

MEANING AND POWER: SOME KEY TERMS IN FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Feminist theologians engaged in research have found it necessary to analyse terms, motifs, definitions and perspectives critically in order to clarify their meaning when applying them to women's experience. In this process certain key terms have come to the fore which occur with frequency as women grapple with what it means to have faith in a sexist world. The role of language, symbol and metaphor are of prime importance in the doing of feminist theology. Women have learnt about the power of naming in the struggle to have their experience heard in a male-defined world. The more language and its use are examined, the more apparent it becomes that making meaning through language is no simple task.

There is no single feminist theology. Feminist theologians are not an homogeneous group and they represent a variety of voices on what it means to be women of faith. Thus the key terms spelt out in this article are neither exhaustive nor universal. Their selection and the manner in which they are explained will depend on the category called 'women's experience', and on particular hermeneutical choices. The phrase 'women's experience' is in itself problematic. Women are separated everywhere by race, class and economic status and great caution must be exercised not to overemphasize the universal at the cost of the particular when referring to the experience of women.

The key terms dealt with are: conscientization, feminism, the personal is political, patriarchy, community of faith, relationality, justice, liberation, liberating praxis and commonwealth of God. They are chosen because they are of particular interest to the author's research in practical theology as a white middle-class Christian feminist and the definitions given are operational in the generating of theories in the South African context.

1. Introduction

Feminist theologians engaged in research have found it necessary to analyse terms, motifs, definitions and perspectives critically in order to clarify their meaning when applying them to women's experience. In this process certain key terms frequently come to the fore as women grapple with what it means to have faith in a sexist world.

This paper does not pretend to deal with these terms comprehensively. Those chosen are of particular significance for my research as a feminist practical theologian. Operational definitions are sought for empirical research and are instrumental in the generating of theories. In the case of a feminist liberation view the process of theory formation is directed at women's experience of oppression and the need for liberation.

2. Language

The role of language, symbol and metaphor are of prime importance in the doing of feminist theology. Women have learnt about the power of naming as we struggle to have our experience heard in a male-defined world. We have found that the more language and its use are examined, the more apparent it becomes that making meaning through language is no simple task. The fact that meaning is made in a certain way has profound implications for how we see the world (Thistlethwaite 1987:533).

We cannot know reality apart from our own particular intellectual constructions of it and our thinking is formed by socially-conditioned linguistic rules and metaphors. Language or discourse thus actually constructs reality as well as describes it.

In a discussion on deconstruction, Sallie McFague (1987:26) approaches the question of language as follows:

I agree with deconstructionists that all constructions are metaphorical and hence miss the mark; I nevertheless disagree with them when they say that language (writing) is about only itself and that no construction is any better than any other. To claim that all constructions are metaphorical is to insist that one never experiences reality 'raw'; it does not follow from this, however, that there is nothing outside language. All that follows is that our access to reality is in every case mediated and hence partial and relative.

Quite clearly the choices made in selecting key terms and the manner in which they are explained and defined will depend on the category called 'women's experience' and on particular hermeneutical choices. The phrase 'women's experience' is in itself problematic. Women are separated everywhere by race, class and economic status (Parenti 1978:69) and great caution must be exercised not to overemphasize the universal at the cost of the parti-

cular when referring to the experience of women. I however agree with feminist theorist Bell Hooks (1984:35) that:

Sexist oppression is of primary importance not because it is the basis of all other oppression, but because it is the practice of domination most people experience, whether their role be that of discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited.

Confines of space do not permit justice to be done here to the variety and complexity of feminist hermeneutics. Suffice it to say that the critical principle chosen for a feminist hermeneutic is that women are fully human and are to be valued as such. This principle encompasses the twin values of equality and mutuality based on a search for justice and liberation. Jesus Christ's injunction

You must love your neighbour as yourself (Mk 12:31)

is understood as laying the foundation for equality and mutuality based on justice, because love is the praxis of right relation and love is justice.

Justice is the moral act of love (Heyward 1982:18).

