Forgiveness: Hindu and Western Perspectives

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Alan Hunter
Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies
Coventry University, UK

THIS paper compares Hindu and Christian beliefs on forgiveness: it argues that forgiveness is an important element within the Hindu religious world-view, even if less explicitly so than within the Christian tradition. Before the late 1980s, discussion of forgiveness in the West was for the most part confined to Christian communities, seldom reaching mainstream publications in other areas. The situation has now changed dramatically. Since the 1990s, scholars from different disciplines have written dozens of books and journal articles on forgiveness, which also featured in numerous popular essays, exhibitions, websites, and other media. There are four major areas for forgiveness research in the West: religion, philosophy, psychology and, perhaps surprisingly at first sight, politics.[1] However, relatively little analysis of forgiveness in other faiths, except Judaism, has appeared.

In the religious dimension, the Abrahamic faiths all have teachings on forgiveness. For example, Judaism distinguishes between interpersonal forgiveness as a social interaction; and forgiveness that God offers to a penitent. The requirements for interpersonal forgiveness are quite stringent. After an offence, the transgressor is required to show remorse, to admit the sin to the community, to apologise and offer compensation. Moreover, transgressors who seek forgiveness from the community also have to maintain exemplary behavior in the future. Even if a situation arises where they could easily commit offences again, and perhaps get away without detection, they have to avoid them. When and only when these conditions are met, the victim is encouraged to offer forgiveness. In other words, the perpetrator does not have the right to be forgiven: he or she has to earn it.[2]

However, final cleansing of sinfulness is not a matter for any person or institution; it is reserved for God both at individual and community level. The Jewish Testament describes the ancient ritual of the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would sacrifice one goat at an altar, and lay his hands on a live goat 'and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness'.[3] In modern Judaism, the same Day of Atonement is observed, but with fasting and prayer taking the place of animal sacrifice. Christianity developed a body of doctrine about forgiveness based on

Alan Hunter is currently Senior Lecturer in Peace Studies at the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies; and also a founding staff member and Assistant Director of a new Applied Research Centre in Human Security based in Coventry. He was previously Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds form which university he gained a BA in Modern Chinese Studies and a PhD in Religious Studies. He has published in both English and Chinese, including major works on Chinese religion and culture with Cambridge University Press and Princeton University Press. In Chinese academic journals he has published a series of articles on peace studies, as well as a short sociological study of Chinese Protestantism (1991) and a book discussing nineteenth century Asian responses to colonialism focusing on Swami Vivekananda's writings and visits to the USA (2006). His current research interests include the cultural history of Sino-Indian relations; security issues in contemporary China including internet-based pressure-groups; and the emerging discipline of Human Security.

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Jewish ideas, although there are diverse interpretive traditions. The New Testament makes an explicit analogy of Jesus' crucifixion with the Jewish ritual, but emphasizes that this sacrifice is once and for all and brings 'eternal redemption', a kind of forgiveness for the whole of humanity, or at least for those who accept Jesus as savior.[4] On the interpersonal level, many Christians interpret New Testament verses as meaning that they should forgive a 'sinner' unconditionally, whether or not he or she repents, apologizes, or refrains; they thus become entitled to God's forgiveness for their own sins: 'For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses'. Another famous passage follows, where Jesus enjoins Peter to forgive a 'sinning brother' seventy times seven.[5] In other words, it will benefit us if we can manage to forgive others, because God will respond likewise.

