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Re-thinking religion and literature [draft]

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Abstract

This chapter 're-thinks' religion and literature as a way of conceptualizing a 'religious reading' practice that advocates a close reading, listening and thinking of all texts. Without implying a return to conservative models of faith in 'literature', religious reading advocates a caring attention to texts that is realized in the reading process itself. I argue against 'religion and literature' as a field or interdiscipline, and suggest instead that it engenders an intimate religious reading practice that refuses to hierarchize texts through values of 'worth', aesthetic, economic, or moral. In readings of Allen Ginsberg, Peter Sloterdijk, Georg Simmel, Charles Taylor and Giorgio Agamben, I advocate both a literary thinking of religions in all their registers that opens us to new forms of language and life; and also a religious thinking of literature, that attends to all voices and texts through care and reverence.

Keywords

Religious reading; religion and literature; Allen Ginsberg; Peter Sloterdijk; Giorgio Agamben; musicality; care; form of life

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy!
Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent
kindness of the soul!
– Allen Ginsberg

A spectre is haunting the Western world – the
spectre of religion. All over the country we
hear that after an extended absence, it has
now returned and is among the people of the
modern world, and that one would do well to
reckon seriously with its renewed presence.
– Peter Sloterdijk

I begin with the poet Allen Ginsberg (2006, p. 8, l. 127) and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk (2013, p. 1) to call attention, first to their literary thinking of religion; and second, to their religious thinking of literature. Rather than sacralizing the literary, Ginsberg and Sloterdijk draw on religion to open a space for a mystical, experiential and imaginative contemplation that founds a reverent and meditative 'religious reading' practice. This practice offers an alternative to a secular criticism that can be distrustful of religion as naïve simplicity or sinister ideology, even as it uses a sanctifying logic to hierarchize texts in terms of their aesthetic value. Religious reading advocates a close, slow reading and listening willing to trust the meaning

that arises from it and have faith in and give credence to what is found there. In theoretical terms, this practice engenders a hermeneutics of trust rather than of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970), one that defends an affective thinking and reading of the local and particular as well as the global and different. Far from implying a return to conservative models of faith in 'literature' or the 'value of the humanities', religious reading advocates a caring attention to all texts that is realized in the reading process itself. Religious reading is not interested in the 'best' or most aesthetically 'valuable' text; rather it tries to attend to and be in communication with whatever text is being read in order to connect to it. It is receptive, accommodating and inclusive and signifies in the act of contemplation and care, not in any ostensible 'merit' - aesthetic, economic or moral - that it might find therein. To reflect on religion as a way of reading literature is important, I suggest, because it refuses to lock 'religion and literature' within an endlessly contested methodological site. I do not think 'religion and literature' constitutes a field or interdiscipline, and instead suggest that religious reading engenders a close intimacy with texts founded on a mindfulness of their content.

Both Ginsberg and Sloterdijk, like many writers who explore religion and literature, draw on western and eastern religious traditions to frame philosophical and social questions about the intangible and invisible. Ginsberg's promotion of mantra chanting to 'discover the guru in our own hearts' (2000, p. 130) and Sloterdijk's call for a 'non-religious interpretation' of 'the realm of the transcendent or holy' (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 4) both focus on the reader as a figure who is 'changed' by religious reading, rather than by religious literature. As such, both writers read religiously, but write creatively. Ginsberg's engagement with Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and the Hare Krishna's was definitively creative, sparked by a vision of William Blake and translated into social and political as well as poetic terms. His poem, *Howl* (1955-56), for example, from which my first epigram is taken, is congruent with Ginsberg's 1967 'Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In', a festival that emulated the peaceful *Kumbh Mela* Hindu pilgrimage of faith. Sloterdijk, who describes his current trilogy, *Sphären*, as a series of novels (Kirsch 2013), accesses religion's capacity to enable an intimate reading mode through a literary thinking of religion beyond dogma. Thus the title of Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), from which I take my second epigram, is a line in a poem by a Catholic, but radical, mystic, Rainer Maria Rilke. The intrinsic literary element to the scripture-based religions this book is focused on underpins a religious reading practice that compels an affective, intuitive and hopeful close thinking, listening and reading.

