

Time out. Perspectives on liturgical temporality

ABSTRACT

The understanding of the relationship between past, present and future is of the utmost importance for the liturgy. This article gives a brief theological exposition of the phenomenon of time, followed by some liturgical implications, namely liturgy as remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the past; liturgy as discernment (*phronēsis*) of the present; and liturgy as anticipation of the coming (*adventus*) of the future. These features form the contours of a liturgy that is sensitive to its dimensions of temporality.

1. TEMPUS FUGIT?

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to describe the phenomenon of time. This is partly because we cannot disentangle ourselves from such a basic vehicle of our existence – “... *pursuing Time, we are like a knight on a quest, condemned to wander through innumerable forests, bewildered and baffled, because the magic beast he is looking for is the horse he is riding*” (Priestly 1964: 81)

Plato spoke of time as the “moving image of eternity” (cf. Burnet 1951: 340). It would seem as if time is indeed a fleeting phenomenon, constantly escaping our grasp, but also drawing us along in its wake. Time could be described from different perspectives, for example, philosophical, socio-economic, developmental-psychological,¹ etc., without our exhausting the fullness of its dimensions.

Key concepts that seem constantly to come to the fore, however, are those of *cyclical and/versus linear time* (to be discussed below in 2 in *theological* perspective). In this article we opt for a (liturgical) understanding of linear time – moving from the past to the present to the future. Time flies (*tempus fugit*), but it never flies backwards; it always flies forward. This acceptance of linear time, however, comes with the provision that the relationship between the “times” (past, present, future) is understood in a dynamic, one could say fluid, way. This means that past, present and future are to be understood as “separate” tenses or stages of time, but also that they are *intrinsically intertwined*. In order for us to understand the present (*hic et nunc*; here and now), we need discernment (*phronēsis*). This entails *inter alia* the incorporation into the present both the past by way of remembrance (*anamnesis*), as well as the future by way of anticipation of its coming (*adventus*).

If we look closely at the present, we will see the past and the future in it. It is folly (i.e. against *phronēsis*) to cast out or cast off the past and/or the future from the present. If the flow between the times is misunderstood, it may result in several misconceptions of past, present and

¹ Piaget, for instance, did some interesting research on our understanding of time. According to him, children up to the age of six have an understanding of “spatial time” only, that is, they can measure “time” in terms of spatial changes or transferences (for instance, being in the bedroom or outside in the garden). Between the ages of six and seven spatial time becomes “compartmental time”, which means that children now measure time in terms of “before” and “after”, or “short time” and “long time”, although these pockets of time are still not linked in a logical coherence. Only after the age of seven does time become “linear time”, that is, time that moves forward or passes by in a sequential way (as quoted in Heimbrock 1993: 63-64).

future, some of them in fact being ideologically quite dangerous. Then the tenses of time (past, present, future) become compartmentalised; become autonomous “pockets” of time. History then becomes historicism, which entails a type of *monumentalisation* of time. Future becomes futurism, which signifies a sort of *apocalyptisation* of time. In turn, the present is solidified into presentism, which inevitably results in a *superficialisation* of our understanding of time.

This understanding of the relationship between past, present and future is of the utmost importance – especially also for the liturgy. We consequently attend to a brief theological reflection on the phenomenon of time, followed by some liturgical implications, namely liturgy as remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the past; liturgy as discernment (*phronēsis*) of the present; and liturgy as anticipation of the coming (*adventus*) of the future.

So let us then try and saddle the magic beast called Time.

2. TIME: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The relation between God and time (or of time before God: *tempus coram deo*) could be described as *dialectical* (cf. Cilliers 2006: 20-22). In this dialectical relation, on the one hand, God enters time; on the other, He remains the Eternal – his Being is one of constancy and, at the same time, variation. This needs some further clarification.

On the one hand, God enters and works within time. These works are so differentiated, He is so varied in his Epiphanies, that the biblical writers must, for example, emphasise that it is the same Jesus who appeared in the fullness of time: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and until eternity (Heb 13:8). The *strangeness*, the incomparableness of the Name of God (God is identical with his Name: *Nomen Dei est Deus ipse*), indeed, is coherent with this chequered way of appearing, with the fact that He indeed makes history, always new and surprising (Bohren 1974:100).

