

The Evolution and Revolution of Feminist Ministry: A U.S. Catholic Perspective

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Abstract

Catholic feminist women in the United States engage in a wide variety of ministries. They are in good company with women from other faiths who are pushing beyond the structures and givens of their traditions to create new forms of spiritual and religious expression adequate to the needs of postmodern people. The author reflects appreciatively on these efforts, with special attention to how the work done in the public arena is changing the face of America's largest religious community.

Feminist ministry remains a contradiction in terms for many people. I have been involved in its evolution for over 40 years in the United States in ways that demonstrate both religious change and feminist progress. I offer reflections on feminist ministry as it emerges, diverges, and converges in a dynamic religious context. It is a movement that has shaped and been shaped by forces that would largely prefer that it had never existed — namely patriarchal, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has so helpfully named *kyriarchal*, religions (2001: 118-19). In my view, the world is safer and religion as a whole has more integrity because of the enormous contributions of feminist ministers.

My starting point and social location is the Catholic tradition that presents the quintessential case for the rejection of feminist ministry. I will confine my reflections to the Christian tradition in an effort to sharpen the

focus. But I note that feminist ministry cannot be thought of apart from the innovative and astonishing advances of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Pagan/Wiccan, and other traditions that women are reshaping. In my acquaintance and collaboration with women of other faith communities, I see enormous differences and painful similarities. I share my observations and analysis in the hope that what are now feminist approaches may broaden to improve the quality of ministry and spiritual life across the board.

Forty years ago, I went to seminary unwittingly. I entered Harvard Divinity School in 1972 after a Jesuit undergraduate experience, unaware that most women at HDS were there to become ministers. It had never occurred to me, as a Catholic woman, to do anything other than study theology for an academic career. In fact, the other Catholic woman in my class was also there to become an academic. Our Protestant colleagues, save for the few who were bound for doctorates, were all heading into ordained ministry, for which a master of divinity degree was the union card. It was a bit of a shock to my Catholic system to realise that these women were in a training program, albeit an academically rigorous one, that would likely result in their being hired as pastors. What a novel concept for a Catholic accustomed to men only in seminary and in ministry!

In retrospect, my naiveté was not so surprising. Mine was the first cohort of women to enter theological schools in large numbers.¹ Women had only been studying at Harvard Divinity School for 20 years. Disgracefully, HDS, which was founded in 1816, waited a century and a half before the first women students were admitted. Pioneer feminist theologian Letty Russell was among Harvard's early women graduates. But it was not until 1971 that women were admitted in significant numbers, and not until 1972, my first year, that women came to constitute anything close to a critical mass.

It is typically the case that pioneers are self-selecting and eager, so the quality tends to be high. This was true among my classmates. Many of them went on to leadership posts in their respective denominations. They did so despite a paucity of resources to accommodate the presence, needs, and wisdom of women. Harvard was forced by women to improve everything from the number of women's restrooms it offered to allowing co-ed dorms. Professors eventually learned to use inclusive language. Women's programmes needed an office, so that the students could be taught and mentored by women at a time when the faculty was virtually all male. Women students excelled nonetheless.

Some theological schools did better than others in their preparation of women for ministry. But in the 1970s, no place in the U.S. was nirvana for aspiring pastors or theologians, since a generation or two of women had yet to be schooled to take leadership. Many of my cohort did just that. Forty

years later, with retirement in the offing, my group includes women who became presidents of seminaries, high-ranking denominational officials, senior pastors of tall-steeple churches, programme officers for philanthropic foundations, and, of course, theologians and ethicists.

Beginning largely in the 1970s, thanks to the remarkable work of a few bold theological thinkers (prime among them Mary Daly), women not only entered the field of religion but immediately set about changing it.² That is the subject of another essay; but the historical point is that women's entrance into theological education in relatively large numbers was both a catalyst for change and a trigger of backlash.

