

The Influence of Globalisation on the Christian Spiritual Formation in Churches in Malaysia and Singapore

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The technological advances in telecommunication and the Internet have shrunk the world into a global village. Malaysia and Singapore are actively involved in the globalisation process and its subset glocalisation¹. While there is no agreed definition of globalisation², it is often understood to have the following characteristics: increasing speed in communication, the interconnected world become smaller, the blurring of national borders, reciprocity, manageable risk, and presence of trust (Beyon & Dunkerley, 2000, 5-6). The purpose of this article is to evaluate the influence of globalisation on Christian spiritual formation in the churches in Malaysia and Singapore, and suggest some possible measures for these churches to enhance the positive effects while limiting the negative ones.

Globalisation affects national economies. It also exerts an important direct influence on the spiritual formation of Christians in Malaysia and Singapore. Like any influences, it may be positive or negative depending on the attitude of those influenced by it. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir while addressing a group of Christian leaders attending the World Evangelical Alliance conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2000 advises,

The challenge for Asia is not how to manage the present concept of globalisation but to make it work and to benefit from it. The challenge for Asia is to influence

¹ Glocalisation is an amalgam of the words, globalisation and localisation. The church should act globally and think locally. In Thomas Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* the benefits of globalisation are put in the context of cultural change. Friedman says that technology is making globalisation inevitable as represented by the Lexus, but people yearn to have cultural roots like their Olive Trees. See (T. L. Friedman, 2000).

² Thomas Friedman noted that globalization occurs in three eras: globalization 1.0 (1492-1800) is when the world shrunk from large to medium and is due to countries expanding their empires, globalization 2.0 (1800-2000) when the world shrunk from medium to small due to the influence of multinational companies and we are now in globalization 3.0 where individuals anywhere in the world is empowered and that the world is now "flat". (T. Friedman, 2005) p. 9-11.

the thinking on globalisation, to reshape it, to reduce the chances of it going awry and in the process destroying economies and countries. (2002, 16).

The churches in Malaysia and Singapore should take heed of this advice and take up the challenges of globalisation and reshape it for the kingdom of God.³ The effect of globalisation on Christian spiritual formation is yet to be fully understood⁴.

Influence of the myth of efficiency

McDonald, an American-based fast food franchise has earned the dubious honour of becoming the symbol of the effects of globalisation which has been termed “McDonaldisation.” McDonaldisation is essentially creating a new reality for people to live in. The new mythology includes what Neil Postman calls the “god of consumerism,” “god of technology,” and “god of Economic Utility” (1995, 27-36). Each of these gods has their own theology. The “god of consumerism” teaches through the media, the most powerful being television commercials. Postman notes,

But the majority of important television commercials take the form of religious parables organised around a coherent theology. Like all religious parables, these commercials put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of Heaven. This will be obvious to those who have taken to heart the Parable of the Person with Rotten Breath, the Parable of the Stupid Investor, the Parable of the lost Traveller’s Checks, the Parable of the Man Who Runs Through Airports, or most of the hundreds of others that are part of our youth’s religious education (1995, 34)

This was written in 1995. Postman did foresee the “god of consumerism” working with the “god of technology” but may not have imagined how true was his forecast. This partnership resulted in niche marketing, the rise of the Internet, the pervasive influence of

³ A “flattened” world that empower individual should be a boon to world evangelism. However, not all contributors who contributed to, (Tong & Wong, 2002) , response with a positive attitude. All the contributors are Christians.

⁴ Lim Hua Min’s comment is informative. Lim is a financial consultant. He writes, “It may be best to view the world in a developmental process in an ascending spiral like a spring. History unfolds this development spiral with its multitude of technology inventions which in turn affect the way society is organized. Ideas are created in response to societal needs. We move from an Agricultural Age to an Industrial Age and now to an Information Age.” (Lim, 2002) p.161. This should be an appropriate response as each age or era offers its opportunity for service in the expansion of the kingdom of God.

computers, the DVD revolution, new social networking (Facebook, MySpace), and the prevalence of handphones as multimedia communication devices and entertainment centres.

