

## Missiology and deep incarnation

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### **Abstract**

Much as the concept of *missio Dei* has shaped missiological thinking and the theology of mission, the growing interest in God's incarnation and embodiment may play a very formative role in missiological reflection in the future, and is already evident in the World Council of Churches mission affirmation *Together Towards Life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes* (2013).

In this research, "deep incarnation" has been introduced as an important concept in the theology of mission, in terms of the recent work by a number of leading theologians under the title *Incarnation – on the scope and depth of Christology* (Gregersen 2015). "Deep incarnation" has been summarized as the coming-into-flesh of God's eternal Logos. In the process of incarnation, God the creator and the world of the flesh are conjoined in such depth that God links up with all vulnerable creatures. In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation in order to share the fate of biological existence. In the incarnate One, God becomes Jesus, and in him God becomes human, sharing the life conditions of the least in creation. The most high and the very lowest are united in the process of incarnation.

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This research emphasizes the importance of the concept of “deep incarnation” for the theology of mission, and how it may inform missiology, with brief reference to TTL and how the major themes of “deep incarnation” (such as an orientation towards life in the broadest sense, the importance of suffering and marginality, the nature of unity and community) are already present in TTL.

### **Keywords**

Incarnation; deep incarnation; embodiment; theology of mission; environment; cosmos; particularity and universality.

### **Introduction**

The concept of *missio Dei* has formed and dominated missiological thinking and the theology of mission since the 1990s (See Bosch 1991:389-392, Bevans and Schroeder 2004:286-303, Conradie 2016:322-323, Flett 2010:35-77, Goheen 2014:loc. 1181, Tennent 2010:loc. 606-707). The question is whether recent developments in theology can infuse reflections on the theology of mission with new imagination and energy? Steve Bevans summarized one of the challenges facing Theology of Mission at the 2016 International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) meeting as listening to the modern day prophetic voices of science and incorporating the discourse between science and theology in missiology. The growing interest in God’s incarnation and embodiment, and the shift away from an anthropocentric understanding to one that has all of reality in sight, might play a formative role in missiology, very much as the concept of *mission Dei* has, and also assist in incorporating the discourse between science and theology in missiological reflection. Conradie (2016:320) noted that since the mission conferences in Vancouver (1983) and Seoul (1990) it is acknowledged that mission includes an environmental dimension. The point of departure is now that God’s mission

includes the whole of creation (Niemandt 2015:2), and that the transformation brought about by religion has cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions. Mission is understood as “all that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation,” and all that he calls his people “to do in cooperation with that purpose” (Wright 2010:24). This implies that the church participates in God’s mission where members are active in restoring the whole of creation and all of human life; meaning that the scope of salvation includes all of creation, and this must be evident in missiology (see Goheen 2014:248) and in the transformation brought about by Christian mission. This research recognizes the importance of the environmental discourse in theological reflection and represents an effort to relate these developments to enhance reflection on theology of mission. This is already evident in contemporary ecumenical documents (*The Accra Confession*, *The Cape Town Commitment*, and *Together Towards life – Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes*), and these statements affirm that God’s mission is inherently creational and world-affirming, and should be carried out by the church as a sign of a new humanity and of servanthood in the kingdom of God, for the re-creation of the *cosmos* (Niemandt 2015:6). In the words of Pope Francis: “We must take charge of this home entrusted to us, so that we can protect and serve it” (Francis 2015:69).

In this research, “deep incarnation” will be introduced as an important concept to be considered in future discourses on the theology of mission and in the quest to bring missiology into the theology and science reflection, specifically in terms of the recent work by a number of leading theologians under the title *Incarnation – On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Gregersen 2015).