3. Key terms

In the light of the above, certain key terms emerge in feminist theology which have specific meanings. Describing these terms is necessary both in writing and researching feminist theology. All the following key terms are arrived at from a feminist theological vantage point informed by the values of the theological metaphor known as the 'kingdom' of God which in feminist theology can be described as the 'reign' of God (see 3.10). The order in which they occur represents, in a fashion, something of a woman's journey - from the background of patriarchy, through the process of conscientization to feminism which brings about the need for convictions in terms of justice, relationally and liberation, expressed within the community of faith.

3.1 Patriarchy

The term 'patriarchy' denotes the legal, economic and social system that validates and enforces the sovereignty of the male head of the family over its other members. These members in classical patriarchal systems are the wives, children and slaves. It describes by implication woman's subordination to male figures in her personal, societal and religious experiences (Figs 1986:17-65).

... the word is primarily understood to refer to a male power and property structure in which men are dominant to the detriment of women and, one may add, also largely to the detriment of their own full development (King 1989:22).

According to Ruether (1988:148),

... women are subjugated in patriarchal societies in a more total sense than either male children or male slaves. The latter might be emancipated and become householders.

Today, it is seen as the central focus of feminist critique and implies a theory about both the history and the nature of human society (King 1989: 21,23). What is important in understanding patriarchy as a construct is its systemic nature. It is 'a social-political system and societal structure of graded subjugations and oppressions' (Fiorenza 1984:37).

It is the systematic nature of patriarchy that differentiates it from androcentrism. Patriarchy as a social, historical, religious and economic system, reveals deep androcentrism. Androcentrism, literally defined as male-centredness, means that

... what is usually thought of as being universally human or a generally valid norm has not been determined by what women and men together experience and understand, but has been exclusively described, analyzed, categorized and laid down by men. This is true of the understanding of the family, of society and government, of politics and property, of education and all the disciplines of human knowledge, of the sciences and the arts, of religion and of spirituality (King 1989:26).

Ruether (1983:165) defines the term 'sexism' as 'gender privilege of males over females'. More broadly, sexism describes the exclusive ordering of life through gender (King 1989:28).

3.2 Conscientization

This term literally means 'making conscious' and alludes to a process of discovery of self as oppressed which leads to the desire for change and the search for affirmation and wholeness. Conscientization, which happens more often in groups than individually and has a strong relational content, leads to a critical consciousness whereby people enter into the historical process actively. Paulo Freire (1972:19ff), describes *conscientizacao* as referring

... to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.

Consciousness-raising has been criticized as a questionable practice because it

... is a project of higher-class individuals directed at a lower-class population (Berger 1979:98).

Berger (1979:98-99) finds that underlying the idea of conscientization is the assumption that lower-class people do not understand their own situation and are in need of enlightenment, which service can be provided by higher-class individuals. When it occurs within a subject-object relationship, this may well be the case. As a key term it is here primarily concerned, however, with empowerment for oppressed women. In the past women have found that con-

consciousness-raising groups provided space for them to explore not only their oppression but also their unconscious collaboration with sexism.

This examination of attitudes towards themselves and other women was often a catalyst for transformation (Hooks 1984:48).

For women this process starts with the awareness of ourselves in relation to the historical contexts in which we live. In this process self-knowledge and social knowledge inform one another. As knowledge of the social world becomes personal, forgotten experiences and knowledge are revealed, connections are made with the experiences of other women and also with all situations of oppression.

The feminist consciousness that emerges from this connection between psyche and history becomes critical when a student discovers patterns in her own and other women's lives that are not created freely, but are determined by restrictive, male-dominated structures (Westcott 1983:212).

The discovery of victimization and subordination often generates anger. According to Westcott (1983:212), discoveries that produce anger also intensify understanding, and the process of putting one's own struggles in historical context allows for distancing from personal experiences of victimization, while at the same time allowing the process of personal uncovering to proceed at deeper levels.

It is important to understand the positive role of anger in the process of consciousness-raising. In the words of Harrison (1985:14):

Anger is not the opposite of love ... Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.