McDonaldisation does influence Christian spiritual formation. It acts to shape or distort the way Christians relate to their God. Singapore theologian Mark Chan comments, “A McDonaldised ethos is marked by the dictates of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control does not value individuality, creativity, deliberation or attention to details. It is speed, proficiency, and the attainment of objectified goals that count” (2002, 120). The characteristics of McDonaldisation are derived from the working of the fast food chain: efficiency means simplified products, calculability means quantifiable products and services, predictability means standardisation of product and services, and control means replacement of human by technology.

The effects of McDonaldisation in churches in Malaysia and Singapore are becoming obvious. In the name of efficiency, some pastors have begun to simplify their sermons and church services, a process which American theologian Marva Dawn (1995) describes as “dumbing down.” Important facts and sermons are delivered in short sound bites which make for efficient delivery, entertaining and geared for an audience with short attention span. Some pastors have begun to play the number games in church attendance and tithing⁵. That is calculability. Predictability means standardising church programs so that it is easily reproducible. To exert control over their productivity Christians look towards technology to solve their church problems. That is the reason why imported packaged education programmes produced by mega churches and Christian publishers in the United States are so attractive once the church has been McDonaldised. Evidences are beginning to appear that the Malaysian and Singaporean McDonaldised churches are being slowly spiritually formed to be efficient marketers rather than effective proclaimers of the Gospel. The church institutional structures are being reorganised so that the pastor become the CEO and runs the church like a corporation. Management terms like 360

⁵ The ABCs of pastors are Attendance, Buildings, Cash. (Source unknown).

degrees, top-down, peer-to-peer evaluations, scorecards, action plans, and vision and mission statements⁶ are becoming more commonly used in the church settings.

Another example of McDonaldisation which values efficiency, calculability, predictability and control is the modern discipleship programs⁷. One of the criticisms of modern discipleship⁸ is that it has become an efficient content-orientated reproducible program. It is assumed here that discipleship is sequential and is a form of behavioural and cognitive modification.⁹ This is usually done within a limited timeframe (Bright, 1965; Kuhne, 1976; OM, 1968). Christian spiritual formation does not have a time frame. It is a continuous ongoing process. Willard defines “spiritual formation in Christ is the *process* whereby the innermost being of the individual (the heart, will or spirit)¹⁰ takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.” (2006, 53 italics author’s) and “discipleship is a life of learning from Jesus Christ how to live in the Kingdom of God now, as he himself did” (2006, 62). Here, Willard, distinguishes clearly that while there are certain overlap between discipleship and spiritual formation; spiritual formation is a more holistic term (process of character formation) while discipleship (how to live in the Kingdom of God) forms a subset of it.

There are certain distinctive features of modern discipleship that churches in Malaysia and Singapore should be aware of before adopting these programs wholesale. First,

⁶ Should churches have vision and mission statements. This needs to be examined in the light of the ecclesiology of the kingdom.

⁷ Bill Hull named this type of discipleship championed by the Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ organisation as classic discipleship. (Hull, 2006) p.18. However I prefer the term modern discipleship in order to differentiate the mid twentieth century discipleship approaches as mentioned by Bill Hull from those approaches of discipleship before the twentieth century.

⁸ I define discipleship as the process of living in obedience to Jesus’ teachings in order to be like him. Dallas Willard defines “discipleship is a life of learning from Jesus Christ how to live in the Kingdom of God now, as he himself did.” (Willard, 2006) p.62.

⁹ Edmund Chan, pastor of an intentional discipling church (IDMC) in Singapore, defines discipling as “the process of bringing people into right relationship with God; and developing them to full maturity in Christ through *intentional growth strategies*, that they might multiply the entire process in others also.” (Chan, 2001), p. 39 italics mine.

¹⁰ Dallas Willard equates the heart, spirit, and will as one and the same. (Willard, 2006) p.53

modern discipleship may not be biblical in its methodology. Discipleship in the Gospels is the disciples following Jesus around in person and learning from him. Discipleship in the epistles is learning from the Holy Spirit, the Gospels and the community of faith. Modern discipleship is a set program with structured training units for the purpose of producing disciples. In biblical models, all teachings are life events oriented and lived experiences done in community or in small groups. Modern discipleship focuses on transmitting the right content and establishing the right behaviour within a set timeframe. In such settings, discipleship is often perceived to be useful for new converts and not as a life-long commitment.

