

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ACTIVITY OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the climate-crisis and Coronavirus-pandemic are the 3 most important events that are milestones of orientation for modern people. The year 2020 has been dominated on all possible levels by the first pandemic in almost a hundred years. COVID-19 has changed the economic, social, academic, political, and everyday lives of billions of people. The lockdown phenomenon, i.e. the order for citizens to stay in a certain place, the prohibition of performing certain activities, for example temporary closing of churches in some countries, caused various reactions from authorities, leaders, individual persons, and public organisations. In the dialogue they built up the common identity of humanity. The voices of the Christian churches still play an important role in this multidimensional exchange of thoughts. One of the most significant activities of the global Christian communities on the front of pandemic belongs to the Lutheran World Federation. This community of Lutherans worldwide has published a number of statements and, what is much more important, creates a space for building a global community of faith of people suffering during the pandemic.

Key words: *protestantism, coronavirus pandemic, Lutheran World Federation, Lutheranism, Globalism, Covid-19.*

INTRODUCTION – THE MILESTONES OF THE 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL IDENTITY

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by the tragic event of the series of terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, which took place on September 11, 2001, in New York. This event entered the scientific and journalistic debate as to the world after 9/11, and it also started a discussion about the concept of the “Axis of evil” and the so-called global war on terrorism. The 9/11 was described as a turning point in history, in which terrorism showed a new global face: the use of various means to intimidate on a global scale. An important, global consequence of the defence actions undertaken by the governments of many countries was the restriction of a large number of civil liberties in many countries, which was particularly visible and felt in air travel. A permanent consequence of 9/11 was also the increased surveillance on the Internet, the feeling of a lasting feeling of control from various types of services. It also created new challenges for various authorities, civic organisations as well as ordinary people [Grabek 2018]. For example, the English documentary film from 2011: “9/11: Day That Changed the World” directed by Leslie Woodhead, expresses common belief in the uniqueness of this event for the present identity of the human being.

The attack of September 11, 2001, was reflected in the lively activities of the Christian Churches and increased interreligious activities. In most cases, 9/11 led to prayers for peace, but in the US situation, it led to different, often extreme, views expressed by various confessional churches, from endorsing the war effort of the George W. Bush administration to their complete negation. One of the very clear voices in this discussion was the Statement of the executive committee of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), announced on 15th of March 2003, where we find the condemnation of the Bush Administration for seeking war without United Nations approval. “The ‘just war’

criteria ... were designed to constrain – not justify – the resort to war. Indeed, they stand in clear opposition to a preemptive war for the purpose of `regime change.’” [Religious Groups Issue Statements on War with Iraq 2003].

The person of Greta Thunberg is a symbol of the most exciting phenomena in socio-political life in the European and later on a global context of the second decade of the 21st century. Since August 2018, a 15-year-old Greta Thunberg in Sweden has begun a school strike for climate. We have to notice that for example, the Lutheran World Federation already at General Assembly in 2017 confessed that the goal to be carbon neutral by 2050 is one of the most important aims of the humanity [Lutheran World Federation 2017].

The activity of the young Swedish woman and millions of others, especially young people, was a reaction to hurricanes, tornadoes, floods on the one hand, and droughts, dust blasts, heat waves, and wars for water, resulting in the movement of hundreds of millions of refugees, on the other hand. The phenomenon of global warming has been treated by entire societies and governments of many developed countries as not an abstract problem, but as an unprecedented phenomenon: the challenge of the climate crisis. Fridays for climate, called later as Fridays for future were the most significant and most global youth actions in the last decade. The Christian Churches were from the very beginning one of the most important supporters of this movement and the global care for climate. Since the 70-ties of the 20th century the Lutheran World Federation has been one of the most active public and international subject in the climate discussion [https://www.lutheranworld.org/climate-justice/resolutions-statements-climate accessed 2020.11.12].