Despite the profound significance of religious literature within the canon and on teaching syllabi, the notion of a 'religious reading' of texts remains unsettling for many critics. Undeterred by the affective turn, the efficacy of care and attention as the basis of reading holds little weight with a literary critical field won over by empirical models of analysis that draw us away from contemplative reading. I intentionally write 'field' here to differentiate 'real' readers from the discipline of literary criticism: human beings are abundantly careful and respectful with texts, and yet broader theorizations of what we do tends to underplay this

element of discernment. Franco Moretti's fashionable 'distant reading' (2013) is a pertinent example, a methodology that proposes the use of computational modelling and quantitative analysis to aggregate data on vast numbers of literary 'works' that are explicitly *not* read. Moretti cannot help but draw on religious language in his critique of close reading, a mode that, 'in all of its incarnations', he writes, is a 'theological exercise', a 'very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously' (Moretti, 2000). The essays in this volume, by contrast, closely attend to a few examples of Abrahamic literatures, not to exclude other examples or other religions, but to express a care for the nuances of the texts that *are* read. Moretti's parody of the theological as solemn and earnest blocks attention to the particulars of any given text, of the nuances of its cultural, religious, and ethical meanings and ultimately of the 'serious' reflection and emotional investment readers might have in it.

To argue for a religious reading practice does not imply a carefree connection between religion and positive feelings about texts, however. Rather it upholds a model of reading in which we might give a little more than we get and in doing so imagine a thinking of, rather than criticism of, the interconnectedness of religious ideas, commitments and imaginings in a spectrum of literary forms. The response readers have to all texts, and especially those that relate to religion, is simply not adequately expressed in an abstract, empirical or judgemental criticism. Split from the literary to free float in philosophy, for example, religion can become little more than wordplay, as several of the 'return of religion' theories attest; and as ammunition in the arena of politics, religion can be twisted beyond recognition as it was in Sarah Palin's grotesque declaration that, if she were 'in charge', the Muslim world 'would know that waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists' (Palin, 2014). Palin's speech, greeted with ecstatic applause by the National Rifle Association at a 2014 rally in Indiana, not only demeans the Christian sacrament of baptism as an image of forced conversion via torture, but it also incites a terrifying Christo-fascism based on a weak and cruel thinking of Abrahamic religion. Equally aggressive is the 'new atheism', repeatedly contemptuous of Christianity and increasingly dismissive of Islam; Richard Dawkins's tweet 'All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge' is a notorious example (Meikle, 2013). Dawkins and Palin's deliberate distancing strategies from any subtlety in reading Islam or Christianity is endlessly echoed in the media, leading to tangible instances of ignorance, intolerance and violence. By contrast, religious reading might provide direct forays into the promotion of care – for humans, non-humans, the material and the invisible.

The religious readings that comprise this volume are grouped into four sections: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Post-secularism. Rather than blending the four into an inter-faith soup, the volume seeks rather to open up these religions to a readership interested both in writers who creatively negotiate a world in which people believe with and beyond dogma, and also in a reading practice founded on care. My introduction reflects on how religious reading might be defined, first, by distinguishing the term from work identified with the now established disciplinary exchange of 'religion and literature'; second, in a discussion of the disputable

categories of 'inter-faith dialogue' and 'world religion', especially in relation to Tony Blair's dream of a global religious democracy; and third, in relation to a series of readers of religion - Georg Simmel, Charles Taylor and Giorgio Agamben, as well as Ginsberg and Sloterdijk – who themselves illuminate the question, what does it mean to read religiously? Against an inter-faith soup that privileges Blair's democracy over the affective specificities of religion, I posit Ginsberg's 'animal soup', a phrase he employs at the end of the first part of *Howl* to introduce a biblical discussion of forgiveness, friendship and love. The chapter turns finally to Sloterdijk, Simmel and Agamben to explore their commentaries on spiritual practice and forms of life, both of which have helped me to conceptualize and argue for a close, thinking, listening and reading.