Second, modern discipleship is objective-orientated. People are also seen as an objective to be achieved. They are an object to be moulded into a disciple. To become a disciple, a person is required to attend a certain number of teaching events (done on a one-to-one basis or in a group), take part in an evangelistic event and lead somebody “to Christ”. People should be given the dignity not to be considered as an object. Doug Greenwold (2007) in making a comparison between discipleship in Jesus’ time and discipleship today (which he termed Western discipleship) highlights it in a table “Making Disciples THEN and NOW.”¹¹

¹¹ Cited in (Matthews, 2010) p.88-89.

World of Making Disciples (THEN)	Western Discipleship (NOW)
Hebrew way-doing, action	Hellenistic way- thinking words, ideas
More concrete	More abstract
Integrated content is understood	Most content is missing
About integrations and synthesis- keeping things together	About analysis, categorisation, and labels-breaking things apart
“Believe” is a verb	“Belief” is a creed – consenting o a series of propositions
Emphasis on consistent behaviour	Much more of an emphasis on ideas
Community more important than individual-sacrifice personal rights for the benefit of the community	Individual more important than the community – sacrifice community harmony for the sake of personal interests
Concerned about right thing	Concerned with right thinking
Willingly submissive to rabbi’s authority	Submissive to no one except myself
Submit to rabbi’s interpretation	Create my own interpretation of the text
Willing to wrestle with the text for long periods of time	Preference for quick, simplistic answers through short encounters with the text
Focus on developing discernment	Lack of critical-thinking skills
Memorising Scriptures	Widespread biblical illiteracy
Live life in community	Functional lone rangers
Live integrated, holistic lives	Live in dichotomised spheres (sacred/secular, faith/work)
Desire to be a disciple	Often content to just “believe” in Jesus
Total surrender to their rabbi’s interpretative authority for living	Partial, elective surrender to Jesus’ authority as convenient
Nothing is hidden or off-limit to rabbinic scrutiny	Much of our lives are hidden from others
Life-issue oriented	Conceptually oriented
Dialogue intensive	Information-transfer intensive
Focused on men	Seems more women are being discipled today than men

Table 1: Comparison: Making Disciples THEN and NOW
(modified from Doug Greenwold, 2007, 36)

Greenwold assumes some generalisations in his table but the basic intent of his message is clear. Discipleship as understood during Jesus' time is different from "modern" discipleship. Modern discipleship, as Greenwold has observed, are very individualistic, cognitive orientated and pragmatic. Not all Christians subscribe to the concept of "modern" discipleship.

Third, modern discipleship is individualistic. In its discipling philosophy, the intent is to produce disciples with a personal relationship with God. Unfortunately modern discipleship has a weak ecclesiology. The program tends to produce very individualistic Christians. As new disciples are made, they were encouraged to join local congregations but the emphasis will be on training or making new disciples. Many believers who come out of the modern discipling programs from parachurch organisations do not join the local Christian faith communities or find it difficult to do so. Some went on to form their small parachurch nucleus of discipling groups while the majority find that they do not fit in with the local Christian faith communities. Many end up as churchless Christians. This is an acute problem in the churches of Malaysia and Singapore as many of their young people go overseas for further studies. There they come into contact with parachurch organisations such as Overseas Christian Fellowship and the Navigators. On they return to Malaysia after completion, they find it difficult to adjust to their home church after their exposure to these parachurch organisations. One reason may be that during their three to five years stint overseas, they have been involved in a "modern" discipleship program.

Finally, modern discipleship is not effective in producing more discipling makers. Many discipling makers find that they do not produce more than two generations of discipling makers. The chain usually ends at the third generation. Campus ministries which once major on discipling making are now refocusing their attention elsewhere. Spiritual formation arises out of a reaction against the inflexible, fixed, content-centered programs of modern discipleship.

Christian spiritual formation is not efficient, calculable, predictable and controllable. Spiritual growth is messy as observed by James Wilhoit though Dallas Willard disagrees (2008, 17; 2002, 10). As one progresses in spiritual formation, one is always faced with choices. Wilhoit explains that crisis and problems are the stimulus to spiritual formation while Willard contends that spiritual formation is orderly as it is an internal psychological process in which a person begins to reject his or her habitual pattern of sinning.