Anger in this instance is often based on a sense of moral outrage at injustice. Coupled with anger is the willingness to risk. Moving out of the defined socio-political boundaries or challenging the stereotyped roles of women in marriage and the family, is a risky business. Taking risks means becoming vulnerable; this calls for courage. In conclusion, conscientization is dynamic; it is growth from *Fremdbestimmung* (alienation) to *Selbstbestimmung* (autonomy) (Halkes 1984:23,133).

3.3 Feminism

Feminism is a socio-political movement with different political orientations (e.g. liberal, socialist, Marxist). I would agree with Ursula King (1989:15) that the spiritual and political challenge of feminism is much wider than any party-political line, and is not restricted to the dominant political orientations of the West.

In the South African context the word 'feminism' is viewed by many white and black women with suspicion, if not aversion. For many whites it conjures up pictures of loud, demanding, insensitive females who eschew marriage and

motherhood for a form of gender *apartheid*. Many blacks apply the labels 'bourgeois', 'North American import' and 'decadent'.¹ According to Rhoda Bertelsmann-Kadalie (1989:48)

... to dismiss feminism as a 'bourgeois concept' is to lose sight of its complexity and diversity.

Such dismissal is often based on a combination of ignorance and fear of the unknown. The publication of Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is global: The international women's movement anthology* in 1984, must, according to Elizabeth Bettenhausen (1985:35),

... relegate again to the land of inexcusable (but, I hope, not invincible) ignorance all those who claim that feminism is and has been a concern only of white middle-class women from Europe and the United States of America.

The term 'feminism' is used here to spell out a commitment to women's struggles against oppression.² The Mudflower Collective (Cannon *et al* 1985: 14,16) states:

We employ the term feminism as shorthand for our commitment to the infinitely deep value of women's lives ... feminism can best be defined in the course of what we do together - that is, in our praxis. We affirmed that feminism may be understood as a vision of a different reality that can only be seen as it is brought into being.

Feminist theorist Bell Hooks (1984:31) describes feminism

... as a movement to end sexist oppression [which] directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression.

I define feminism as the commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppresses us. Feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women, neither does it promote privilege for women over men. It is about a different consciousness, a radically transformed perspective which questions our social, cultural, political and religious traditions and calls for structural change in all these spheres.

3.4 The personal is political³

This slogan encapsulates the belief that there is no valid dichotomy between the private and public arenas as separate universes. In fact, their maintenance

1. At a meeting of women sponsored by the Institute for Contextual Theology held at La Verna (Transvaal) in August 1987, these descriptions were put forward by a group of angry black women in response to a feminist critique of the *Kairos Document* given by me. The term 'decadent' appeared on investigation to refer to feminists' tolerance of lesbian life-styles.

2. African-American women who reject the use of 'feminist' prefer the term 'womanist'.

3. For a detailed treatment of the subject see Collins (1974:151-186).

as separate spheres assists in perpetuating domination and control because of excessive preoccupation with personal morality at the expense of a social conscience. It has also led to the failure of Christian ethics to provide a sufficient theoretical foundation for social and gender justice.

When the private and the political are not separated, the interlocking mechanisms of oppression are revealed. The 'small places' of women's lives are connected to the social, political and economic structures we live in.

What focusing on the everyday life of women should do instead, is reveal that connection between public and private, between production and reproduction. In socialist-feminist research, the everyday world is not a self-contained world; quite the contrary, it is an integral part of the social whole. What's more, the relationships and values of that private, everyday world are shaped by social and economic forces ... (Weiler 1988:61).

In doing feminist research the personal constitutes a vital part of such research as the understanding of everyday lives is deemed crucial for the understanding of oppression.⁴

Broader perspectives can only emerge as we examine both the personal that is political, the politics of society as a whole, and global revolutionary political (Hooks 1984:25).

3.5 Relationality

This concept emerges from my hermeneutical understanding of the injunction by Jesus Christ that 'You must love your neighbour as yourself' (Mk 12:31) mentioned above. Active loving of self and neighbour is understood as the praxis of right relationship. Communal right relationship is the essence of justice-centred praxis. Such praxis is liberating and reflects the values of the reign of God.

Relationally is the expression of love for self and neighbour as well as the result of praxis directed towards this goal. It lays emphasis on the relational aspects of reign of God values and praxis. It also 'makes the connections' within the community of faith and, indeed, between all those engaged in liberating praxis.