This new and surprising entering and working of God in time is best described in *linear* and not *cyclical* time frames. Both the Old as well as the New Testament express God’s history-making action predominantly with the help of *linear* time categories.² The linear passing of time (history), thus, is not conceived as an abstract continuity of time, but rather the God-given content of certain moments in history. God “pushes” the time forward, creating “time-leaps” towards His goal (*telos*) with history (cf. Berkhof 1973: 561).

In this regard Tillich also refers to the perpetual tension between time and space (1962: 187-197). Time and space are symbolised by a *circle* (representing enclosed space) and a *line* (representing linear time). If, for instance, space is understood as an exclusive entity (circle), it attains eternal characteristics. Therefore this exclusive circle must constantly be shattered by the *line* of time, reminding space of its inherent transience (1962: 187). In this way the tragic and repetitive circle of eternalised space is broken, interrupted, and the God of history acknowledged and worshipped. Indeed: “*Der Gott der Zeit ist der Gott der Geschichte. Das heist vor allem, dass er der in der Geschichte auf ein End-Ziel hinwirkende Gott ist*” (Tillich 1962: 194).

The cyclical understanding of time underlies the classical Greek understanding of *tragedy*. In Greek thought we find no philosophy of history, and where the Greeks do reflect on the meaning of history, it is seen as the all-encompassing circular movement of the total cosmos,

² In some instances, for example in the Wisdom tradition, we do find the concept of cyclical time. In my view, this does not oppose the notion of linear time. Within linear time there are certain occurrences that repeat, for example seasons, but these repetitions are never understood as the inevitable, unpredictable fruits of fate. Cyclical events can be seen as part of the linear movement towards the Day of the Lord, even if this Day sees many fulfilments.

from birth to death. In this cosmological tragedy time is devoured by space (Tillich 1962: 191).

God's objectives for the world, however, move to a consummation; things do not just go ahead or return to the point where they began, in a never-ending cycle of time. Although the fall of humanity made history meaningless and monotonous, it is indeed God's intervention that (always) imparts purpose and new meaning. Linear time is not a sequence of inevitable events, but moments, "days," in which God brings his objective for the world closer to its conclusion. These are unrepeatable moments, *kairos moments*, in which God allows a specific objective to be fulfilled at a specific time. The fullness of time, with Christ's coming, the *ephapax* of his crucifixion and resurrection, is the most striking example of this (Kümmel 1974:141-146).

On the other hand, God remains outside of time, as the Eternal One. Therefore, one must also emphasise that God is the *Lord* of time and history,³ that He is the eternal King (1 Tim 1:17). He determines, divides and encompasses time, for instance *ante et post Christum natum* (before and after the birth of Christ). He sees through time, as the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Rev 1:8). Before Him, there is but one time, and one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day (2 Pt 3:8). He inaugurates and closes the epochs of his works among us. In the Holy Spirit He closes the book on certain periods of time and, in doing so, turns a new leaf of opportunity, creating new time: therefore *from now onwards*, we no longer judge anybody according to human criteria, *now* we no longer judge Him thus (2 Cor 5:16).

Both these sides of God's actions with us must thus be maintained, i.e. his transcendence and his immanence. Indeed, God *reveals* Himself in history, and this is a real revelation, it is his *Being* that He reveals to us; it is He *Himself* who makes history in his revelation. Between God's Being and his revelation, there is no tension. Yet, God is also more than his revelation. God's reality is not dissolved in his work. Because He is more than his works, He can work; because He is greater than his revelation and precedes it, He can reveal Himself (Durand 1976:47). Neither has God, in his revelation, been given to us as manipulable in our hands. His Name remains a nameless Name (Miskotte 1965: 99-111).

The acts of God in history (the *caesuras* of creation, covenant, the Christ-event, Pentecost, etc.) underline the fact that God does not operate according to the circle theory. He continuously draws a line – through the circle of so-called eternal repetition or tragic fate. For God nothing is *fait accompli* – especially not our states of hopelessness. He continuously puts up signs at the limits of our *cul de sacs*, saying: *No Parking* (Jager 1962: 481).