'Religion and literature'

Critics who seek to pursue a religious idea in a literary text or assess the literary aesthetic of a religious idea now find themselves in a thriving community served by journals, companions, readers and monograph series (see, for example, Branch, 2012-; Mason and Knight, 2010-; and Monta, 2009). The field has sparked a renaissance in historical work detailing the contexts in which specific moments of belief are represented; a profusion of critical and philosophical reflections on the nature of the religious and the spiritual; and animated political contestations over the relationship between the secular and the religious, including the term 'post-secularism' (controversially apathetic towards many major religions). Whereas the religious was once relegated to the status of esotericism or irrelevance in literary studies, one would be hard pushed to find any period or methodology that does not now recognize its importance, even if such recognition is sometimes negative or critical. At the same time, the 'return of religion' within critical theory and philosophy has prompted many critics to once again become suspicious of religion, in particular in relation to transcendence and immanence. Those who work on religion and literature have sought to nuance this dualism through specificity, turning in particular to the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, connected as they are in their focus on a main sacred text: the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. 'World religion', as Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) argues, tends to be avoided by scholars aware of its invention by Europeans eager to find a category for the social and cultural practices of peoples across the world.

Research into the relationships between Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths nevertheless promises to garner ways of thinking, listening and reading that surpass modes of interpretation locked within one tradition or text. For example, literary discussions of 'revelation' tend to be considered within the framework of a monolithic male God that produces a very particular kind of 'experience' that changes significantly when read beyond western monotheism. As Cleo McNelly Kearns argues, in Hinduism, 'we find not only a more multifarious and in many ways less anxious concept of revelation and the incursion of the divine into the human world than in the west' as many 'Indic artists work relatively free of the anxiety of influence that troubles the western "maker"' (Kearns, 2009, p. 65). While

comparativism itself might be accused of being a western paradigm, literary critics will have to engage with non-Christian faiths as the canon expands beyond the West, not only into literature, but also into music, dance, rites and festivals. The diversity of the chapters in this volume point towards the importance of such a task, revealing as they do that the religious interests of certain writers or texts are at once ubiquitous and indisputable, but also easy to side-step as ostensibly esoteric or abstruse. They offer examples of a religious reading practice receptive to questions of belief, consciousness, emotion and love, what Susan Felch calls 'registers of religious consciousness' that include the Abrahamic, Dharmic and Taoic, as much as Māori and Aboriginal spiritualities, as well as mythical cosmology and UFO religions (Felch, 2009, p. 101). The literary, with its embrace of the imagination, the senses, the aesthetic and the experiential, enables the study of religious consciousness where other (empirical) routes in threaten to lock it inside a scholarly environment that favours solutions and objective goals over the joy of asking questions without any answers. This is not to say that the literary makes the religious fictional, but rather that it facilitates multiple ways of believing that might underpin a religious reading practice.

Animal soup versus inter-faith soup

An example of how the literary enables multiple ways of believing is Ginsberg's *Howl*. At the end of Part I, Ginsberg addresses Carl Solomon, the friend to whom the poem is dedicated after the two met while institutionalized in the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Hospital in 1949-50. Exhaling through his 'Hebraic-Melvillean bardic breath' (2000, p. 229), Ginsberg sighs 'ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time' (2006, p. 6, l. 72). While the animal soup is a brothy time of beast-like impulse and turbulence, it also offers an alternative to linear, capitalist time, which moves forward with such pace and speed that particularity, repose and meditation become impossible. As Ginsberg's medical records show, his hospitalization, while in no way a positive experience, did initiate what would become Ginsberg's enduring interrogation of his ego in both his poetry and spiritual life (Timberg, 2007). The animal soup's rhythm of 'variable measure', for example, opens up a non-egoic mindfulness alive with the presence of God, Solomon setting 'the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus' (2006, p. 6, l. 73-74). As angels and madmen 'beat in Time, unknown' to the syncopated blues rhythm of the passage, the 'ghostly clothes of jazz' blow 'the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry' (2006, p. 6, l. 77), repeating the 'why' of Matthew's 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' (27. 45-46). For Ginsberg, this accentuated 'why' is a direct challenge to the devastating conservatism and atomic violence of 1950s America, controlled by a government in which reverence and care were wholly absent. *Howl* itself was put on trial for translating the biblical 'why' into social and political terms, in 1957 by the American Civil Liberties Union, and also in 1987 by the American 'Moral Majority' movement (Morgan and Peters, 2006, p. 221). To the censorious reader, Ginsberg's animal soup is vapid: the transcript of *Howl's* trial is