Forgiveness in Hindu Tradition

I start this section with a brief citation from an internet article where the author contrasts Christianity favorably with Hinduism. The text highlights how the author sees Jesus' sacrifice as the key to God's forgiveness, which is available to (only) those who believe in Christ:

> It is true that in certain Hindu groups there is a similar emphasis on God's grace (probably as a result of past Christian influence). But even here, there is a major distinction. The Hindu teaching about grace sees no need for an atonement for sin, but simply offers forgiveness without any satisfaction of the judgment on sin required by a holy God. In contrast, the Christian gospel is this: God the Son became a man, died a sacrificial death on the cross, making real forgiveness of real sins against the real God possible to those who place complete trust in Christ. All who do so can experience true forgiveness, know God and His purpose for their lives, and have the certainty of eternal life with Him![6]

The materials presented in this section present a more complex picture of forgiveness,

ksama in Sanskrit, in the Hindu tradition, and comparisons with Western and Christian thought (I leave aside the bizarre claim in the above passage that Hindu teaching on grace is a result of 'past Christian influence'). Of course, to speak of 'the Hindu tradition' is itself tendentious given the vast scope and variety of indigenous Indian religious thought. I have based my discussion on what is known as neo-Hinduism or neo-Vedanta, a reasonably homogeneous discourse within modern liberal, rationalist Hinduism. I was greatly assisted in the preparation of this article by interviews with lay-believers and monastics: many Hindu scriptures are aphoristic, so interpretation of them relies heavily on the body of knowledge transmitted through oral tradition. I believe the following account is more or less representative of mainstream modern Hindu views on the subject.[7]

As far as I have been able to discover, ksama, although it is certainly mentioned, was not a major topic either in the classical texts of Hinduism, nor in commentaries or academic discourse. However, a number of related concepts are discussed in a number of key works and are prominent in Hindu discourse, forming a cluster of meanings which provide a substantial overall conceptualization of forgiveness in the Hindu tradition. I have not yet found reference to ksama in the oldest scriptures, the Vedas and early Upanishads, but the term does appear in the Bhagavad Gita (16.3).[8] This is an important reference, because it is cited together with other 'divine qualities' (daivim sampadam) − for example charity, non-violence and compassion − to which a spiritually-minded person should aspire. Since the Gita is recognized as the universal scripture of the Hindu religion, the text gives forgiveness an important religious endorsement. Two epics, the Mahabharata, of which the Gita is a small section, and the Ramayana have a quasi-scriptural status: incidents and personalities from them are widely cited as authoritative exemplars of correct behavior. In both, there are extended discussions of forgiveness and revenge, qualities which are played out in many of the sub-plots. The discussions are quite sophisticated and varied: for example, some speakers imply that forgiveness is to be adopted in all circumstances,

while others argue that it also has drawbacks. The Mahabharata even has a famous 'hymn to forgiveness' which opens as follows:

> Forgiveness is virtue; forgiveness is sacrifice, forgiveness is the Vedas, forgiveness is the Shruti [revealed scripture]. He that knoweth this is capable of forgiving everything.

> Forgiveness is Brahma [God]; forgiveness is truth; forgiveness is stored ascetic merit; forgiveness protecteth the ascetic merit of the future; forgiveness is asceticism; forgiveness is holiness; and by forgiveness is it that the universe is held together.[9]

We can thus see that ksama was valued from early times, but it is not easy to analyze the full scope of the concept without further evidence. Given the relatively few references, it is helpful to understand four related topics to gain a clearer idea of this complex of ideas: sreyas (the good, or spiritually beneficial); titiksha (forbearance); ahimsa (non-violence); and pape (sin).

The term *sreyas* appears in key positions in two of the most authoritative texts of philosophical Hinduism, the *Katha Upanishad* (1.2.2) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.7). The Upanishad states: 'The good (*sreyas*) and the pleasant are both open to a person. The wise person prefers the good after closely examining the two and weighing their merits and demerits. A short-sighted person, however, prefers the pleasant, for he is only concerned with increasing and preserving his physical comforts'.[10] The dilemma is sometimes humorously referred to as the choice between the 'pleasurable and the preferable'. In the *Gita*, Arjuna says to Krishna, 'Now I am confused about my duty (*dharma*) and have lost my composure because of weakness. In this condition I am asking You to tell me clearly what is best for me (*sreyas*). Now I am Your disciple, and a soul surrendered unto You. Please instruct me'.[11] Placed at this critical point in the text, the word opens up the whole of the following discourse: in a sense the rest of the *Gita* is an answer to the question, which can be asked by anybody, 'What is best for me?'