Whether orderly or messy, Christian educator Suzanne Johnson is correct to observe that spiritual formation is dynamic and is always changing. It involves character formation which includes making correct choices (1989, 111-117). There is a paradox here that while spiritual formation is by grace, it also requires people's commitment and effort in obedience to God. A mystery is that spiritual formation will be complete in this life but also fulfilled when Christ comes and Christians receive their new bodies.

The world economy is intricately connected. This means changes in everything from economy, technology, and fashion to communication will continue to accelerate at a rapid rate. "The times they are a-changing" is more true today than when Bob Dylan sang it in 1964. Life will continue to become more hectic. The hectic lifestyle and rapid change will definitely impact Christian spiritual formation. How the church is to respond to the influence of globalisation is an ongoing debate. The influence of globalisation is very attractive and pervasive. The church must be ready to harness the positive effect and counter the negative aspects of it.

Influence of popular global culture

Religious educator Michael Warren (1987) notes that globalisation changes a person's thinking in three ways: as "culture in the formation of perception, language in the formation of thought and hegemony in the formation of consciousness." Though written more than 23 years ago, Warren's insight on globalisation is still worth consideration. Globalisation affects one's perception of reality by changing our culture, introduces new meanings to languages, and subtly allows a dominant culture to supersede a weaker one.

First, while McDonaldisation is influencing the business world through globalisation, a global popular culture has been influencing the world through the media. Like McDonald, the Disney Company also received the dubious honour as symbol of this global popular culture. Disneyisation is the term used for the worldwide control of the arts, entertainment, media so that a particular worldview, values and filtered knowledge are disseminated. This is the cultural component of globalisation. It exports escapism, American culture, products, and a delusion that happiness can be bought. Disneyisation has united the world into one culture that regards human beings as consumers. From birth children are exposed to advertisements that life will be better if one uses the right sort of mouthwash or hair cream, buys a certain brand of car, achieves a certain body shape, or drinks a certain brand of beer. Children grow up with the delusion that money can buy whatever they need. This is a worldwide phenomenon and marketing has become the creator of these new “realities.”

Consumerism and materialism is the driving force of this global culture. The media has been spreading this influence through prints like books and magazines, television, movies and recently the Internet. Social scientist Neil Postman (1985) notes that television have created people who are passive recipient of the media while Miller (2004) recently observes that through the Internet, the people themselves become the media. Christians in Malaysia and Singapore seem to assimilating this global culture uncritically. They are influenced to be consumers of church services and other spiritual things rather than to be involved as participants. Some mega churches which are functional communities that offer spiritual services like commodities are a product of this culture. An astute cultural observer, North American theologian David Wells comments,

The church marketers are those who have followed the innovations in “doing” church pioneered by Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Community Church in 1975. They have been egged on by Barna and his never ending flow of poll numbers. What was begun then has since been copied all over America. It has morphed into new forms and has been exported to other parts of the world. Of course! This is America! (2008, 13).

The consumer worldview promises a delusion. Instant gratification is the new reality. Instant results are expected. They believe that these instant results are achievable either by new programs, more advanced technology or new spiritual techniques. Things and people are to be used. Unproductive things and people are to be discarded. The churches in Malaysia and Singapore need to be able to counteract this negative socio-cultural influence on Christian spiritual formation. This worldview is antithetical to the fact that spiritual formation takes time and demands self-denial. Commenting on this influence on spiritual formation in the North American churches setting, Discipleship guru Bill Hull notes,

With a consumer mentality, there is no basis to enter into a life of submission and humility. According to the consumer mentality, activity, including church, is in orbit around the individual. The mania for success trains people to think in terms of programs and give them a short term view of personal development. They begin to believe that if they can get a handle on this character flaw of uncontrolled anger in the next two months, it will be taken care of. If it doesn't work, then they need to find a better teacher, church, curriculum, husband, wife, or workplace (2010, 110)

The delusion of the consumer worldview is being continually transmitted through the media, arts, movies, and music. The foundation of the consumer worldview is worship of Mammon as god. There is some similarity in Mark Chan's Disneyisation and Tom Sine's McWorld. Tom Sine notes that "McWorld is driven by aspirations and values of modernity and is aggressively at work creating a one-world consumer culture in which shopping mall is replacing the church as the centre of religious devotion, and all of life is reduced to a commodity." (1999, 52). Both Chan and Sine have discerned that consumerism will be a major influence on Christians in the 21st century. It will take a lot of effort of members of churches in Malaysia and Singapore to resist Disneyisation and to examine the influence of the global culture in the light of biblical theology.