### **Deep incarnation through the eyes of an artist**

The concept of “deep incarnation” can perhaps be best described in the words of Yann Martel (2016) in his new book *The high mountains of Portugal*. He discusses the challenging theme

of the great paradox – the unbridgeable gap and the unbreakable bond between human and animal – and the ideas on the origin of mankind and the impact of this on Christology and the theology of creation. In the final novella of the book, called *Home*, a Canadian politician loses his wife and ends up in the mountains of Portugal with a chimpanzee. Martel crafts a wonderfully symbolic story, describing the deepening relationship between the main character, Peter Tovy, and Odo the chimpanzee, and places the relationship in another earlier story of a young man named Tomás, who lost his son, his lover, and his father. The grieving Tomás finds a rare artefact – an icon of a crucified Christ that looks very much like a chimpanzee, made by Father Ulisses, a priest in Africa. The icon is deeply symbolic (as is much of the work of Martel – see e.g. *Life of Pi*), and nudges the reader to reflect on the relationship between man, animals, and the cosmic salvation of Jesus Christ. Tomás finds a cross with a crucified Christ in a little church in Portugal. It is perhaps best to listen to Martel’s description:

He points to the heart of the church and asks her, “What is that?”

The woman looks bemused. “It is Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Yes, but how is he represented?”

“Suffering on the Cross.”

“But what *form* has he taken?”

“The form of a man. God so loved us that He gave us His Son,” she replies simply.

“No!” shouts Tomás, smiling though every muscle in his midsection is twisting. “What you have here is a chimpanzee! An ape...

... Here is the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, the biological reality.

The clue to Martel's metaphor is a famous citation from Robert Ardrey (1961): "We are risen apes, not fallen angels".<sup>2</sup> Martel mentions it twice (Martel 2016:131, 226), and concludes: "So when we study chimpanzees, we are studying an ancestral reflection of ourselves." (Martel 2016:226). By narrating the story of a close friendship between Peter Tovy and Odo the chimpanzee, and through the radical notion of a cross with a crucified Christ that resembles a chimpanzee, Martel underlines the relationship between mankind, animals, and all of creation; and the meaning of the crucifixion of Christ not only for mankind, but for all of creation. In a stunningly creative way (some might say blasphemous), Christ is not only put in relation with all humans, but also within the biological reality of evolution, and the interrelatedness of all primates and all species. This has profound implications for the ideas on religious change brought about by the Christian faith.

### **An introduction to "Deep incarnation"**

The concept of "deep incarnation" broadens the well-known idea of incarnation to include all of created reality. Theology is familiar with the concept of incarnation - signifying the coming-into-flesh of God's eternal *Logos*. Bergmann (2003:15) and Pears (2009:118) argue that the incarnation of God in Christ is at the center of the Christian faith. The ideas on incarnation suggest that the body of Jesus does have significant meaning for the vast body of the whole *cosmos*. The concept of "deep incarnation" (sometimes called "radical incarnation – see Gregerson 2016:1) represents a fresh theological perspective to relate the importance of incarnation as a central concept in theology to recent insights from history and evolutionary science. The use of the word "deep" was inspired by concepts of "deep ecology" and "deep

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<sup>2</sup> The correct and full citation is: "We were born of risen apes, not fallen angels, and the apes were armed killers besides. And so what shall we wonder at? Our murders and massacres and missiles, and our irreconcilable regiments? Or our treaties whatever they may be worth; our symphonies however seldom they may be played; our peaceful acres, however frequently they may be converted to battlefields; our dreams however rarely they may be accomplished. The miracle of man is not how far he has sunk but how magnificently he has risen. We are known among the stars by our poems, not our corpses."(Ardrey 1961)

history”, and represents, amongst other things, an attempt to overcome the contrast between man and nature – the metaphor does not only stand in contrast with the shallow, but especially in contrast to the anthropocentric (Gregerson 2013:376). Deep incarnation shifts the perspective from the well-known concept of *kenosis* to the “deep” relation God has with all creation. Bentley (2016:2) argues that this terminology assists the interpretation of the divine incarnation in the person of Christ that is not only understood as God present in the body of a human being, but God’s presence in and association with all materiality. Deep incarnation takes incarnation further and states that - in and through the process of incarnation - God the creator and the world of the flesh are conjoined in such depth that God links up with all vulnerable creatures. In a sense deep incarnation suggests God takes on the totality of humanity and this not only includes the “the exact evolutionary point where humanity stood at the time of the Incarnation” (Bentley 2016:4), but also the whole evolutionary history leading up to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Bentley (2016:3) explains: “Deep Incarnation argues that God did not only become human in the person of Jesus, but through the Incarnation, God assumes a human body in the natural world with *all* its evolutionary progress and processes.”<sup>3</sup> It links the story and body of Christ with the overarching narrative of creation. In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation, in order to share the fate of biological existence. In the incarnate One, God becomes Jesus, and in him God becomes human, sharing the life conditions of foxes and sparrows, grass and trees, soil and moisture. The Most High and the very lowest are united in the process of incarnation. Johnson (2015:loc.2119-2122) argues:

The *sarx* of John 1:14 thus reaches beyond the person of Jesus and beyond all other human beings to encompass the whole biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed. In this

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<sup>3</sup> See Bentley (2016) for a more comprehensive discussion on deep incarnation, kenosis and Pauline Christology.

perspective, the flesh that the Word/Wisdom of God became is part of the vast body of the cosmos. (Johnson 2015:loc.2119-2122).

Gregersen (2015:loc.367-370) gives a wide-ranging overview of the theological history and application of incarnation. For him, incarnation is the story of God's reach into the very tissue of material and biological existence. He states that in the embodied *Logos*, the "flesh" of Jesus Christ is co-extensive with his divinity (Gregersen 2013:370). The incarnation enhances and accentuates the universal significance of the flesh of Jesus Christ (2013:373). He describes incarnation in what he calls a "full-scope inclusive sense" as:

The extended body of Christ comprises the life of all creatures, including their cosmic nexuses, insofar as "the fullness of deity" was pleased to dwell in Christ (Col 2:9) and "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col 1:20) (Gregersen 2015:loc.367-370).

In deep incarnation, God participates in his creation by putting himself, incarnate as the particular human being Jesus Christ, within the ecological interrelatedness of **all things** (Bauckham 2015:loc.820-821). Gregersen (2013:375) explains that deep incarnation is God becoming flesh for the purpose of reconciling humanity with God, and of conjoining God and the world of creation so intensely together that there can be a future also for a material world characterized by decomposition, frailty and suffering. Deep incarnation "suggests that God not only tolerates material existence, but also accepts it and incorporates it in a divine embrace" (Gregersen 2013:375).

Johnson (2010) explains deep incarnation in the following way:

Born of a woman (Gl 4:4) and the Hebrew gene pool, Jesus of Nazareth was a creature of earth, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the

carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. Like all human beings, he carried within himself the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life history of the Earth. The atoms comprising his body once belonged to other creatures.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God is in, with, under, and as, flesh with a human body, a body made from the same stardust that makes up all other bodies. The flesh that the Word became is part of the vast body of the cosmos (Johnson 2010). Bass (2015:21) calls this a spiritual revolution and the crafting of a new theology.

Deep incarnation does not only refer to the Christ-event when God become flesh in a particular time and place and assumed the particular life story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth. Gregersen (2013:389) argues that God's *Logos* assumed the full-scale of human existence (*humanitas*), and not just Jesus as an individual *homo*. Jesus shared the basic creaturely conditions of "men and women, friends and foes, sparrows and foxes" and in terms of the presence of the *Logos* when all reality originated, Jesus shares "... the whole warp and woof of creaturely reality" (Gregersen 2013:389). The divine *Logos* was present in the world of creation before and after the advent of Christ. The incarnation is a "densely specific expression of the love of God already poured out in creation" (Johnson 2015: loc. 2141). Deep incarnation emphasizes the presence of the *Logos* in creation and the origin of the *cosmos*, as well as the future of the *cosmos*.

In summary, deep incarnation can be described as the presence of God in the past, present and future of the whole *cosmos*, the co-existence of the embodied *Logos* with the divinity of God. It underscores Jesus Christ, God incarnate, as the ecological center of all creation and facilitates all things interconnected to find their unity and wholeness in relationship to God.