Sreyas, then, means that at any moment we can make a decision, or take action, or at least give rise to a thought that is conducive to our well-being. *Sreyas* is not defined in terms of material comfort, but in terms of our overall, holistic, long-term, or spiritual well-being. Thus sometimes it will be best to face hardship and make tough decisions, although painful in the short-term, because they lead us onwards and upwards. These decisions will contribute towards collective, as well as personal, well-being to qualify as *sreyas*. Forgiveness, for example, is not taught merely as a moral injunction, but as a component of *sreyas*. It benefits our own life and the life of our community.

Titiksha means tolerance or forbearance, and is another quality praised in the *Gita* (2.14), along with similar virtues like *akrodah* (freedom from anger, 16.2) and *ksantih* (tolerance, 13.8). The meaning is that whatever occurs, one should not feel anger, resentment, or mental disturbance. Even if someone attacks or insults us without cause, there is no need to feel enmity. How does one come to this state? One approach is a deep acceptance of the law of returning karma: an 'enemy' is in fact only the instrument of a process which we ourselves initiated, and for which we are responsible. If I had not created a problem for myself because of some past action, I would not now be experiencing a difficulty. To a devout believer in this theory, taking revenge on an 'enemy' means to shoot the messenger and ignore the message. Moreover, those who accept the law of karma and reincarnation may be relatively willing to let go of longing for retribution: they feel that the perpetrator will inevitably receive a comeback for their deeds, so it is almost irrelevant to go out of one's way to try to inflict some kind of punishment or revenge.

More generally, tolerance of discomfort can be interpreted as an important element of spiritual discipline, not necessarily taken to the point of extreme austerity, but at least willingness to suffer hardship, as exemplified by Gandhi in British prisons. A more profound interpretation within non-dualistic schools of Hindu philosophy is the realization that the Self of all human beings – indeed all living beings – is essentially one and the same, and one with

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God also. So there is no 'Other' against whom one could feel anger.

Ahimsa is in the West perhaps the most discussed of all Indian religious terms, in great part because of Gandhi's influence. The Finnish scholar Tähtinen devoted a book to its meaning in Indian texts, while Gier's more recent publication elucidates the concept in the context of Indian, Greek and Chinese philosophy.[12] *Ahimsa* is widely used in the Buddhist and Jain traditions; and within Hinduism it is an ancient term used since the Vedic period. *Ahimsa*, usually translated as 'non-violence', carries a complex set of meanings. This much is obvious from even a superficial reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, because *ahimsa* is enjoined several times as a cardinal virtue, while at the same time Arjuna is exhorted to fight and kill his enemies. One way out of this paradox, put forward by Gandhi among others, is to argue that the battles of the *Gita* are supposed to be psychological battles only, and that Arjuna, representing our conscious mind, is being exhorted to fight his lower nature or sinful desires. (There is a parallel with Islamic interpretations of *jihad* which can also be used for psychological or physical struggle.) This interpretation, however, seems very forced and does not accord with the overall Hindu position that violence under certain circumstances is justified and necessary.

The following exegesis was given to me by Hindu interviewees. *Ahimsa* has a two-fold meaning: 1. one should not harbor feelings of anger or enmity even if obliged to fight; 2. one should not do anything that will cause unnecessary harm, confusion or misery. One should recognize that there are many circumstances where a citizen will need to resort to physical force, for example, to protect the weak against aggression, or to prevent a serious crime. One's first duty is to resist evil, by force if no other means is available. Thus, for example, if one is a law-abiding citizen of a well-governed country which is suddenly attacked, one should take up arms if required to do so. (Personally I find this one of the weaker components of the argument, since all Caesars build up their armies by appealing to self-defense priorities; they never seem to build up techniques of peaceful non-co-operation or other ways to break the cycle of violence.) The key point of *ahimsa* is that even while fighting, one should not feel anger or hostility towards the attackers, but maintain a state of mental equilibrium. And one should realize that it is sometimes better for people to die or to be imprisoned, rather than for them to continue committing crimes. Forcibly restraining a violent psychopath would be quite in accord with the doctrine of *ahimsa*: it is good (*sreyas*) for the restrainer, and will also help the psychopath because it averts further bad karma. Incidentally *ahimsa* is the antonym of *himsa* which means uncontrolled, random, angry violence. *Ahimsa* could then possibly be translated as 'non-violent force' if such a concept is thinkable.