Second, the influence is in the way language is being used. Warren (1987) postulates that certain words in language may become so powerful that it may direct people to think and live in different ways or create a new "reality" for them. In fact, the word is often so innocent that it is often regard it as common sense. Language also helps a person to identify and develop their role in a family or a community. In a research on *Family*

Discourse and the Construction of the Gendered Self and Others, Malaysian linguist Zuraidah Mohd Don concludes that “(d)uring the construction of family discourse, we create a meaning of an experience and through this meaning-making experience we learn about our role in the family as well as an individual” (2006, 183). It is not only specific words but also the use of language that forms our thinking and helps to define our role in our community. One such word is “worship.” The sound of the word often invokes the image of the singing part of a Sunday service. Worship is music with catchy chorus, uplifting music and a feel good atmosphere. It is the time when everyone will join in the singing, clap hands or sway in time to the rhythm. Music may come from energetic musicians playing on pianos, keyboards and drums. A dynamic song leader will be there to lead the congregation into a meaningful time of “worship.” Nobody in church will question why they must spend \$200,000 on a sound system if it is for “worship.” Worship has become synonymous with music and catchy songs. When has the reality of worship as a time of adoration changed to worship as karaoke? The insidious change in the “reality” of words in spiritual formation may lead the church to idolatry.

The third influence is hegemony in the formation of consciousness. A small unknown group of people on the other side of the world can affect or destroy an economy of a nation overnight. In any society or economy, Warren explains, there is a dominant class which consists of people who are able to contribute to that society or economy. The other group of people is called the dominated class. The dominant class are able to shape issues or programs in such a way that the dominated class thinks that it is their idea all along. The dominant class are often hidden from the consciousness of the dominated class. In globalisation, this hegemony operates on a worldwide scale. It means that a few rich well-connected financially savvy individuals have the influence and means to change the situation on a global scale. The lessons of the currency crisis in 1998 and the credit crisis in 2008-2009 show that the powerful negative influences of hegemony in globalisation.

Another example of this hegemony is the “prosperity gospel” which teaches that God guaranteed health and wealth which was started in the United States and is now being present in every continent in the world. Instead of coming to church to worship and

receive spiritual food, some people are coming to church to be entertained or to receive spiritual comfort. Spiritual comfort involves a God who will reward them with health, wealth, and prosperity. The church is seen as a social club that promises comfort, good feelings, health, wealth, useful relationship, and the absence of suffering. It is no surprise that the health-and-wealth prosperities churches are the faster growing churches in the United States and the rest of the world (Biema & Chu, 2006). Commenting on the Australian churches, Australian sociologist Gary Bouma remarks,

In its (orthodoxy) place comes feel-good theologies that insists God wants you to be rich and good-looking and live in a large house with all the latest gadgets and appointments. God as the great 'know-it-all' is not the God in demand today. Rather people seek the God who has experienced it all, who has been where I am going and who knows what it feels like because God has been through it. Whereas previously our ideas and images of God had to conform to the theological precepts of the church, now theologies must be emotionally satisfying and produce joyful members who gives generously to the church (2006, 101).

Some of the larger mega-churches in Malaysia and Singapore fall into this group of churches. Many other churches are indirectly influenced by this culture¹².

It is interesting to note that while evidence of globalisation effects in the churches in Malaysia and Singapore are widespread, that of glocalisation is not. Often the churches adopt a model or a program from North American or Europe wholesale, without critical examination and theological reflection on the appropriateness of the content for the local context. The desire to imitate the West is so strong that churches often adopt rather than adapt these programs and models. Programs such as the Alpha course, Purpose-driven life and Million Leaders Mandate (MLM) are adopted without modification as are church models such as the Cell Church, Group of 12, Willow Creek Community Church (Bill Hybels) and Saddle Back Church (Rick Warren). Often these adopted programs or church models fail because they have not been modified and adapted to the local context.