Less than 20 years after the 9/11 world-shaking event, people across the globe have been confronted with a new global challenge. The first media information about strange illnesses in the Chinese city of Wuhan with a population of more than 10 mil-

ion people appeared in November 2019, when in mid-January 2020, a previously unknown virus spread throughout China. In the following weeks, SARS-CoV-2 infections broke out in South Korea, Italy, and Iran. In Poland, the borderline day is March 4, 2020, since infections with previously unknown viruses have been recorded. The global date for Europe is March 13, 2020, when the WHO announced that the centre of the coronavirus pandemic has become the Old Continent and that cases of infection have covered all continents except Antarctica [Berlinger 2020]. For the Polish context, it is also the day of March 13th – a beginning of the lockdown.

CHRISTIAN REACTIONS TO PANDEMIC AND THEOLOGICAL PATTERNS OF INTERPRETATION

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic was completely unexpected. The reaction to the news about the spread of the pandemic was extreme: panic on the one hand and denialism on the other. A very common phenomenon was the paradigm of thinking that pandemic is an international conspiracy to limit civil liberties in the name of protecting public health. Denialism was a typical position for very conservative, fundamentalist circles of Christians all over the world.

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the most known is the reaction of the roman-catholic church. The head of this Church, Pope Francis recognized from the very beginning the enormity of the threat and its social consequences. The Vatican Seed supported the medical personnel and appeal for the attitude of isolation.

The prayer of Pope Francis in the empty St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2020, was widely echoed. In the meditation prayer for the end of the pandemic, the Pope reflected on the essence of the disease and pointed out that the world did not wake up in the face of wars and planetary injustices [<https://www.vatican-news.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-prayer-our-la->

dy-protection-coronavirus.html accessed 2020.10.21].

Later on, the Pope Francis formulated several prayers for the end of pandemic, especially famous was the episode when the Pope asked members of the catholic Church to make a special effort in May to pray the rosary, to be united with other believers around the world asking for St. Mary's intercession in stopping the coronavirus pandemic [<https://www.osvnews.com/2020/04/25/pope-composes-prayers-for-end-of-pandemic-to-be-recited-after-rosary/> accessed 2020.10.21]. This call had non ecumenical character because of its direct reference to the Mariological tradition. Anyhow, the voice of Francis in the year 2020 was one of the most noticeable among all authorities in the time discussion of the pandemic. He very quickly recognized global consequences of the present health status.

The Orthodox churches are not formally subordinated to any supreme organ, they have an autocephalic structure. The Patriarch of Constantinople is the first of the equals among the heads of the national churches (patriarchs, metropolitans and archbishops) and is the honorary leadership of all Orthodoxy, but his statements are not binding.

In some countries, the Orthodox Church appeared to be split. For example, in Greek context, several bishops opposing restrictions to mass attendance and accusing the government of persecuting Christianity. In this meaning, the so-called heroic statements of some hierarchs of the Orthodox Church who are not afraid of the virus call people to take part in ecclesiastical gathering of worship despite the legislative prohibitions of freedom of the movement. By the other groups they are considered irresponsible and somehow selfish. The attitude of many Orthodox Christians in Russia and Belarus was in line with the denialist trend and the preaching of the belief that nothing bad could happen to the faithful during the holy liturgy. This thinking is deeply rooted in the belief that is present in the Orthodox faith also in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic: the Holy

things in the Holy place cannot hurt you. In many quoted statements of Orthodox clergy leaders, one could hear that the pandemic is a punishment for the sins consuming Western Europe, including primarily homosexuality. Instead of isolating people, fight the blight with a sprinkler and an icon.

In the beginning of the pandemic the Polish Autocephalic Orthodox Church has also called their believers to continue taking part in the liturgical life of the communion. The Council of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in Poland on March 17, 2020 issued a communication on the coronavirus epidemic. The message reads: “The Holy Eucharist is the source of life, health of soul and body, against which no disease has power”. [<https://www.orthodox.pl/komunikat-kancelarii-sw-soboru-biskupow-11/> accessed 2020.10.13]. On the other hand, in the bishops’ appeal, we find concern about the situation: “For the duration of the epidemic emergency, you should refrain from meetings in parish rooms. Only strong faith, prayer, broadly understood abstinence, penance - as it was in the history of our Church - will help us and today overcome the epidemic that is affecting our generation”.