Change occurred as every theological discipline (theology, ethics, scripture, church history, pastoral studies, etc.) was deconstructed and reconstructed from a feminist perspective. That work began in the 1970s as a gender-based critique, but it quickly came to incorporate insights into the injustices wrought by sexism, racism, economic disparity, heterosexism, ableism, and colonialism. Accordingly, the population of women involved in ministry expanded exponentially beyond the mostly white group predominant in my graduate school years to include African American, Hispanic/Latina, Asian, Native American, and other women who have shaped the field with their insights, skills, and tenacity.

Backlash against these efforts is predictable and pernicious. Whole denominations — including Roman Catholicism, various Orthodox Christian groups, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and others — have steadfastly refused to admit women to their clerical ranks. As someone who considers clericalism a central part of the kyriarchal problem, I am still outraged by the rank discrimination that these groups exercise in the name of the Divine. Nonetheless, their recalcitrance has necessitated creative and expansive responses that have resulted in some marvellous ministry. The Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER),³ where I work, is one such example. The Women's Ordination Conference (WOC)⁴ is another. Both groups, and others like them, are run by women who are not siphoned off into kyriarchal ministry, but can shape their work as they see fit.

I do not applaud the churches' actions just because these savvy organisations are the result. But I note that not even the most theologically bankrupt notions have been sufficient to keep women from exercising a range of effective, meaningful, and transformative forms of feminist ministry. It is ministry characterised by mutuality and equality, an allergy to clericalism, and a commitment to meeting needs and empowering people to work for social transformation. It sounds like a recipe for postmodern ministry of any stripe.

Among U.S. Protestants, where most of the denominations ordain women, the number of women ministers has risen steadily (Fiedler and Pomerleau

2006: 951-960). In some cases, notably the Unitarian Universalist Association, the number of women seminary students has reached or exceeded the number of men, so the trajectory in that case is clear. But ordaining women is just the first step. Many ordained women, especially women of colour, report problems finding employment (Vargas 2010: 99-106). Others cite discrimination in advancement and salaries. Moreover, there are lots of instances of women being hired to clean up problems that had arisen long before they had any access to power.

Protestant women lead some denominations now. Katharine Jefferts Schori is the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. While her election was considered a success and her ministry is exemplary, she faces a difficult situation as conservative and progressive forces in her church spar around the world. In the United States, these tensions have resulted in literal turf battles over whether those who wish to divorce their denomination and join a conservative consortium of Anglicans should be able to take their church properties with them. Court battles have ensued, despite the general reluctance of the U.S. courts to get involved in internal church matters. It is these kinds of struggles, brewing long before they were ordained, that some women ministers face. This is on top of the regular tasks of sacraments, preaching, teaching, and community building. Somehow it isn't quite fair.

My impression is that while these women are doing fine work, their mere presence has not been enough to occasion substantive structural changes in their religious institutions. Conversely, their presence has the net impact of reinforcing and re-inscribing the current organisations and polities. This may "work" for Protestants, whose ministers operate in conjunction with, and sometimes at the behest of, laypeople. In fact, one could argue that the overall quality of ministry has improved mightily by the addition of women to the pool. But this model presents serious problems on the Catholic front.

My Catholic ministerial studies were less accidental than were my Harvard years. By then, the mid-1970s, I was well into a doctoral program in philosophical and systematic theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley — with full knowledge of the ban on women priests in my own tradition. Nevertheless, I enrolled simultaneously in the master of divinity degree program at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley (now part of Santa Clara University), which is part of the GTU. I wanted to add a pastoral dimension to my academic theological work, and I wanted to know just what Catholic ministerial studies were like from the inside.

I was one of only two women in my class of several dozen mostly Jesuit scholastics preparing for ordination. I learned up close the attitudes, abilities (or lack thereof), and culture of would-be clerics. Those stories await another telling, but my key learning was that the women were at least as well

prepared for ministry, and in some cases far better prepared, than were the men. In our clinical pastoral education, preaching, study of the sacraments, and the like, we were easily able to compete. Clearly the only barrier to the ordination of women was discriminatory theology and lack of support from men, not intellectual or ministerial incompetence on the part of women.

The Vatican has issued several statements against the ordination of women.⁵ Other statements effectively ban most progressive women from teaching in theological schools, attempt to curb what the Vatican considers the 'feministisation' (my word, not theirs, but it fits!) of American women religious, and strongly oppose government policies on contraception and abortion. All of this has deeply scandalised many Catholics, driving many to look elsewhere for a comfortable, just religious community.