littered with the prosecution's accusatory demands that the poem's witnesses make it 'mean' (2006, p. 139). For the reader who approaches the poem with care, however, the animal soup might allow the material – Carl, city streets, saxophones, radios – to sit alongside the intangible – angels, syntax, 'goldhorn' shadows, cries, rhythm – without blending them up or dissecting them into separate and distinct entities. Ginsberg's religious vision is inclusive, but never consolidating or condescending.

In complete contrast to Ginsberg's animal soup sits the inter-faith soup. Where the animal soup holds difference buoyant without judgement, the inter-faith soup seeks to measure the comparable 'value' of religions and assess them in social and political terms. The 2007-2013 AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Research Programme and 2012-2015 Westminster Faith Debates series, for example, 'reads' religion through its empirical implications for gay marriage, global unity, the family, the Arab Spring, parish life and the future of the Church of England. As Tony Blair declared in one of the project's debates, 'Religion in Public Life' (2012), religion enables the success of charity, welfare and human rights, but *only* in relation to 'religion friendly democracy and democracy friendly religion' (Blair et al, 2012). For Blair, 'inter-faith dialogue' leads to a co-operative and democratic politics that effectively counters bigotry, extremism, prejudice and intolerance by bringing together people of faith and none in a 'common space' organized 'through the proper processes of the law, parliament and the courts'. In reference to the Middle East, Blair argues that religion should only be 'safeguarded and allowed to play its part' if believers 'understand that there is in the end something essentially pluralistic about the concept of democracy' that is 'supreme in the ultimate decision-making' (Blair et al, 2012). The problems inherent to inter-faith discussion are illuminated as much by Blair's overbearing conviction that the western democracy should eclipse religious nuance, as by David Cameron's Etonian promotion of Christian values as a counter to the UK's moral collapse (Cameron, 2014). Both embody a logic that annuls Felch's 'registers of religious consciousness' and overshadow suggestions like Rowan Williams' that in a post-Christian country like the UK we would do well to embark on a shared work on all sacred texts (Ross, 2014; Blair et al, 2012).

Taylor also explores the significance of reading practices in relation to the religious in *A Secular Age* (2007), where a late eighteenth-century Romantic sensibility and authenticity replaced metaphysical beliefs with 'an original vision of the cosmos' that provoked unique subjective feeling (Taylor, 2007, p. 353). For Taylor, it is this focus on personal emotion through reading that created the secular itself, a worldview that emerges, not from a decline in religion, but in a human belief in individual expression. This new self, no longer 'porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers', was disciplined, buffered and confident, a 'reformed' believer who aspired, not to atheism, but to the highest levels of religious devotion and practice. Now able to fulfil the roles once reserved for magi and priests, these disciplined individuals sought to control their world, especially outcast elements like the poor, the sick, and the different not easily tidied up into an ordered social imaginary. As a result, individualism becomes defined through economic

prosperity, an open public sphere and the practices of self-rule and so value the observable and empirical world, not because they suddenly realise everything that cannot be proven is illusory, but because a rational (male, adult, Protestant) code offered assuredness and confidence (p. 159, 176, 294). As belief diversified into newer disciplines like psychology and neurobiology that promise to 'explain' our being, religion is 'delinked' from society and transferred to 'spirituality' (p. 419). Individuals are freed from church and state alike to live in a 'spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane' in which we are granted a sense of 'invulnerability' consolidated by a 'sense of self-possession' and 'secure inner mental realm' (p. 300-301, 419).