Generally, the reaction to the pandemic in the Orthodox world has been that of scepticism and is connected with the faith that in the sacral sphere the virus could not be dangerous to faithful people.

In the End of March 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew took the initiative and framed the incipient debate. He fully endorsed social distancing measures and framed his position on a sound theological basis: “Observing social distancing measures was not a violation but a realisation of God’s will. Science and faith were not juxtaposed but stood on the same side of the struggle against the Covid-19” [Grigoriadis 2020]. This voice was later supported by several hierarchs in the Orthodox World. There was also quite an influential movement within Orthodox Christianity which denies the dangers of COVID-19. For

example, Eugenia Constantinou, in a polemic expressing typical view of this time, emphasises: “Orthodoxy has always been flexible, but it has also been uncompromising in certain areas, including our core belief about Communion and our Orthodox phronema, our mindset, which is distinct from all other Christian groups” [Constantinou 2020].

The Greek theologian Petros Vassiliadis summarised the activities of the Orthodox Church during the Sars-CoV2 pandemic. He recognized the complicity of problem of pandemic and formulated in this context a question: “Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in our Churches?” [Vassiliadis 2020a]. The COVIC is seen as a sign of time and should be impulse to renewal in the Orthodox Church: “The Biblical renewal in this pandemic crisis is the *sine-qua-non*, both in correctly understanding the real meaning of the communion event, seemingly threatened by the social distancing precautionary measures, and the profound theological meaning of the Divine Eucharist, the mystery par excellence of the Church” [Vassiliadis 2020b: 6]. This example shows the mystical thinking of the Orthodox Tradition.

A completely different path was adopted by the Churches associated with the Lutheran World Federation. For Church communion of Lutherans since the General Assembly in French Evian, 1970, the social and political problem of the current time are recognized as a special subject of the faith [Schjorring, Kumari, Hjelm, 1997: 284]. There is a certain number of fields of the human activity prior for the Church of Christ in the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century: human rights, gender politics, East-West conflict, social justice, climate responsibility. In the beginning of 2020, the authority of the Federation put a special accent on the problem of pandemic. In materials of the LWF of the whole year 2020, it is the problem of Coronavirus-pandemic certainly of the highest priority. The problems is described as a theological, political, ecumenical and global

subject of the Christian and all-human care. That is the reason why the position of LWF in pandemic situation in this article is an object of detailed analysis.

Besides the confessional initiatives in the field of faith with pandemic, we can recall local activities that are beyond confessional character such as a textbook written by Christians in Malaysia [Guidance for Churches in the Coronavirus Era 2020].

THE ACTUAL STATUS OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

The Evangelical-Lutheran churches founded in the 16th century followed by the reforms begun by Martin Luther and his contributors. They drew their theological thought from the confessional, so-called symbolic books of Lutheranism. These books, among which the most important are the *Small and Large Catechism* of Martin Luther and the *Augsburg Confession*, which were included in the *Book of Concord* published in 1580 - they contained the entirety of Lutheran theology and spirituality. An important element of this identity was the Evangelical understanding of the Church as well. Lutheran churches founded in the 16th century understood themselves as local communities that were part of the universal Church [Abromeit 2017: 111]. The heads of these national Churches were bishops, superintendents general, who had no supranational authority over them. The locality of the Church was one of the hallmarks of Lutheran ecclesiology, that is, teaching about the Church. Until the 19th century, there were no organized actions to build the unity of the Lutheran churches in the world.

First, in 1868 in German city of Hanover, the *Universal Evangelical-Lutheran Conference* was established, which, however, had a very limited scope: it was addressed only to German local churches (*Landeskirchen*). In 1901 this organisation was transformed into the Lutheran Work for Unity during the International Conference which took place in Lund, Sweden. Since

that time the *Conference* had international character and covered other countries with its activities. This event started a new chapter in the history of rapprochement and cooperation in European Lutheranism. Since then, representatives of the Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia began to officially participate in the work of the Conference [Gaßmann 1991: 141].