### **“Deep incarnation” as an important concept in the theology of mission**

Behr (2015:loc.1248-1250) described incarnation as one of the central elements of the Christian faith. Faith has come to be identified with the Trinity and the incarnation: how God exists as a community of divine persons, and how one of these divine persons entered into our time and space by the particular event of the incarnation. This also explains the importance of the concept of incarnation in the theology of mission (see also Bosch 1991:309; Goheen 2014:loc.1634). Tennent argued that “the incarnation is the ultimate example of what we call the translatability of the gospel” (2010:loc.3616-3617), and he challenged the church to reflect on the incarnation as “an ongoing expression of the unfolding drama of God's mission in the world” (2010:loc.812). I will argue that deep incarnation helps the church to reflect on the ongoing expression of the unfolding drama of God's mission in the *cosmos*.

There is also an important link between incarnation and the *missio Dei*. The *missio Dei* must be understood within an eschatological framework. Flett argues that mission is an eschatological occurrence and that “incarnation means sending” (Flett 2010:44). Incarnation embodies the past and the future, and the future coupling and restoration of all relations. *Missio Dei* reminds us that the embodied Christ will also be present in the full material reality of the *parousia*. God accepted and embraced the cosmic aspects of all reality, and will renew it and restore its full beauty and relationality. Flett makes a strong case for the eschatological continuation of God's mission: “For all eternity, the Father will continue to send his Son and Spirit to bring peace and joy to creation” (Flett 2010:76). Deane-Drummond (2015:loc.3003-3004) understands deep incarnation to act at the boundary of creation and new creation, where Christ enters into human, evolutionary, and ecological history in a profound way so that “...

through the living presence of the Holy Spirit that history is changed in the direction of God's purposes for the universe after the pattern of Christ."

Bauckham (2015:loc.729) argues that incarnation implicates God in the universal interconnectivity of and with creation. He states that this is possible because the exalted Christ participates in God's divine ability to be present throughout his creation, but does so as a human being who retains his ecological interrelatedness to other creatures. Because incarnation is permanent, he cannot be thought to extract himself from that creaturely interrelatedness (Bauckham 2015:loc.731-733). He states:

The most easily intelligible way to understand the cosmic effect of the incarnation would be to focus on the healing of the human relationship to the non-human creation that should result from the redemptive transformation of humans. (Bauckham 2015:loc.550-551)

Deep incarnation means that when God's Logos "became flesh" in Jesus, the material world of joy and suffering was also assumed (Gregersen 2015:loc.58). This has profound implications for those on the margins of society, as deep incarnation emphasizes the dignity of all that is physical. Johnson (2015:loc.2210-2213) argues that a plenitude of life for all, including poor human beings and all living creatures, not just for a slice of the world, is God's original and ultimate intent. It means that all "bodies matter to God ... also those damaged, violated, starving, dying, bodies of humankind and other kind alike" (Johnson 2015:loc. 2211-2213).

There are many avenues to explore the role of incarnation in missiology. A brief discussion, focusing on the references to the salvation of the whole of creation as part of God's mission, in the policy document (TTL) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), serves as a starting point to bring deep incarnation, theology of mission and current ideas on mission together. Although the impetus of TTL is focused on the role of the Holy Spirit in the *missio*

*Dei* (Kemper 2016:424), Karechi (2016:401) and Bevans (2016:465) acknowledge the importance of creation in TTL. Bevans (2016:465) argues: "...mission is a call to move from an anthropocentric understanding to one that has the entire creation at its heart."

The concept of deep incarnation expands the relationship with the Triune God as including and beyond the human realm; it includes all of life and the whole of the created universe. Gregerson (2013:383) writes: "The flesh assumed in Jesus includes the entire human race (women and men), as well as the nonhuman creatureliness." The concept of deep incarnation can enrich this shift in focus present in TTL.