This (linear) understanding of time is significant for our understanding of the liturgy. Barnard is of the opinion that it is not cyclical time, but the church year, even more so the weekly rhythm of seven days, that structures the encounter between God and his people in time. He concludes:

Het ritme van dag en nacht, de wisseling van de seizoenen en de dagen van de grote feesten worden bepaald door de banen van de planeten; ze zijn cyclisch. Ze keren steeds terug, hun tijd loopt rond. Maar de week en het uur zijn geen spiegeling van een kosmische cyclus. Ook niet van de maan: een maanmaand duurt 29 1/2 dag. De week en de uur zijn geen beelden van de rondlopende tijd, maar van de voortgaande tijd, van de geschiedenis die ergens heengaait, en die eindigt op Gods grote Dag (de achste dag).

(Barnard 2001: 27)

We now attend to some liturgical implications of this understanding of time.

3 Here, there is a distinction between time and history, but not a separation. Viewed formally, time is God's gift to humans as a possibility for existence; history is its actual course.

3. LITURGY AS REMEMBRANCE (*ANAMNESIS*) OF THE PAST

Remembrance forms a characteristic part of all religions; religion has always had a memorial aspect (Landres and Stier 2006: 1). The Christian religion could also rightly be called a religion of remembrance. As a matter of fact, the root word for remembrance (*anamnesis*; the mnē group) covers a concept which is fundamental to the Bible and encompasses the whole of divine and human life (Bartels 1978: 246).

The biblical concept of *anamnesis* is deeply rooted in a profound understanding of linear time. Bartels contends: God's revelation, unlike the nature religions, does not follow the birth-and-death cycles of nature; it is no automatically unfolding process as in the mystery religions or in Gnosticism. Rather, it occurs within the course of history... stretching from yesterday, through today, and on to the future... Hence, all the church's worship is and always has been historical, verbal and personal, rather than nature-orientated, mystical or dramatic. This is true of the preaching of the word, which aims to give outward expression to something which has happened in the past, by removing it from the wrappings of memory or of oral or written tradition and so recalling it to men's minds. The same applies also to the Lord's Supper, instituted at a precise time and place to be a "remembrance" of Christ throughout a definite period in the church's history, namely "till He come" (1 Cor 11: 26).

(Bartels 1978: 246)

In this act of remembrance, however, we should not fall prey to a *liturgical over-estimation* of the past. This over-estimation can take on many forms, often avenging itself within the liturgy by, for instance, repristination (the urge to repeat in the exact form), traditionalism, fundamentalism and a mythical solidifying of time – all of which could be called a *monumentalisation* of time. Then the past becomes a "pocket" that should be neatly brought into the present, to be erected there as *norma normans* for all further action, present and future.

But the past is indeed the *past*. It lies behind us and cannot be repeated. History does not repeat itself – contra to what the popular slogan says. Gertrude Stein, the famous American writer and poet, once said: a rose is a rose is a rose, meaning (in terms of aesthetics) a rose is self-referential; its meaning is not constituted by realities outside of it, but much more by means of its modality, i.e. its relationship to these realities (1922: 30). Perhaps we could say: the past is the past is the past. It has gone by – and should be viewed as such. It cannot, and should not, be resuscitated liturgically.

But in remembrance we should also steer clear of a *liturgical under-estimation* of the past. The past is of the utmost significance for the present. The reason why people are interested in the past is because the past reveals certain patterns. To find and honour historical patterns also remains an important task of the liturgist (Vos 1999: 101). Tradition as such, and also the use of (liturgical) tradition, is no evil thing. Tradition should in fact serve as a conduit for meaningful transference (*tradere*) of culture from the past to the present, and also to the future. We are not the first to invent the (liturgical) wheel. Others have come before us and it is wise to listen to them. In this sense, we need to *celebrate the past*, or rather: celebrate the acts of God in the past.

But we also have enough reason to lament the past. For this we need a *responsible, hermeneutical dialogue* with the past, as we so often tend to apply a reduced form of remembrance, a selective memory, if not a total amnesia. Ricoeur has written extensively on both the vulnerability and weakness of our acts of memory, but also indicates the potential

of memory to interpret the past in a hermeneutically responsible manner. Memory is all that we have to link us to the past (Ricoeur 2004: 21). But memory can also be abused in a variety of ways, for instance, on a pathological and therapeutic level, on a practical level (especially in terms of finding and defending our identity), and on an ethical-political level (cf. Vosloo 2007: 279 f.).