After World War I, in the circles of American Lutherans, associated with the National Lutheran Council in the USA, the idea arose to create an organization uniting Evangelical Churches around the world. The result of the actions taken by American Lutherans at that time was the establishment of the *World Lutheran Convention* in 1923. The event was organized for Lutherans from August 19 to 24, 1923, in the historic city of Eisenach. Rev. John Morehead from USA was elected the first president of the Convention. The Convention, however, was not a thriving organization, it only gathered in two conventions: in 1929 in Copenhagen and in 1935 in Paris. This organization covered only Europe and the United States, excluding the Lutheran churches in Asia and Africa with its influence. The World War II, and especially the crisis of German Protestantism, led to the spontaneous cessation of this structure [Schjorring, Kumari, Hjelm, 1997: 16].

Immediately after World War II, various Christian churches, among the Lutheran ones, also became involved in the humanitarian aid operation for countries that were particularly affected by the effects of the war. American churches joined the organization of humanitarian aid transports, meeting locally? members of other Lutheran churches. It should therefore be emphasized that the foundation of the *Lutheran World Federation* (LWF) was not based on theological considerations, but those of a practical nature. Actions were taken, mainly on the axis of Scandinavian - Germany - United States, aimed at convening the first General Assembly of Lutherans, at which the World Federation would be established. After the war, the first meeting of the *World Lu-*

theran Convention was held in December 1945 in Copenhagen, and the next in 1946 in Uppsala. At those meetings, it was decided that the existing Convention would be transformed into a global union. At the end of June 1947, representatives of the 47 future member churches from six continents met in Lund. The Federation at the founding assembly defined itself as an international, voluntary organization associating Lutheran or Augsburg churches from all parts of the world. The rules and goals of the Federation are contained in the Statute. The doctrinal basis is the Holy Scriptures, 3 old Church Symbols of Faith and the unchanged *Augsburg Confession* and the *Small Catechism* [Wentz 1965: 1427].

The LWF has indicated the goal of its action to bring Christians closer and to understand it, thus inscribing ecumenism in the foundations of its activities. An expression of this ecumenical commitment is the fact that the headquarters of the LWF is still located in Geneva in a joint building with the World Council of Churches (WCC). It should be noted that the greatest changes in the self-understanding of the LWF took place during the General Assembly in 1984 in Budapest, where the formula of “altar and pulpit community” was adopted, understood as the principle of membership and mutual relations among LWF churches. This event also confirmed the unity of faith, motivating the national churches to enter a new dimension of cooperation and to abandon thinking of separateness and independence. The development of the Federation’s self-awareness can be described as a description of the breakthrough points formulated during the General Assemblies. With time, more and more emphasis in the activities and reflection of the Federation was placed on social issues and ethical questions.

In the actual declaration on the LWF’s Website we can see: “We are a global communion of churches in the Lutheran tradition on a common journey of renewal. We strive to put our faith into action within and beyond the communion, and seek God’s

Word and Spirit to guide us” [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/about-lwf> accessed 2020.10.14]. The collegiality of the LWF is a typical attribute of the Lutheran ecclesiology practiced in the life of the global organisation as well as on the level of local Churches, dioceses and congregations.

Since the 5th General Assembly in Evian, 1970, which occurred in the atmosphere of students’ revolt in 1968 and under the influence of theological schools’ revolution theology, the social ethics problem rests in the middle point of debate. The motto of the Assembly was *Sent into the World* which described the way of the Church. It was a turn from dogmatics towards dealing with the problems of Christian existence in the modern world which was connected with the reinterpretation of the doctrine of two powers/kingdom modern world which was connected with the reinterpretation of the doctrine of two powers/kingdom [Schjorring, Kumari, Hjelm, 1997: 286]. Subsequent assemblies continued the thematic scope set out at the landmark Evian meeting: 6th Assembly gathered in 1977, first time outside Europe and America i.e. in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania under the topic: *In Christ – A New Community*, 1984, 7th Assembly, Budapest, Hungary, topic: *In Christ – Hope for the World*. In 1990, the 8th Assembly took place for the first time in Latin America, exactly in Brazilian Curitiba. The problem was focused on social justice, the topic was: *I Have Heard the Cry of My People*.