How can one derive a commitment to absolute non-violence? One suggestion is that there is a spiritual ideal even higher than the above usage of *ahimsa*: a truly great person, like the Buddha or Gandhi, can perhaps achieve practical results, for example restraining a psychopath, by spiritual power alone without ever resorting to direct violence. In this context there are many incidents in hagiographies of Indian saints where a vicious person is disarmed or pacified by the mere presence of an enlightened sage. Many Gandhians interpret the ending of British rule in India as a case where truly non-violent *ahimsa* overcame a violent enemy.

Hinduism has concepts of sin (*pape*) and freedom from sin dating back to Vedic times. Indeed the Vedic hymns are most likely the earliest texts in the world documenting the human yearning for release from sins. I quote two short extracts:

> So that Agni's conquering beams may spread out on every side
> Shining bright, drive away our sin.
> Thy face is turned on every side, thou pervadest everywhere.
> Shining bright, drive away our sin.[13]

> Of the sin against the gods Thou art atonement;
> Of the sin against men Thou art atonement;
> Of the sin against myself Thou art atonement;
> Of every kind of sin Thou art atonement.[14]

Sin can arise from the breaking of either ethical or ritual injunctions: for example stealing on the one hand, or eating taboo food on the other. Apart from the injury caused to others, sin inflicts injury on oneself: one's spiritual life is impeded, and one has to suffer negative consequences. Thus an important aspect of Hindu religious life is to cleanse oneself from past sins. There are many techniques and opportunities for doing this, some of which are quite enjoyable. For example, a pilgrimage to a sacred site or *tirtha*, especially a great religious centre like Kashi (the traditional name for the modern city of Varanasi), in itself cleanses many past sins: Kashi has an epithet *kapala-mocana*, the place where sins are annulled. The River Ganges in particular is believed to have the power to remove sins, especially if one bathes at certain auspicious times and places, a key aspect of the massive *Kumbhmelas* which are held on its banks. Various rituals may also be undertaken to achieve the same effect for those who cannot make the pilgrimages.

Sins may also be forgiven by God in response to prayer and devotion: in a concluding and summative verse of the *Gita*, the Lord says 'Just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reaction. Do not fear' (18.66). In the famous hymn *Prakritim paramam* by Abhedananda, the Goddess is begged to 'completely remove all our sins';[15] while in one of the most celebrated texts of modern Hinduism, Sri Ramakrishna is reported as saying: 'All the sins of the body fly away if one chants the name of God and sings His glories. The birds of sin dwell in the tree of the body. Singing the name of God is like clapping your hands. As, at a clap of the hands, the birds in the tree fly away, so do our sins disappear at the chanting of God's name and glories'.[16]

The concept of vicarious atonement, central to Christianity, does also have a place in Hinduism. For example, it is widely held that when a guru agrees to teach a disciple, he or she will carry the burden of the disciple's sins. When a guru manifests physical ailments, they are believed to be the manifestation of the transfer of this burden. Two of the greatest saints of modern India, Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi, both experienced great physical pain during their lingering terminal illnesses: many devotees believed they were mystically atoning for the sins of others.

Hindu-Western Comparisons

To summarize Christian teachings on forgiveness, core concepts are that one should forgive one's neighbor for offences, and in return one might hope for forgiveness from God after earnest prayer and repentance for one own sins; and that the crucifixion of Christ offers universal, eternal forgiveness at least to those who believe in his divinity. Other Western views are that forgiveness can be seen and practiced as a moral virtue; that it can be learned as a tool to enhance psychological well-being; and that it has a role to play in reconciliation after violent conflict. While these secular views on forgiveness may be held by non-Christians, they have at least evolved in a Christian or, as some would say, post-Christian cultural environment.