While Catholicism remains the largest single religious affiliation in the United States, former Catholics now rank as the second-largest group. This trend shows every sign of continuing, as more and more people realise that discrimination against women in ministry is theologically unsustainable. When combined with the epidemic of priest paedophilia and episcopal cover-ups, as well as financial manoeuvres to protect the institution and not the victims, the Roman Catholic Church's treatment of women is simply one more unacceptable dimension of an increasingly unacceptable church.

Some people speculate wistfully that Pope Francis will change all of this. I fear not. In the first few months of his pontificate, he has shown no willingness to look critically at doctrines and practices that discriminate against women and keep ordained ministry, especially as it relates to decision-making, in the hands of men. His efforts to set up a committee of cardinals to advise him (without decision-making power, however), and his initial steps to clean up the money-laundering at the Vatican bank, while laudable, are hardly the stuff of structural change. Minus such transformation, women have no hope of equality in Catholic circles.

Feminist ministry has arisen as a result of this exclusion, as well as from the common-sense experience that service in a community is honest work that requires training and commitment. It is not tied to anatomy or lifestyle. Catholic women engaged in feminist ministry have found a variety of ways to exercise their gifts and utilise their training. Some have gone to other Christian denominations where they have been welcomed, ordained, and hired. Others have found jobs within the kyriarchal structure, including a growing number who are lay ministers or parish associates in Catholic parishes. In a few of those cases, there are also women who function as pastors in the absence of ordained males (see Wallace 1992). Why these women are not ordained remains a tale of rank discrimination.

Still others have been ordained in groups like Roman Catholic Women

Priests,⁶ the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests,⁷ the Ecumenical Catholic Church,⁸ and similar groups. These women function as priests in base communities and congregations despite the official ban. As such, they represent an answer to the question, “Where have all the Catholics gone?” These eucharistic communities meet the pastoral and spiritual needs of thousands of people, while parishes are closing and people are voting with their feet against discrimination.

There are also many base communities that have a shared ministry approach without any ordained leaders. Women-church groups — such as Sisters against Sexism, to which I belong — have worked quite nicely for three decades with shared leadership and not a whiff of ordination. Even women ordained in other traditions who belong to these groups have no special role or function in women-church groups. They are members along with the rest. In a “discipleship of equals” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998), it is impossible to argue for the qualitative difference that clergy embody in the Roman Catholic model.

Age is an important variable in all of this. Younger Catholics tend to be far more liberal in their views than are their elders. Ironically, much of the call for change in Catholic structures is fuelled by older women, many of my baby-boomer cohort and older. Young women either have little interest in the structural questions, little time for the work it takes to change millennially entrenched ways, and/or little appreciation for the ways in which kyriarchal religions shape the larger culture.

Their choices make good sense, especially when they are creating new forms of spiritual community for themselves and their families. But what is incomprehensible is that so many young women simply flock to Catholic churches to marry and baptise their children. They seem to miss entirely the connection between their choices and the fact that the institutional Roman Catholic Church seeks to impose its morality on the whole country with impunity, as evidenced by its efforts to oppose coverage of contraception in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, or what is called “Obama Care”. I can only conclude that a certain nostalgia for Catholic sacramental life runs deep, signalling that feminist ministers have plenty of work left to do.

As the gestalt takes shape, it is clear that the roles of Catholic women line up quite readily with the changing ways of being religious in the United States. Some stay within the structures of the institutional church; many move to the edges to create alternatives; and still others leave Catholicism altogether to seek spiritual nourishment and belonging in other groups. The rise of “nones” — people who do not claim allegiance and/or membership in any religious tradition whatsoever — demonstrates that the spiritual needs of people are changing. A recent Pew study showed that upwards of 20

percent of Americans have no religious affiliations. For people under 30 the percentage jumps to 30 percent, with increases predicted (Lugo 2012).