I find myself questioning those who see the need or inclination for relationality as peculiar to women.⁵ The fact that women articulate this need could simply stem from their existential reality of being the Other. If relationality is the opposite of alienation, men need it as much as women do in order to find

4. Eagleton (1983:149) points out that although it is profoundly true that the personal is political, there is an important sense in which the personal is also personal and the political. Women need to be careful about advancing the experiential and spontaneous as though these provide an adequate political strategy. 'The political cannot be *reduced* to the personal or *vice versa*'.

5. See, *inter alia*, Gilligan (1982) and Miller (1976:87-102).

their authentic selves. Relationality is foundational to a feminist theological anthropology.

3.6 Justice

Ethicist Karen Lebacqz (1986:9) says

Justice is thus a bit like the proverbial elephant examined by blind-folded explorers. Each feels a different part - the foot, the ears, the tusks - and consequently each describes the beast differently - gnarled and tough, thin and supple, smooth and hard. The elephant itself - justice - is not encompassed by any of the individual descriptions. At times they seem incompatible. And yet, each contributes something to its definition.

There is no single way of describing justice or one single theory of justice which satisfies everyone. There are various theories of justice, which make *mishpat* the measure (Is 28:17). From the perspective of liberation theology, the realities of oppression and the commitment to liberating praxis lead to an understanding of Scripture which holds that to know God is to do justice for our neighbour (Gutiérrez 1973:194). According to Lebacqz (1986:104), liberation theology begins with a theory of injustice by analyzing and denouncing the grave and rampant instances of injustice. Dorothee Sölle (Sölle & Steffensky (1983:8), in discussing justice, asks:

Does this feeling of rage in the pit of your stomach have something to do with God? In every human being there is a need for justice, a feeling about justice, and a knowledge of what is unjust and unacceptable. Without justice we wouldn't be able to live.

In an attempt to offer foundations for a Christian approach to justice, Lebacqz (1987:154ff) suggests that the following elements should be considered: firstly, that justice be conceived of broadly as participating in the richness of the biblical concept which regards justice as nothing less than 'right relationship' or righteousness; secondly, that it resides in responsibilities rather than rights;⁶ thirdly, that the primary injustice is exploitation; fourthly, that since injustice is found in exploitation it must be corrected (primarily in rescue/resistance and in rebuke/reparations) and lastly, that our concept of justice be viewed as incomplete and partial.

From a feminist liberation perspective justice is seen as praxis which creates the common good, something which women deserve. The mere appeal to justice itself is considered inadequate. Justice as 'communal right-relationship' becomes a basic theological hermeneutic for the proper understanding of

6. Lebacqz's emphasis on responsibilities rather than rights must be seen in the context of the biblical concept of right relationship, where what is stressed is right relationship with God and with neighbour. Women, coming from the perspective of the oppressed, are rightly suspicious of the accentuation of responsibilities over rights unless the emphasis proceeds from the core concept of right relationship.

spirituality (Harrison 1985:90). The praxis of justice begins in the personal and extends into the political. Love, power and justice belong together in an ontological unity.

3.7 Liberation

The simple meaning of 'liberation' is 'to set free'. It has been included among the key terms as it has acquired a more specific meaning in theology in recent times by being linked to the so-called genitive or contextual theologies.

Liberation theology can be described as an

... interpretation of the Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor (Berryman 1987:5).

Gutiérrez (1973:36-37) finds three interpenetrating meanings of the term 'liberation'.

In the first place, *liberation* expressed the aspirations of oppressed people and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes ... At a deeper level, *liberation* can be applied to an understanding of history. Man is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny. This understanding provides a dynamic context and broadens the horizons of the desired social changes ... the word *liberation* allows for another approach leading to the biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of man in history. In the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates man from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression.⁷

The meaning of 'liberation' in terms of a feminist perspective will need a broader base than that of Gutiérrez. For us 'liberation' cannot be localized within a particular class or group. Nationality, class and race offer no barriers in the understanding of liberation for women (Halkes 1977:126 and Ackermann 1985:37).