The 9th Assembly 1997 occurred for the first time in Asia. It was in Hong Kong, China under the title: *In Christ – Called to Witness*. The Assembly reaffirmed the communion’s commitment to women’s ordination, but acknowledged member churches’ varying views on the practice by urging reflection and dialogue. For the 10th time the Assembly worked in 2003 in Winnipeg, Canada, the topic: *For the Healing of the World*. The Assembly theme led to commitments to transform economic globalization; strengthen ministries addressing HIV and AIDS, violence and poverty; and defend the rights of indigenous peoples

[<https://2003.lwfassembly.org/lwf-assembly/htdocs/index.html> accessed 2020.10.15].

In 2010, the 11th Assembly gathered in Stuttgart, Germany under the motive: *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread*. They resolved to work for gender and intergenerational justice, food and climate justice, and fairness toward those affected by HIV and AIDS. Emphasis was made on promoting justice for migrants and relief for those who suffer under the severe conditions imposed by illegitimate debt. Assembly delegates affirmed that churches would speak out boldly and prophetically across ecumenical lines and with communities of other faiths [<https://2010.lwfassembly.org/> accessed 2020.10.15]. The last Assembly, signed with the number 12th took place in 2017 – the Jubilee year of 500th year of Reformation focused on: *Liberated by God's Grace*. “Taking the central theme as the starting point, the Assembly will structure its work around three sub-themes: 1. Salvation - Not for sale, 2. Human beings - Not for sale, 3. Creation - Not for sale. These three sub-themes address the contextual challenges the Christian community faces in today's world. They help to identify certain concepts, attitudes and global policies that people “liberated by God's grace” reject since they are incompatible with the gospel” [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/assembly/>]. Especially, the 3rd point of the Assembly program was connected with the bride understanding ecotheological problem. The Assembly formulated the program for the next 7 years of theological work in the member Churches which was expressed in 3 Public Statement and 25 Resolutions, among them one is about climate change [<https://2017.lwfassembly.org/en/assembly/assembly-outcomes> accessed 2020.10.15]. At that time, no one could have imagined that the problems of disease, pandemic and restrictions on freedom would become the central topic of public and church debate only three years later.

THE RESPONSE OF LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION TO THE PANDEMIC SITUATION

The Lutheran World Federation is a global communion of the independent, local, mainly national 148 member Churches in 99 countries representing over 77 millions of Christians. The member churches work in seven regions and delegate representatives to the highest governing body, the Assembly. The Assembly elects the President, the Council consists of 48 persons, elected by Assembly and the General Secretary. The Office of the LWF works in Geneva, it has 3 Departments: Department for Planning and Coordination, Department for Theology, Mission and Justice, Department for World Service and the Office of the General Secretary. Altogether 65 staff members work there. For the theological, social and ethical problem responsible are: Department for Theology, Mission and Justice currently under the management of Rev. Eva Christina Nilsson from Sweden. This unit was highly involved in the formulation of theological statements of the time of the pandemic. Already on February 20th, 2020, the Office of LWF sent a statement of Lutheran Churches in Asia to all members: *Churches in Asia advise prudence in COVID19 outbreak* and organise a solidarity help for suffering people in Indonesia [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/churches-asia-advise-prudence-covid19-outbreak> accessed 2020.11.04]. The first official theological voice from LWF is formulated on March, 11, 2020 in the letter of President of LWF Archbishop Dr Musa Panti Filibus and General Secretary Rev. Dr Martin Junge. Both hierarchs gave the comprehensive theological and ethical interpretation of the pandemic situation and called to the moral attitude:

“This is a time to continue trusting in God’s compassionate presence among humankind. We take courage in the knowledge that God never abandons us, even if it means going through the experience of the cross. We see the cross of Christ as the sign of our strength and hope. The call for self-disci-

pline, stated in the Bible verse above, is paired with the call to love our neighbour. Love and self-discipline belong together, even more these days. By holding back from unnecessary contact, we are able to show our love and concern for those who are most vulnerable. We call upon you to uphold self-discipline as a gift of God” [Filibus, Junge 11.03.2020].