We do indeed need an acute liturgical memory, as we so often tend to block out our wrongdoings of the past, and find no need to lament them in the present. *In this sense, the past is often strangely absent from our liturgies.* We seem not to understand that our wrongdoings of the past, especially those with grave social consequences, are not issues that can be settled and “buried in the past” with a number of official denominational declarations, but which must be worked through in continuous discussions in a process of questioning and listening, and especially of liturgical remembrance and reflection, instead of forgetting and pushing aside (cf. Lapsley 1996: 22; also Richter-Böhne 1989:13).

This indeed applies not only to individual behavioural patterns, but also to society. *Collective* guilt is often suppressed by finding a communal external cause for the very circumstances in which those who are involved and responsible or co-responsible find themselves. With the assistance of social behavioural patterns, guilt is worked away and removed from the system (Mitscherlich 1967:21ff). But unlamented guilt is not like yesterday’s snow. It does not melt as a result of our forgetfulness, and it threatens to smother us if we suppress it (Bohren in Preface to Richter-Böhne 1989).

Indeed, we are in dire need of a critical and hermeneutical interrogation of the past. The potential of being liturgically enriched by this interrogation is endless. It offers “*a horizon of expectation that opens the possibility of being strangely surprised by the past*” (Vosloo 2007: 290).

But one can only be surprised by the past through discernment in the present.

4. LITURGY AS DISCERNMENT (*PHRONĒSIS*) OF THE PRESENT

The Christian religion is not only a religion of remembrance – it is also acutely aware of (the importance of) the present. “Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6: 2). When Christ breaks the bread during the last supper, He says: “Do this in remembrance of Me”, but He also says: “This is my body which is given for you” (Luke 22: 19). He is not making a general remark, fitting for all times, but an offer, *hic et nunc* (here and now).

This “here and now” could, however, be misunderstood in a number of ways. It could, for instance, be equated to certain forms of mysticism. The latter endeavour to extinguish both time and space, to find an eternal now (“...*Über aller zeitlichen Gegenwart stehende ewige Gegenwart*.”; Tillich 1962: 191). The effect of this form of mysticism is that time cannot create a radically new creation and no *novum* can be formed – there can be no escape from the tragedy of a cyclical birth and death. “*So verstanden ist die Mystik die subtilste Form der Übermacht des Raumes. In subtilster Form verneint sie die Geschichte, aber durch die Ablehnung der Geschichte verneint sie zugleich denn Sinn von Zeit*” (Tillich 1962: 192).

The “here and now” could also be misunderstood as a form of mythology. Destructive myths always tend to *change history (or: time) into nature* (Barthes 1964:113). Time is arrested and fixed in space. What in essence is contingent is solidified as stringency. This is done to sanctify certain motives and ideals, often nationalistic in nature (Tillich 1962: 190-191). But, in the end, (linear) time always draws its line through the circle of exclusivist space and congealed time; always reveals the inherent transience and finitude of any destructive myth, however powerful it may also seem to be.

We indeed need *phronēsis* to discern the value of the present. In the New Testament sense *phronēsis* means, *inter alia*, a type of mentality that undergirds the inter-relationship between life and thought: *"It expresses not merely an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will; it is both interest and decision at the same time... this attitude of mind is closely connected with spiritual status: the believer's new standing in Christ both creates and demands a new mentality ..."* (Goetzman 1976: 617, 619). This new mentality or attitude is one of looking at life, and the realities of the present in particular, through the lenses of the Christ-event; it is to discern the deeper meaning of the present moment – as a moment being filled by Christ Himself.

In the liturgy we worship the God of history, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is, the God of the past (cf. Ex 3: 6), but therefore also the God of the present and the future. When God says to Moses: "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14), He fills the present with pregnant time (*kairos*). It is the same One who says "I am", and also "I was what I was", i.e. the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But at the same time He is also the God who fills the future with his promises, when He declares: "I will lead you out of Egypt" (Ex 3: 17); the same God who implies: "I shall be what I shall be."