This connection of the *missio Dei* to life in the broadest sense also emerges in TTL. The WCC includes "all life" and the whole of creation in its understanding of God's mission (WCC 2013:51). It states that mission is God's love overflowing to all humanity and creation (WCC 2013:52). "The gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society" (WCC 2013:52), and we must recognize God's mission in a cosmic sense (WCC 2013:52). In the concluding affirmations, TTL (WCC 2013:74) states: "We affirm that mission begins with God's act of creation and continues in re-creation, by the enlivening power of the Holy Spirit." This also expands the mission of the church, and TTL argues that, for the church to participate in God's mission, it must proclaim the good news to all humanity and creation. TTL also addresses one of the key issues in deep incarnation under the rubric of mission from the margins. As much as all bodies (those damaged, violated, starving, dying) matter to God, and as much as deep incarnation emphasizes frailty and suffering, so much does TTL underscore that the marginalized in society are the main partners in God's mission (WCC 2013:75). The centrality of the incarnation is affirmed (WCC 2013:75). In terms of eschatology, and the linking of deep incarnation with the *missio Dei* and the eschatological continuation of God's mission, it is significant to note that in TTL the church is called to participate in the renewal and reconnection of all creation (WCC 2013:74).

In terms of deep incarnation, this “extended body of Christ” comprises the “life of all creatures, including their cosmic nexuses” (Gregersen 2015:loc. 367-369). God is co-present with the entire world of creation in such a way as to transform creation in accordance with its destiny (Gregersen 2015:loc.5709-5710).

It is clear that the major themes of deep incarnation (such as an orientation towards life in the broadest sense, the importance of suffering and marginality, the nature of unity and community) support Bevens’ (2016:465) case for a missiological move from an anthropocentric understanding to one that focusses on the entire creation, as is already evident in TTL. This enriches the importance of incarnation in missiology. One could say that the *missio Dei* is not possible without deep incarnation. The reach of the *missio Dei* should include all of created reality. The modern understanding of our universe, the ideas on history and the history of creation going back billions of years, as well as the shift away from an anthropocentric focus to a broader focus, compels a broader understanding on the scope of the *missio Dei*. Deep incarnation IS the *missio Dei*. Deep incarnation repositions the *missio Dei* in the current scientific context and realigns the idea of the incarnation away from the picture of a three-tiered universe to an approach that is true to its ancient Biblical roots while at the same time recognizing current recent scientific insights. Deane-Drummond (2015:loc.2851-2852) refers to Von Balthasar, and argues that it is self-giving love, rather than the cross itself, that is at the heart of the immanent Trinity, and at the heart of the incarnation. In the words of Gregersen (2015:loc.5675): “Thus there is no deep incarnation without a sending of the Son from the depth of the Father”.<sup>4</sup> Hastings (2012:loc.966-967) argues in the same vein, stating

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<sup>4</sup> Gregerson (2015: loc.5672–5673) says: “In short, any doctrine of incarnation can only be explained as part of a wider Trinitarian understanding of God’s ways of relating to God’s world of creation.”

that the inner movement within the Godhead spills over through the *missio Dei*, and this entails the incarnational movement of the Son.

Deep incarnation is not only incarnation into the mortality and fragility of human existence, but also a way of revealing God's attributes - the deep love, self-giving, and "emptying" of God. It certainly represents a new discourse on the doctrine of God, and the implications for missiology warrants further research. Johnson says it is not the case that the transcendent Holy One enters the world for the first time in the historical person of Jesus Christ. "Rather, the triune God is pervasively present as self-communicating Love throughout the *cosmos* from the beginning of time to the end" (Johnson 2015:loc.2056-2057). Or, in the more provocative metaphor of Martel (2016:301), when he gets Peter Tovy to reflect on the presence of his chimpanzee and sighs: "I'm in the presence of a weaver of time and a maker of space. That's enough for me."

### **How "deep incarnation" may guide and transform current ideas on theology of mission**

Repositioning the incarnation of the Triune God with all of created matter, and the human phenomenon with regard to its historical and ongoing relationship to cosmic matter and planetary life, has far-reaching implications (Johnson 2015:loc.2103-2104). This contemporary scientific perspective, that so carefully relates the human race to the natural world on earth and beyond, provides a lens through which to see in a new way the scope and significance of the incarnation in an ecological perspective, and to apply deep incarnation to the ideas regarding mission and transforming mission. (Johnson 2015:loc.2108-2109). Evers (2015:loc.4850–4852) argues that incarnation not only refers to the fact that the transcendent God becomes immanent, but also that God entered the very depth of creation in order to transform creation from within.