It is no longer adequate to prepare for ministry in a seminary as if one were going to minister only to Baptists or only to Lutherans. Rather, the needs of a religiously diverse public, including those who have no particular religious commitment, require that well-trained ministers be prepared to be useful across denominational and religious lines. Schools like Claremont Lincoln University are now emerging as places where one can train according to the broad range of religious needs one will encounter in the bustling marketplace of spiritualities.⁹ Catholic women are ideal candidates for such studies, as they come from a tradition that recognises diversity, even if it deals with diversity badly.

The impact of religions' teachings in the public arena strikes me as indicating the place where feminist leadership can and should make the most difference. Someone else will need to analyse whether the influx of women into Protestant and Jewish ministry has changed the public character of those traditions' teaching. But I can offer several instances in which Catholic women's extra-institutional work has been helpful.

By *extra-institutional* I mean that the kyriarchal institutional Roman Catholic Church is diametrically opposed to these feminist efforts — but that is the point. Catholic women, with no possibility of voice or vote, and barred in many instances from teaching in Catholic institutions for fear that the content of our teaching will be at odds with the institution's stated views, simply act as responsible religious agents on our own. We claim our right to do so, and we name what we do as Catholic. The impact on the larger culture is worth noticing.

One example of this is in the area of contraception and abortion. Catholics for Choice,¹⁰ headed for many years by Frances Kissling, is a global leader in providing education, training, and technical assistance from a Catholic perspective on matters of reproductive justice. That group is largely responsible for earning the trust of secular feminists and religious feminists of other traditions who work on these matters, proving to them that large numbers of Catholic women do not agree with the institutional church's teachings. Catholic women vote. So being able to liberate a large sector of the electorate from the claims of kyriarchal officials who speak for no one but themselves is a significant political achievement. It translates into political capital that the bishops once possessed alone, and now must share whether they want to or not.

This is the fruit of feminist theological and ethical reflection, discussions, and workshops, as well as individual counselling with women who are faced with difficult decisions. Groups like *Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir* (CDD)

in Brazil¹¹ and *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* in Mexico,¹² for example, do similar work in their settings. Together with other feminist groups, these colleagues question the validity of the Vatican's participation in the United Nations, where the church that claims to be a nation carries out obstructionist tactics against achieving global consensus on matters of women's health.¹³ Catholic feminists have provided effective leadership in rejecting the unholy alliances the Vatican has formed to prevent women from making their own decisions.

Another example of Catholic feminist ministry making a difference is on matters of same-sex love. The Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL),¹⁴ DignityUSA,¹⁵ WATER,¹⁶ and the Women-Church Convergence¹⁷ have made clear that growing numbers of Catholics understand human sexuality and sexual identity to be fluid, dynamic, diverse, and worthy of respect. Leaders, including Christine Nusse and Karen Doherty, who pioneered CCL; Marianne Duddy-Burke and Lourdes Rodriguez-Nogués, executive director and president, respectively, of DignityUSA; Diann Neu; and myself at WATER, as well as many Women-Church Convergence members, have stepped out to proclaim queer goodness from Catholic starting points.

While this has not earned us any kudos in Rome, it has effectively leavened what began as a mostly male Catholic movement in an all-male, clerical-centric church with a high percentage of closeted gay men in ministry. The feminist leadership of women has expanded the kinds of liturgies celebrated in Catholic LGBTIQ communities from the masses with priests to which Catholics are accustomed, to feminist rituals with full participation of everyone. It has meant that the art, music, dance movement that feminist women create is now a normative part of many such celebrations. Moreover, it has unleashed the pastoral, theological, and liturgical talent of the other half of the Catholic population, showing just what church can look like minus its kyriarchal trappings.

Not only Catholics have had to get used to these changes. It is a delicate matter in a local community to invite the Catholic feminist minister, and not the monsignor, to be part of an inter-religious protest against violence against women, for example. It takes some education to wean people away from the usual hierarchs and redirect them to the much broader, more accepting community of feminist ministers. Even more difficult is helping people to name such ministers "Catholic", or even "catholic" (small c), in the public forum. But efforts to do so are helpful in dismantling what is left of the kyriarchal church that makes such a mockery of human rights and sexual choices.