The present is filled with the past and the future. But we cannot live in the past or the future. We live in the present. It should not be devalued in any way. The present is the present is the present. It is a gift to be experienced, to the full. In the liturgy, time is pressed into the present, as *"Ballungen von Zeit"* (Jüngel 1974: 116). Or as Friedland and Hecht put it: *"Central places, holy places, sacred places, memory places are those in which time is concentrated, thickened. They are places where the beginning of time presses into the present and the present bleeds into the end of time. Beginning and end are there, but central places, holy places, sacred places, and memory places are intensely present"* (2006: 35).

This gift of concentrated and thickened time should be celebrated liturgically, because it brings with it the presence of the One whom we celebrate. We celebrate the fact that that what was and will be, "already" is. In contrast to this, we could so dwell on the past, or so escape towards the future, that the ontological gift of Christ's presence in the present is overlooked. *It could also be that the present (presence) is strangely absent from our liturgies.*

Certain forms of mysticism and mythological understandings of time may seem to be deep, but in fact they represent a *superficialisation* of time, exactly because they try to escape from time. When we speak about discernment of (Christ's) presence in the present, the latter is in no way intended. Liturgical discernment of presence in the present is not a form of mystical escapism or mythological annihilation of time, but should rather be understood as "time out". The latter phrase is often used in the world of sport. In order for the game to be continued, "time out" is taken to remind players of rules, to tend to those injured, etc. Time as such, of course, does not stop for one second, but the stop watch for "time out" signifies a different time zone, or time experience. "Time out" exists within time, but simultaneously outside of time. It does not stop, or negate "normal" time, but is there exactly to enhance the play taking place in "normal" time. "Time out" entails reframing, perhaps rescheduling, and re-evaluation of normal time. In the liturgy we take some "time out", or rather: we are given the gift of "time out", not as an escape from time, but rather so that we can re-enter time, and experience "time in" in a different manner.

Perhaps all of the above is said best in Eucharistic terms. One could say that a type of *condensation of the times* takes place in the Eucharist: the past is presented in such a way that a yearning for the future is created, but a future that continuously breaks through into the present (cf. Van Wengen-Shute 2003: 101; also Wainwright 1983: 131). The Eucharist represents a form

of *punctual coincidence*: the past and the future coincide in such a way in the present that the present becomes an epiphany, a point of revelation.

In this regard Purcell refers to the phenomenon of “Eucharistic Time”, which signifies “the presence of Transcendence” (2001: 141-144). The Eucharist is not only a present event; it rather creates the present as present. It constitutes the present as a gift (present). It interprets the present time in order to make it the time of the present/gift, or expressed in the above terms, it calls for “time out”, to transform “time in” into a *kairos*. Purcell quotes, and in the process slightly alters, Aquinas’ doxological understanding of the Eucharist:

*O Sacred Banquet in which Christ is our food:
the memory of his passion is recalled,
a pledge of future glory is given,
and (so) our lives are filled with grace.*

According to Purcell, the “and” in the above does not simply signify a conjunction that connects the present with the past and the future, but it is also a concluding “so/therefore”. The gift of the Eucharist “arises in a past covenant; it points to an eschatological future charged with hope and promise; and because of this, it establishes a present” (Purcell 2001: 141).

This filling of the present, or constitution of the present through the gift/present of the Eucharist (presence of Christ), could be called *infinituding*. Time is filled with the infinitude; it becomes infinitude. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist and liturgy is not so much about the description of time, as it is about the *infinituding* of time and people’s experience within this time. The *Liedboek van die Kerk* of the Dutch Reformed Church captures something of this experience in the following stanza:

*Spreek die Here, word die tyd
oomblikke van ewigheid* (2001: 255/2).

But, in order for the present time to become “moments of eternity”, it needs to be filled with the future.