¹² Many of these churches spread their teaching through books, audio CD, video DVD and MP3 recordings and the Internet. They then to be more computer savvy than many of the other churches.

Countering the impact of globalisation on churches in Malaysia and Singapore

Christian educator Kim Yong-Bock in his 2001 paper, *Education for the 21st Century in Asia* for the Asia Religious Educator Forum of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), regards education as a “kind of cultural action for the sharing of life-wisdom in community.” In evaluating the “false education of the globalisation process” he notes,

The most serious danger for education in Asia and the world lies in the fact that it is subjugated to the powers of the global market. Those powers have secured cultural hegemony over all the peoples in the world and thereby over the whole of cosmic life. The cultural life of all people – their minds, hearts and senses – is for all practical purposes dominated by the modernist school systems and hi-tech mass media, and colonised by the market forces. Total consciousness as well as conscience is being dictated by the cultural actions of the principalities and powers in the global market (Kim, 2001)

The negative influences of McDonaldisation and Disneyisation is being highlighted here. Globalisation and glocalisation as influences may be very manipulative. As an educator Kim realises the danger this could prove to the Christian faith communities in Asia and calls for these communities to resist these influences by treating people as the subject rather than the object of their cultural action (education), by teaching ways to resist the “market powers”, and by building a vision through cultural action (education) a life with “creativity and imagination” nurtured by the Asian peoples’ experiences (Kim, 2001). This is pertinent for the Asian churches especially for the Malaysian and Singaporean churches which are searching for their identity in the midst of globalisation influences. This is a call for the Asian Church to be counter-cultural in her action.

Globalisation is not necessary bad. Using the improved communication and extensive networking provided by new technologies, it is easier to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world than before. The Internet has made it possible to reach even the remotest part of any country as long as there is Internet access. It has also allowed even the remotest part of the world with Internet access to be readily accessible. A Christian website may be accessed by anyone, even those in areas not accessible to missionaries. Social networking allows people to connect over long distances which otherwise will not know of one other’s existence. Streaming videos and MP3 allow download of materials anywhere in

the world.¹³ The global culture has made inroads into many other cultures. It is a two-way street. Local cultures may influence global culture. There is much potential in the wise use of art, music, video and writings to spread the Gospel. Anyone can upload something onto the Internet and have it viewed by thousands within the hour! YouTube may be used as a media for evangelisation. Virtual Christian faith communities may be set up online. The degree of Christian spiritual formation that may be done through the Internet has not been fully explored.

Analysing the vast body of literature of congregational studies, Jeff Woods, an American Baptist suggested five tasks for the 21st century congregations to respond to a post-Christendom, postmodern, post-traditional, multicultural, and pluralistic world (2003, 2-4, 8). Though Woods' research is done on North American congregations, the results are equally important for the churches in Malaysia and Singapore in counteracting negative influences of globalisation. The five tasks are (1) build the relationship, (2) create the space, (3) enable the journey, (4) seek the direct, and (5) receive the cup (2003, 7-16). Essential to Woods' thinking is that genuine caring relationships, allow spaces for people to grow, spiritual mentoring and guides, direct experiential encounters with God and the willingness to empower the younger people to take on or over leadership roles are important for the continued development of the Christian faith communities in the midst of globalisation. All these are essential components of Christian spiritual formation.

Conclusion

These psycho-political (McDonaldisation) and socio-cultural (Disneyisation) influences of globalisation affect the Christian spiritual formation process in churches in Malaysia and Singapore. Members of churches in Malaysia and Singapore will need to be equipped with these counter measures. A deeper sense of identity as the people of God, a

¹³ It surprises me to discover that while many of the major institutions (including MIT, Stanford, University of Edinburgh, Yale, Harvard, University of Brisbane etc) are offering people to download the videos, MP3 and transcripts of their lecture courses free, there are very few Seminaries or Bible schools which do the same. On a positive note, more and more churches are making available their sermons free from their church websites.

commitment to a simple lifestyle that honors Jesus Christ and a strong involvement in the Christian faith communities are effective counter measures.

Soli Deo Gloria

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