'Liberation' in the context of feminist theology has two dimensions. In the first place, for women it means being freed from all that discriminates against us and oppresses us: androcentrism, dualistic thought patterns and patriarchal, hierarchical structures, wherever they may occur. Secondly, it means freedom to become autonomous persons in a restructured society (Halkes 1980:16-27). Thus the term 'liberation' points to personal freedom which entails communal responsibility. A feminist concept of liberation finds no tension or dichotomy between these two terms (Heyward 1984:16)

7. Since the mid-1970's, Latin American male theologians have become somewhat more sensitized to the more overt manifestations of sexism (Berryman 1987:172), see Gutiérrez (1983:102,137).

3.8 Liberating praxis

Liberating praxis is grounded in the actions that characterize the reign of God as exemplified in the praxis of Jesus.

The announcement that 'the Kingdom of God is at hand' pointed to something new and critical. Jesus' words and deeds embodied and clarified what it meant to live in the reign of God (3.10).

He did not ask people to be 'religious' in the well-recognized ways supported by the powerful religious leaders of his time. One way to characterize what he was doing is to say that he proposed a radical, alternative understanding of what it meant to *be* 'religious' or 'spiritual', challenging many of the most influential and powerful conceptions of religiousness practiced in his culture ... Living out this conception of 'religion' brought Jesus into a great deal of conflict. It was obviously not in the interest of many people to encourage this sort of religion - an active, change-making praxis (Harrison 1985:217-218).

Theology which takes as its point of departure or incorporates a liberation perspective insists that only liberation praxis can offer both a theological vision as well as the touchstone for such a vision. Liberating praxis is the ongoing struggle against oppressive structures that exploit people and rob them of their full humanity. It aims at realizing alternative social structures and relations which will foster the values of the reign of God. Therefore justice, love, freedom, equality, wholeness and *shalom* provide the aim of and the impetus for liberating praxis. In keeping with the feminist perspective of this thesis, particular emphasis is placed on liberation praxis in which women are the subjects.

3.9 Community of faith

For many women Beverly Harrison's (1985:206) question 'How to keep faith in a sexist church?' is central to our experience of the praxis of our faith. It is a question which has no simple answer and which women wrestle with in a variety of ways. Is being a feminist compatible with church membership? For some women the answer has been 'no', yet for others like myself it is 'yes'. It begins with the refusal to accept a split between being a Christian and a feminist, despite the fact that church praxis and feminism are often irreconcilable. Allowing such a split is to acknowledge a kind of dualism which is damaging to both one's faith and one's personhood. It also means that women in the church are not allowing patriarchal norms to define our reality. Nonetheless, many conscientized women find the experience of 'church' painful and seek new ways of being the community of believers.

As the church has, therefore, become a site of struggle for most feminists of faith, the wider term 'community of faith' is preferred. This term includes both those people who belong to the institutional church as well as those who,

for a number of reasons, find themselves outside the church and yet profess Christian values and faith in God as the guiding principle of their lives.

Women of faith, who have been called both the 'silent' as well as the 'silenced' majority in the church (Fiorenza 1985:3), are also experiencing the need for parallel communities which provide space for them to celebrate. The phenomenon of 'women-church' has arisen because this

... silence and invisibility of women [has been] generated by the patriarchal structures of the Church and maintained by androcentric, i.e. male defined theology (Fiorenza 1985:4).

The concept and activities of 'women-church' have been described as follows:

Women-Church represents the first time that women collectively have claimed to be church and have claimed the tradition of the exodus community as a community of liberation from patriarchy. This means that patriarchy is rejected as God's will ... The need for a period of withdrawal from men and communication with each other is essential for the formation of the feminist community, because women, more than any other marginalized group, have lacked a critical culture of their own (Ruether 1985:57,59).

The phenomenon of 'women-church' is not necessarily a separatist movement, but an interim strategy aimed at providing a place for women to celebrate in an atmosphere which is not alienating. I prefer the concept 'community of faith' as it is more inclusive of corporate faith activities, less liable to be misunderstood and more in keeping with the ultimate thrust of feminist liberation theology as justice and liberation for all.