5. LITURGY AS ANTICIPATION (OF COMING: *ADVENTUS*) OF THE FUTURE

Liturgy, as exemplified in the Eucharist, is about remembrance and presence, but it is also about (anticipation of) the future. We are called to re-tell the message of Christ’s death *until He comes again* (1 Cor 11:26). Liturgy is not just about *incarnation* and *inhabitation*, but also *anticipation*. Obviously the future by implication means “not now” – the future is the future is the future – but this is often misunderstood as an experience of time exclusively related to a *futurum*, i.e. an attitude or mentality that somehow bypasses the present in its eagerness for the future. In the New Testament sense of the word, advent indicates a close connection between the saving presence of Christ *who has already come* and the future. The hour that is coming, already is now (cf. John 4: 23; 5: 25; also Mundle 1975: 324). Anticipation is more about *adventus* (the coming of the present One), than it is about *futurum*. Moltmann explains:

De ‘toekomst’ moet gedact worden als bestaanswijze van God bij ons en met ons. Deze toekomst van zijn heerlijkheid en van zijn heerschappij is niet iets dat volledigheidshalve nog aan zijn eeuwigheid moet worden toegevoegd... Tussen het geloof in de ‘God boven ons’ en het geloof in de ‘God binnen ons’ komt dus als derde mogelijkheid de ‘God vóór ons’, ‘de God die voor ons uitgaat’, ‘de God van de hoop en van de Uittocht’... In de spanning tussen de ervaring van Gods aanwezigheid

en van Gods afwezigheid zoeken wij naar Gods toekomst, want die alleen kan die spanning opheffen. 'Toekomst' is niet een toestand eindeloos ver weg, maar een kracht die werkzaam is in het heden, in belofte en in hoop, in het vrijmaken en scheppen van nieuwe mogelijkheden. Als macht van de toekomst werkt God op het heden in.

(Moltmann 1969: 177-178)

This understanding of the future as *adventus* clearly has profound implications for the liturgy. The present (presence of Christ) is celebrated precisely because the future is already here. It prevents us from practising a type of liturgical escapism, or an apocalyptisation of our hope. Anticipation is not about waiting for certain (apocalyptic) events, but about *participation in the future*. . . . Liturgy could indeed be called an *anticipatory participation in the presence of the coming One*. In the light of this understanding of *adventus*, it could be a fair question to ask whether *the future is also not strangely absent from our liturgies*. Often the future is treated as a distant and totally unknown phase of time, rather than celebrated as gift that "already" fills the present with meaning.

The latter point does not negate the fact that we have "not yet" reached the *telos* of time. On the contrary, the liturgical act of lament, for instance, does not only take place in the light of evil because it is simply there, but because the tension between what is (the *presence of the future*) and the discrepancies and paradoxes called forth by evil cry out for a "final" answer and solution (i.e. the *future of the presence*).

This tension between the future that is already with us, and simultaneously not yet, finds its best expression in the Eucharist. Purcell elaborates:

The present celebration of the Eucharist is referred to a past which exercises a certain judgment over the present and summons the present celebration to be responsible and faithful celebration. But, so too with the future orientation of the Eucharist. The life, death and resurrection of Christ which establishes the new covenant inaugurates the kingdom of God, and thus provides a substantial anchor for that "pledge of future glory" (*pignus futurae gloriae*). The future is not an empty promise; it has already been established... It already has a content which has been realised in the life, death and resurrection of Christ... Thus, as with the past, the future has a certain exteriority with regard to the present. It is that which, along with the past, gives a present.

(Purcell 2001: 142-143)

6. A TIMELY CONCLUSION

The liturgical acts mentioned above (remembrance, discernment, anticipation) could be described as human expressions of faith (religious *existentialia*), and form the contours of a liturgy that is sensitive as to its dimensions of temporality. They could, however, also be understood as divine acts. We remember on the grounds of God's remembrance of us; we discern because it is a gift of Christ's presence; we anticipate because the present One is coming. God's acts in time (past, present, future) dovetail with our liturgical acts in the light of time. What Bartels concludes in terms of remembrance is as true for discernment and anticipation: "*God's 'remembrance' of his people ... dovetails with his people's 'remembrance' of Him in praise and testimony... God's remembering is thus an efficacious and creative event*" (1978: 246).

This brings us back to our theological reflection: God enters time, but also remains free from time; He is immanent, but also transcendent. He fills time with the presence of his

transcendence. This He can do because He is the Lord of time, the One who is and who was and who is to come (Rev 1:8).

In the end the magic beast called Time will throw us from the saddle. But it must also bow down before this Lord of time.

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