A third example of Catholic women's leadership has been the role of American women religious in the public sphere. NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby,¹⁸ is well known for its "Nuns on the Bus" campaign (see

Hunt 2012). This movement began as an effort to bring about a fair national budget that would prioritise funding for social programmes to bridge the growing gap between rich and poor. The bus trip generated a lot of publicity and interest in the work that women's religious communities are doing around the country in the absence of adequate resources for people who are made poor by rampant capitalism.

The first bus trip (other trips followed on ferries, etc.) came around the time that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a doctrinal assessment accusing the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) of programmes and publications containing "certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2012). While NETWORK and LCWR are separate entities, NETWORK received a negative mention in the Vatican's report about LCWR. The nuns are alleged to be at odds with the Vatican on issues of abortion, women priests, same-sex love, and whether Jesus is the only way to salvation. I hope that they are! The attention that the Vatican's disrespectful approach to LCWR garnered resulted in a great deal of sympathy and respect for the nuns.

Another Vatican office has conducted an Apostolic Visitation of the active women's religious communities in the U.S., which includes more than 90 percent of the nuns. Results of that study remain to be seen. But the general feeling is that the women have more than proved their bona fides in social justice work, spirituality, and simple living, over and against the social bullying of the bishops, the men's miserable record on children's safety, and the male hierarchs' often ostentatious costumes and lifestyles. When it comes to things Catholic, recent studies show women far outpacing men in popularity.

It is important to underscore that nuns are laypeople, so that what goes on with them is on a par with what happens to other Catholic laity: namely, being prevented from exercising spiritual agency. On reproductive choice or whether to wear a habit, ordination or daily mass, women make their own choices. Nuns are women. Thus, their holding the line against the intrusion of kyriarchal authority in their religious communities and ministries is part of the reshaping of the Catholic community in general. This is revolutionary, in that for the first time on a public level, women are being taken seriously as normatively Catholic. Obviously, some of the men's scrutiny/harassment of them, as in the assessment and visitation cases, is a reaction to that fact. The ground has thus shifted somewhat for kyriarchal Catholicism in the United States.

One example of this dynamic is the work of the Catholic Hospital Association (CHA) under the leadership of Sister Carole Keehan. This

organisation, along with NETWORK, apprised the bishops of the fact that the Obama health care changes would not include funding for abortions for poor women. Therefore, they urged Catholic legislators to support the plan. The bishops thought otherwise, and brayed loudly about the pernicious consequences of legislators voting in favour of what has turned out to be a major move toward health justice in this country. I would have preferred that the women religious actively promote abortion rights for poor women, rather than simply speak about the analysis involved. But given their status in the kyriarchal church, I am grateful that they did even this much to clarify the situation.

The women were right, the legislation was passed, and they were seen as the definitive Catholic voice on the question. That dynamic persists up to the present writing. Despite widespread wrangling over how the regulations will be enforced, the CHA endorsed the final Obama administration compromise that allows religious groups to opt out of providing contraceptive coverage if it offends their morality — while obliging insurance companies to make contraception available to all of their customers, even if their employers do not wish to offer it. It was an unpopular but understandable compromise that did not force anyone to act against their will, and permitted everyone to get their due.

That very public struggle further solidified the fact that reasonable-sounding Catholic women trumped unreasonable men in the public forum. So much for the kyriarchal church being the definitive voice on all things Catholic. Those days are over, and new hints of equality are in the air. This shift in power characterises the evolution and revolution of feminist ministry.

One problem with the nuns' high profile is that they can be understood in quasi-clerical ways, as if they were a simple substitute for the male clerics. This is not the case, as all Catholic women are lay until such time as one is ordained validly and licitly. But it bears mention, because the real shift here is not from priests to nuns as normatively Catholic, but from clergy to laypeople. Clergy make up a tiny percentage of the Catholic population; they are tens of thousands out of 65 million in the U.S.

Feminists from other traditions are also living out new forms of ministry that respond to the needs of a postmodern society, effectively rendering the old options obsolete. For example, the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF), pastored by Unitarian Universalist Meg Riley, is an online community.¹⁹ They have worship, educational activities, their own teleconferences, and the like. I imagine that many of their members are people who have left mainline, especially Catholic, churches for the creative, convenient, challenging approach CLF uses.