The following comes to mind in terms of theology of mission:

*Deep incarnation underscores the universal scope of the divine Logos assuming flesh.*

Moltmann (2015:loc.1947-1949) states:

The human being is living in his or her totality; the human race is living in its community with everything that lives on earth. Everything living shares the fate of vulnerability, mortality, and transience. Everything living is promised a common future in the kingdom of God's glory.

Johnson (2015:2265-2266) argues: "The whole natural world, all of matter in its endless permutations, will not be left behind or rejected but will likewise be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit". Participating in the *missio Dei* gains a cosmic dimension. The question is: How does this reconfigure the *missio Dei* and the church's participation in the *missio Dei*? How does this alter the church's understanding of transformation and the scope of transformation? Botha (2016:282 - 295), in his overview of the importance of transformation in missiological reflection, suggest that the concept of missional transformation recognizes Christ as the savior of the whole world and makes room for the renewal of the whole creation. Deep incarnation can enrich this understanding of transformation by reconfiguring *missio Dei* to include the past, current and future relationship between the creator and the cosmos.

*Deep incarnation raises many issues regarding particularity and universality - how Christ is present for other creatures, and the implications of the "extended body of Christ".*

Johnson (2015:loc.2130-2132) agrees with Rahner: 'the climax of salvation history is not the detachment from earth or from the human being as spirit in order to come to God, but ... the

coming of the divine *Logos* in the flesh, the taking on of matter so that it itself becomes a permanent reality of God”. Gregersen (2015: loc.5579-5581) states that the Christian concept of incarnation includes both God’s particular self-embodiment as Jesus Christ, and God’s self-identification in and through him. Christ is the incarnate One who stands in for others. This means that we should distinguish incarnation from creation, but not separate it from creation. Participating in the *missio Dei* includes participation in the transformation of the whole complex material/spiritual world of creation. The *missio Dei* embodies the past and all relations that constituted life in fullness in the past, as well as the future and the re-instatement of all future relationship so that Christ can be all-in all.

***Deep incarnation support the mission move from an anthropocentric understanding of mission to one that has the entire creation at heart.***

Take the *Lausanne Covenant* as example, when it defines mission as world evangelization that “requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world” (see Wright 2010:26). Reflection on deep incarnation might modify this famous definition to “the whole church linking the whole Gospel to the whole cosmos.” What is the relationship between mission and the prospering of the cosmos? How does the theology of mission, with its focus on transforming mission, participate in the theology and science discourse? How can missiology contribute something particular to the global efforts to address environmental issues and assist the church in formulating the moral dimension of environmental issues through a deep appreciation of the full dimensions of incarnation?

## **Conclusion**

Deep incarnation is perhaps an expanded explanation of “*veriditas*.” *Veriditas* is one of the images used by the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen. It refers to the greening power of

God, the animating life-force within all creation, giving it life, moisture and vitality. *Veriditas* is a complex term that encompasses the nature of creation, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the continued growing and prospering of all created things through a relationship with God (see Jones n.d.). In a sonnet of Hildegard of Bingen (n.d.), Hildegard wrote:

Mother from mother earth and *Magistra*,  
Your song revealed God's hidden gift to us;  
The verdant fire, his holy harbinger  
The greening glory of *veriditas*.  
'Cherish this earth that keeps us all alive'  
Either we hear you, or we don't survive.

The theology of mission needs to attend to deep incarnation to hear the prophetic voices of scientists. Deep incarnation opens a journey of discernment (always the first act in mission) to become part of the discourses between science and religion, and opens the eyes of missiologist for *veriditas*, the ever present relation between the Triune God and creation that might "keep us all alive". Deep incarnation can serve the missiological turn to the world and cosmos and the growing realization that mission encompasses and broadens the vision far beyond the historical notions of ecclesial missions.

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