In Hinduism, we can likewise distinguish between teachings on divine forgiveness of human transgressions, and interpersonal forgiveness. As regards the former, it seems clear that Hindus have a sense of sin, and a desire to find release or forgiveness by God. To achieve this end, the tradition has available a number of religious resources including pilgrimage, bathing in sacred waters, and rituals. Personal devotions, for example the chanting of God's name and singing his praises, are also enjoined for this purpose. As is well-known, Hindus generally subscribe to the concept of one supreme Godhead (*Brahman*) which can be approached through a number of different deities or symbols according to one's family tradition or personal choice. So perhaps a significant difference with Christianity is the latter's focus on the singular power of Jesus in the process of divine forgiveness; in Hindu tradition, God's grace may be manifested immediately, or through many different saints, saviors and deities.

A more profound difference, however, perhaps lies in the Hindu understanding of consciousness and in its traditions of yoga and meditation. A key aspect of all South Asian religion is maintaining a peaceful mind through a constantly renewed process of psychological

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purification. To this end the whole enterprise of spiritual yoga and meditation is dedicated. It is believed that by continuous practice and self-cultivation one experiences a kind of psychological purging, whereby all tendencies towards violence and anger are eliminated. This process has a positive effect both on the individual and collective psyche. At its extreme, it can produce figures like the Buddha or Gandhi, who can even overcome . violent enemies by non-violent means, or 'soul-power'.

Moreover, according to Hindu philosophy of mind, there is a continuity of consciousness both in the collective and through time; and as consciousness is universal, non-physical and has no location, then it survives the death of the body, and is trans-personal, not confined to any one individual. (In the late twentieth century, even a few mainstream Western scientists were starting to accept this proposition as, at least, a reasonable hypothesis: 'It is conceivable that such non-physical self might also survive the death of our physical body and brain'.[17]) An emotion like lust for vengeance is by no means easily destroyed once it has arisen. The ideal may be to not give rise to such feelings in the first instance: instead one should remain calm and detached, accepting one's own responsibility for any event, practicing the virtues described earlier of *ahimsa* and *titiksha*. However, practically we see that the universal condition of humanity is different. Almost all individuals and ethnic groups feel some kind of hostility, resentment, and anger against someone. According to the Hindu analysis, these feelings have deep roots in the consciousness. For example the 'non-physical self' may have suffered injury many decades or even many centuries ago. Perhaps one was the victim of a massacre or other war crimes. Even if all the individuals concerned have died, the desperate need for revenge will still be there, stashed away in some deep, unseen area of our mind. Since it is there, it is bound, sooner or later, to manifest, to express itself at least as anger and more likely as violence. When this happens is a question of timing: it will occur when the circumstances are favorable for it. But happen it must. This, then, is the deep explanation for the cycles of violence we see all around us. We may slow down the cycles, perhaps by good governance or

education or moral teaching; sooner or later, inexorably, the violence will break out again, probably all the worse for being long repressed. Where consciousness is locally permeated by such feelings, there may be almost incessant, generational violence, protracted social conflict.

Is there then any way to a lasting peace, something other than a temporary truce in hostilities? There are many utopian philosophies with recipes for lasting peace, not least Marxism. Although there are utopian strands within Hinduism, most of its more serious philosophers tell us that violent conflict will inevitably continue, as long as memories of violence, and subsequent resentment, remain in the consciousness. This gloomy prognosis applies to individuals and to the collective society of any group. Liberation, inner peace, psychological transformation, will always and necessarily be only for a very few individuals. These fortunate few are blessed with excellent karma from the past, and will reap its rewards in this life-time. The rest of us will have to struggle on as best we can in a highly imperfect, inequitable, and violent world. Of course, these perfected beings are themselves by definition full of compassion for the fate of humanity, so they are a continuous source of inspiration and spiritual strength for society. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that were it not for the small number of sages in the world, human society would simply implode under the weight of its own accumulated evil. According to this view, we should all be grateful to all the known or unknown saints of all religious traditions who maintain some kind of equilibrium.