Taylor's narrative of secularism also identifies a flipside to this spiritual super-nova: that 'wide sense of malaise' at a 'flat, empty' world that offers little compensation for 'the meaning lost with transcendence' (p. 302). Beyond 'melancholy' and perhaps depression too, Taylor's malaise casts 'doubt on the ontic grounding of meaning' itself, so that any possible solution to meaninglessness is immediately dismissed (p. 303). In this light, pluralism simply creates a multiplicity of faiths to deny, and 'our actions, goals, achievements' feel as if they are without 'weight, gravity, thickness, substance' (p. 307). Religion is consequently reinvented through pilgrimages to other countries where non-Abrahamic faiths are central, or through 'mystical aspects' of the Abrahamic faiths, such as Taizé or meditation. For Taylor, like the Radical Orthodoxy thinkers with whom he sympathizes, the way out of this bind is to embrace a Burkean politics of public virtue understood within a renewed post-Enlightenment Christian framework. While I question Taylor's turn to public virtue (I prefer Ginsberg's 'public solitude', albeit without the LSD, 2000, p. 125), I do go along with his sense that a 'new poetic language can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham' (Taylor, 2007, p. 757). This does not imply a way back to the God of the Radical Orthodoxy, but rather a way back to the language of God as the 'experiential reality' of our being, one that commonly feels both 'powerful' and 'confused' (p. 757). A religious reading practice might help us to contemplate this language in an acknowledgement of our contradictory emotional responses to it in relation to the lived reality we each occupy. It is in the *practice* of reading of God's word, rather than God's word itself, that a literary thinking of religion helps us out of the meta-theories of interdisciplines like religion and literature or secularism.

Spiritual practice

The populist western turn from the Abrahamic to the Dharmic is suggestive of widespread overlooking of the centrality of meditative spiritual reading practices within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For Sloterdijk, for example, western spiritual practices remain a point of access into both individual happiness and a wider commitment to human rights and welfare. While Sloterdijk provocatively demands that religions do not and have never existed, only 'misunderstood spiritual regimens' (p. 3), his work provides a very current reading of religion through the discourse of physical fitness. His hero, *Homo immunologicus*, is a Nietzschean

'human in training', dependent on repeated and habitual practices that cultivate his cosmic ability to face an existence made up of anxiety and planetary crisis. While modernity collectivizes practice, either into labour or disastrous regimens of control, Sloterdijk calls on the individual to change his or her own life as part of an organized co-immunism: 'the good habits of shared survival in daily exercises' (p. 452). This 'co-immunism' derives from Sloterdijk's reading of monotheism. For Sloterdijk, the God of early Christianity offered believers an immunizing sphere in which to live, one where they could be intimate with and protected by all kinds of holiness. In the late Middle Ages, however, the Church discarded the intimate God for a distant deity, neutralizing the 'immunity' believers once had and reconfiguring God as a disconcerting, even sinister, 'outside'. In *You Must Change Your Life*, Sloterdijk rethinks various attempts to recreate God as an immunizing power – from Olympism to Scientology – all regimens in which humans develop 'psycho-immunological practices' ('anthropotechnics') in 'the form of imaginary anticipations and mental armour' that buffer them against fate (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 9).

While Sloterdijk's reading of religious history is deliberately defiant, the reading practice that emerges from his theory is caring and communal. This is especially apparent when he suggests that practicing religiosity is like practicing music, an act that connects one to a collective performance as often as a personal regimen (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 361). Here Sloterdijk has in mind Max Weber's self-accusation that he was unmusical in regard to religion, although he does not cite the comparable 'musicality' of Georg Simmel, who, because willing to 'believe', was able to attune himself into the 'particular spiritual quality' of religion as a 'form of life' and 'state of being' (Simmel, 1997, p. 10). Simmel is helpful because he rejects the notion that religion might be just another psychological (or pathological) inner state, and recognizes religiosity as an affective relationship that includes 'the subject in a higher order – an order which, at the same time, is felt to be something inward and personal' (p. 104). Modernity's crime is not the undermining of dogma, but its characterization of 'the object of transcendent faith' as 'illusory' and disenchanted: 'paralyzed' by a 'yearning' for something no longer available, the subject turns to religion as 'being' implemented by 'prayer, magic, and rite' (p. 9). Religion transforms into, 'not simply an added accompaniment', but 'the original source of all the harmonies and disharmonies of life', a rhythm for being (p. 15).