They call to follow instructions from the public health structures of your Countries and warn about the fact that much false information is circulating. The letter indicates that the WHO messages should become the source of factual knowledge about Coronavirus and pandemic.

This pastoral letter was an impulse for the national Lutheran Churches all over the World to take the responsibility on the local level and it is fitted in the theological model; think globally, act locally presented on the Assemblies since Dar el Salam.

As a consequence of global responsibility the Office of LWF in Geneva organized a several aid action and solidarity transport which was a realisation of solidarity with one another, to practice love and self-discipline, to hold back from unnecessary physical contact yet remain connected in different ways. Through that we are able to show our love and concern for those who are most vulnerable. As a sign of global solidarity a chain of prayer was organised in every member Church. The Office created a special Website dedicated to the Covid-19 problem with all important information and ways of support [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/lwf-responds-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic> accessed 2020.11.07]. The www subpage has 6 sections: News, Intercessory Prayers, World Service Response – Press Kit, Rapid Response Fund, Donate Now, Members Churches Response. The working of LWF was led in 3 directions: theological reflection, common prayer and financial support.

The first global Prayer in the time of pandemic was held worldwide in the Lutheran Churches on March 19th. The LWF prepared a special liturgy which was translated into the languages

of local congregations. On March 24th, at noon, the member Churches reacted to the call of the Pope Francis for a common, ecumenical prayer in the Churches with the Word of the Lord's Prayer: Our Father. The position of the Leaders of the LWF from the very beginning of the pandemic was that the Christian Churches should be in this dramatic time gathered in prayer. Global pandemic calls us to global, ecumenical action.

Afterwards, almost each week information, statement or solidarity action is formulated by Office in Geneva which underlines that the pandemic is not only a global experience but a problem of individual people. One of the symbols of this activity was the action conducted since July, 2020: *COVID-19: Wear it, share it*. It was a production chain of pandemic face masks with the LWF logo in several poor countries and the global distribution of them [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/covid-19-wear-it-share-it>].

Very characteristic theological analysis came from the President of LWF in June, 2020. Musa reflects on redefining churches' role in post-COVID19 world. He said that "Lutherans must learn to redefine their role in society as they continue to be advocate and to ensure that no-one is left behind". He underlined that the role of the Church in the crisis time is serving the most vulnerable [<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/redefining-churches-role-post-covid19-world> accessed 2020.11.17]. The last important voice from Geneva is the information from November 19th, 2020 that the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is joining the ecumenical partners to call on leaders of the G20 nations to urgently provide needed debt relief for countries struggling to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/appeal-g20-address-debt-crisis-and-save-lives> accessed 2020.11.19].

Generally, the Lutheran member Churches of LWF keep the line of global responsibilities on the local level and that is why they did not protest against closing the Churches in the time of the

first wave of pandemic in the spring of 2020. The *signum temporis pandemiae* – the sign of the times of COVID-19 is that the life of huge number of Churches, not only Lutherans automatically moved from temples and chapels to the virtual reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic crisis of 2020 has generated very different reactions of individual and social groups. Also in Christendom, there has not been the same position and action against COVID-19. The conviction of denialism and scepticism versus the reality of common disease caused by the Sars-CoV-2 virus were not seldom in the first phase of its occurrence. One of the most comprehensive attitudes toward the pandemic of 2020 has from the beginning of this global phenomenon been demonstrated by the Lutheran World Federation and by its member Churches all over the World. The reaction of this global religious organisation has not only shown a theoretical character. The long-lasting practice of the LWF has led to the development of an adequate model of action in a crisis: theological reflection and motivation, the spiritual response in the form of liturgical and prayer activities, humanitarian aid for the neediest. This model had theoretically been constructed in many assemblies and meetings in the last 40 years and has been currently brought up to the global level of Office in Geneva clear frame of the solution and it has been performed by local member Churches in every part of the Globe.

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