The Rev. B.K. Hipsher pastors another online community in the alternative world known as Second Life.²⁰ She, too, serves many people who have long since left organised religions for the freedom and excitement of those online organisations where avatars reign. These innovations make the pope's promise of plenary indulgences to those who follow World Youth Day on Twitter seem rather anachronistic. Squeezing the square peg of paid-up remission of temporary punishment for sin into the round hole of postmodernity strikes me as ludicrous. Where to start deconstructing that? By contrast, these women's pastoral work is serious, responsible, and effective.

Use of technology in the service of spirituality is a mainstay of feminist work. At WATER we offer a monthly meditation opportunity, both in person and online. What I once thought was the stuff of a *New Yorker* cartoon — people sharing silence on the phone — is now a deep experience of communal contemplation and dialogue.²¹ The group that pioneered that work, the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue,²² led by Nancy Sylvester, a Catholic nun, is now doing some of its work on the phone as well. Groups all over the country are adopting webinars and other interactive ways of sharing with one another. Spirituality has many media.

While not feminist per se, such methods can level the playing field, socialise the resources, and include more and more diverse people in the process. They are extremely helpful for people who are housebound and/or have mobility impairments since such people are thus able to participate in worship and community life without distinction. Young people do so much online that it is completely natural for many of them to think of meeting their religious/spiritual needs in the same ways that they learn and recreate. Of course there are those of us who are accustomed to the in-person, hands-on forms of ministry of old. But there is no reason why these options cannot be in addition to, sometimes replacing, and at other times augmenting, more familiar forms of ministry. Women on the margins are game to experiment because we have little, if anything, to lose.

What a far cry this kind of ministry is from the style my classmates of 40 years ago learned. My observation is that the ministry models of old were what amounts to a recipe for a women's job in a patriarchal society. Long hours, low pay, 24/7 availability, endless nurture, and diminishing prestige still characterise much ministerial work today. It is no wonder women are being ushered in where men increasingly do not want to go. Feminist ministry, by contrast, is done on women's terms, often outside of organised structures that perpetuate a model few communities can sustain.

The downside of the more entrepreneurial approach is that its very fluidity has negative financial consequences. Many members of Roman

Catholic Women Priests, for example, make their living doing something quite other than ministry. But perhaps that is as it should be, so that no one is paid for being religious, and everyone is invited to participate in the well-being of the community.

These practical issues beg exploration as new models of ministry and spiritual leadership unfold. In the meantime I watch with interest, eager to learn from women in other parts of the world as they develop their own ways of being religious and doing ministry with integrity in changing contexts.

Notes

- 1 See Ann Braude's convocation address at Harvard Divinity School (2005).
- 2 See Mary Daly (1968 and 1973).
- 3 See www.waterwomensalliance.org.
- 4 See www.womensordination.org.
- 5 Among the several documents are the 1976 *Inter Insigniores*, "Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," published by Franjo Cardinal Seper and Jerome Cardinal Hamer and Pope John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 1994, in which he makes clear that priesthood is for men only.
- 6 See www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org.
- 7 See www.arcwp.org.
- 8 See www.ecchurch.org.
- 9 See www.claremontlincoln.org/about/a-new-university/a-model-for-solutions.
- 10 See www.catholicsforchoice.org.
- 11 See www.catholicsonline.org.br.
- 12 See www.catholicismexico.org.
- 13 "See Change Campaign" is a project of the Catholics for Choice. See <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/campaigns/SeeChangeCampaign.asp>.
- 14 See www.lgbtran.org/Collection.aspx?ID=1.
- 15 See www.dignityusa.org.
- 16 See www.waterwomensalliance.org.
- 17 See <http://www.women-churchconvergence.org>.
- 18 See www.networklobby.org.
- 19 See www.clfuu.org.
- 20 See http://believe.mccchurch.org/?page_id=1064.
- 21 See www.waterwomensalliance.org/water-rituals-audio.
- 22 See www.engagingimpasse.org.

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