Forms of life

Simmel's musical reading of religion as an attuned being, a 'form of life', coheres with Giorgio Agamben's use of the same phrase in *The Highest Poverty* (2013), an inquiry into the early religious monastic orders and heretical sects that emerged as people sought to escape imperial rule and Roman law (p. 91). In a reading of Francis of Assisi, Agamben argues that monastic law transformed, rather than ruled, life for those within religious communities: prayer, song and ritual produced their 'form of life' as one modelled on Christ's own radical rejection of the social order that ultimately crucified him. By the Middle Ages, monasteries had become hierarchized

and folded back into the Church, a shift that served to blur monastic rule with legal codes. The Franciscan 'form of life' – a phrase coined by the overseer of the female Franciscan order, Clare of Assisi, and which denoted a way of living in the world, but not of it – lost its meaning as the law forced the communities to 'own' what they used, damning them to bureaucracy through property law. Agamben does not directly envision a 'new monasticism' that would provide an alternative form of life to unsustainable capitalist excess; but the implications for radical movements, from Occupy to city missionaries, are there, not least because of Francis' emphasis on equality between all beings and all things. Monasticism is more radical still because of its refusal of oppositionalism: 'what was in question in the movements was not the *rule*, but the *life*, not the ability to profess this or that article of faith, but the ability to live in a certain way, to practice joyfully and openly a certain form of life' (p. 93).

Such 'bare life' describes the physical life apart from the 'qualified' or politically identified one, that which remains after we withdraw those other meanings we usually think grant us 'value' or help us to think the 'good life'. Divested of human rights, ego or ethical significance, Agamben's bare life is exempt from sovereign rule because it exchanges the law for profanity, critiquing religion's reinvention as political power (Agamben, 1995, p. 54). Profaning and blaspheming, are, as Blake illuminates in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), skills in which Jesus was particularly adept, breaking all ten of the commandments and embodying 'virtue' and 'impulse', not 'rules' (2005, p. 58). For Agamben too, people need to command themselves by way of duty and responsibility beyond the law to enable a mode of action that critiques the state's manipulation of the sacred exemplified by the perversity of Dawkins's tweets and Palin's speech. Like Ginsberg and Blake, Agamben invests in poetry as an 'atheological' way of revealing a form of living beyond metaphysical, theological and political subjectivity, one that frees society from divine and secular structures to unveil the void at the centre of power to allow for new and creative ways of being (see Dickinson and Kotsko, 2013). These creative ways of being that the literary allows encourages us to develop a spiritual and ecological awareness and discerning reading mode in which we become 'perceptually open', not only to humans but also to what Jane Bennett calls 'nonhuman vitality' (Bennett, 2010, p. 14, 19).

Religious reading is akin to what Bennett calls 'sensory, linguistic and imaginative attention' and it is significant that she concludes her discussion of 'vibrant matter' with a 'Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists', in which a series of statements about the maker of 'things seen and unseen', the 'pluriverse', the 'vitality of nonhuman bodies' and 'encounters with lively matter' are each prefaced with the phrase – 'I believe' (Bennett, 2010, p. 122). The care and belief the ecological movement is dependent on to counter 'oil, coal, and petro chemical interests' that 'have flooded the airwaves with climate science denialism' corresponds with the 'recognition of human participation in a shared' immateriality, as well as materiality (Buell, 2014). A literary thinking, listening and reading of all religions promises to open to us forms of language and life that we should read carefully in order to recognize that intimacy with texts invariably leads to joy, a

'supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!' (Ginsberg, 2006, p. 8, l. 127).

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