Fundamentally, if lasting peace is to be achieved, according to Hinduism, it cannot be done either by forgetting or by force. Forgetting or sweeping things under the carpet will not help. The seeds of violence remain in the unconscious even when the incidents that sowed them have been forgotten by the conscious mind. That is why the active, willing participation of the individual is required. He or she must have the commitment to analyze and come to terms with the past, and to purge feelings of revenge. In this context *ksama* is a vital ingredient of an overall spiritual life, in particular because it is a component of mental

purification which alone can lead to peaceful interpersonal relations, and to *sreyas*, the 'good'.

An image one monk gave me was controlling an aggressive dog. It is true that one can whip it into submission, or chain it up, or bind its four legs together so it cannot move. But even so, it will squirm; and as soon as you release it, the aggression will be there. The only real answer is to train the dog, to convince it that non-aggression is in its own best interests. Likewise with people, they will only give up their aggressive, violent tendencies when they come to a voluntary understanding and personal commitment to bring them to an end, in other words, to commence a deep re-thinking of their values. It cannot be imposed by any outside agency, although training may be helpful. Is killing the (physical) dog any use? Not according to Hinduism: the aggression persists in its 'non-physical self' and sooner or later, in one form or another, it will again manifest as some kind of aggression. Even if two communities manage to obliterate each other in a frenzy of killing, they are destined to re-live a similar fate – until, eventually, they learn to purge their minds of the will to repeat the conflict. Only then can a lasting peace be expected. That is the deep meaning of forgiveness.

Notes

[1] For an overview of recent forgiveness research see Alan Hunter, *New Themes in Peace Studies*, in Alan Hunter (ed.), *Peace Studies in the Chinese Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) pp. 135-40.

[2] Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* is a superb, thoughtful and scholarly reflection on forgiveness within Judaic tradition. See Chapter 3 (pp.61-89) 'Why and When to Forgive'.

[3] The discussion is in Leviticus 16: 6–30, the citation at verse 21 (King James version used here and subsequently in this paper).

[4] Hebrews, 9: 11–14. The theme of redemption through Jesus' self-sacrifice is also taken up in Ephesians 1: 7–8.

[5] Matthew 6:14–15 and 18: 21-22.

[6] Rick Rood, 'Hinduism: A Christian Perspective' in World Religions Index <http://wri.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/hindu2.html>

[7] I would particularly like to thank Swami Satyarupananda of the Vivekananda Ashram, Raipur;

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[8] The dating of Hindu scriptures, as of pre-medieval South Asian history generally, is uncertain and controversial. A conventional consensus would put the final forms of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita* at around 400 to 200 BCE, and versions of the epics and yoga sutras somewhat later.

[9] Mahabharata Book 3 (Vana Parva), Section 29, see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/m03029.htm>.

[10] *Katha Upanishad*, translation and commentary by Swami Lokeswarananda, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1993), at pp.49-50.

[11] *Bhagavad Gita*, translation and commentary by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, (Manila: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust), 1972, at p.79

[12] Unto Tähtinen, *Ahimsa: Non-violence in Indian Tradition* (London: Rider, 1976); Nicholas F. Gier, *The Virtue of Nonviolence:From Gautama to Gandhi* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004).

[13] Rig Veda, 1.97.1-6, English translation in Abinash Chandra Bose, ed., *Hymns from the Vedas* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 370.

[14] Yajur Veda, 8.13, English translation *ibid.*

[15] The text of the hymn is available in Sanskrit and English in Swami Tapasyananda (ed) *Aratrika Hymns and Ramanam* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1976) p. 30.

[16] Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated into English by Swami Nikhilananda, (Indian edition, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1996), pp. 181-82.

[17] John Eccles quoted in Michael Talbot, *Beyond the Quantum*, (New York: Bantam, 1988), p. 93.

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