3.10 Reign of God

Describing the core concept of the Christian faith as the 'Kingdom of God' is problematic from a feminist perspective. Its association with monarchy and absolute rule can communicate oppressive, hierarchical structures. Moreover, 'kingdom' is a gender specific word. As Albert Nolan (1988:126) points out, the original Hebrew and Greek words (*malkuth* and *basileia*) are not sexist and refer to a monarch who could be either male or female.

Nolan, writing within the South African context, also finds the term 'Kingdom of God' inadequate.

What we want today is not a kingdom, but a republic, a democracy (1988:25).

He proceeds to argue that the concept is also utopian and therefore abstract and idealist in a Platonic sense. He queries whether this is in fact what Jesus was talking about, and then proceeds to find four ideas associated with the reign of God in Jesus' praxis (1988:128-131). The first is the association with the poor and the outcast and their yearning for liberation. Next he holds that in the parables Jesus associated the reign of God with a project for which

both God and humans would share responsibility (see, for instance, Mt 13:4-9, 24-30, 31-32; Mk 4: 26-29). The third idea associates the reign of God with total commitment in which justice is a priority (Mt 6: 33, Lk 9:62). Lastly, Nolan finds in Jesus' parables and sayings the concept that the reign of God should be associated with a community of people.

Nolan can be criticized for being too egalitarian and unnecessarily wary of utopian notions, which are after all the basis of many faith terms. From a feminist perspective, however, the concern with symbol and imagery in our faith concepts is overdue and one is grateful for Nolan's sensitivity on this score.

Some feminist have opted for 'commonwealth of God', a term originally used by the Puritans. As a concept 'commonwealth of God' is not without its own baggage. The Puritans were very patriarchal and the modern concept of commonwealth can have imperialistic connotations (Ackermann & Armour 1989:55). In grappling to come to terms with sexist imagery for God, the term 'reign of God' is found to be preferable to 'Kingdom of God'.

The reign of God brings good news to people in terms of their life situations. This news speaks of justice, love, peace and wholeness, of the flourishing of righteousness and *shalom* (de Gruchy 1979: 195-237). I ally myself with Catharina Halkes' (1984:20) description of 'wholeness' as

... *niet* een werkelijkheid in mij of buiten mij die alle spanning verhult en die breukloos is, maar een mogelijkheid, een verlangen naar een vruchtbare en dynamische integratie van allerlei polariteiten (vrouw/man; geest/lichaam; enz.) zodat deze geen polarisaties worden maar op elkaar betrokken raken, kritisch op elkaar inwerken, niet elkaar onder- of bovenstellen.⁸

The praxis of Jesus discloses the critical and transforming vision of what it would mean for the fullness of God's presence to be known on earth. Seen from a feminist perspective, it calls us, like Jesus,

... to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, passes on the gift of life (Harrison: 1985:18).

Harrison (1985:19) further remarks that to live as if the reign of God were present, that is to live by radical mutuality and reciprocity, is a risky business.

8. '... *not* a reality in or extraneous to me which is flawless and avoids all tension, but a possibility, a desire for a fruitful and dynamic integration of various polarities (woman/man; spirit/body; etc) so that these do not become polarities but relate to one another, respond critically to one another and do not place one another in superior or inferior positions' (my translation).

4. Conclusion

There is no single feminist theology. Feminist theologians are not an homogeneous group and they represent a variety of voices on what it means to be women of faith. It is therefore not likely that the key terms spelt out above are either exhaustive or universal. They represent the searching of a white middle-class Christian feminist to come to grips with the actual doing of feminist theology.

Feminist theology is also not a closed endeavour. It has a short history and a long future. It is dynamic and ongoing and continuously in dialogue ecumenically and with feminists of different faith perspectives. New terms are emerging, being refined and redefined and hopefully contributing to the unfinished dimension of the whole theological endeavour. It would be helpful if male theologians would reflect critically on the theological terms they use instead of assuming that what they do can simply be called 'theology'. In this event fruitful dialogue could ensue on the use of language and metaphor in theology. In the last analysis, this search for naming which is empowering calls for an hermeneutical approach. There is much work to be done and women must claim the space to pursue this endeavour in theological discourse.

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