



Dogma, Tradition, Historicity: Contribution of Yves Congar and Bernard Lonergan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted: Januari 30, 2025

Revised: February 6, 2025

Accepted: February 21, 2025

Keywords:

Historical consciousness;
Dogma; living tradition;
Permanence; Historicity;
Differentiations of
consciousness

Kata-kata Kunci:

Kesadaran historis;
Dogma; Tradisi yang
hidup; Permanensi;
Historisitas; Diferensiasi
kesadaran

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53396/media.v6i1.517>

ABSTRACT:

The inquiry into the understanding of dogmas has been prompted by historical consciousness. Dogmas were traditionally viewed as universal and a-historical until historical consciousness emerged, leading to the questioning of their truth claims. Some attempted to rely on common sense, but this proved futile. To provide a more nuanced solution to the issue of determining the truth claims of dogma, the author introduces the ideas of Yves Congar and Bernard Lonergan. Through the method of dialectic, this study aims to explore Congar's concept of living tradition and Lonergan's distinction between the permanence and historicity of dogma. This investigation seeks to resolve the tension between what is permanent and what is historical, which primarily arises from different levels of consciousness.

ABSTRAK:

Kesadaran historis telah menimbulkan sejumlah pertanyaan tentang bagaimana dogma dipahami. Semula dipercaya sebagai sesuatu yang bersifat universal dan a-historis, sebelum munculnya kesadaran historis, klaim kebenaran sebuah dogma kini dipertanyakan. Beberapa pemikir beralih pada akal sehat (*common sense*) sebagai solusi, walaupun tidak membuahkan hasil. Sebagai upaya menawarkan solusi yang lebih mendalam terkait masalah pencarian klaim kebenaran sebuah dogma, penulis mengemukakan gagasan dari dua penulis, yaitu: Yves Congar dan Bernard Lonergan. Dengan menggunakan metode dialektik, penulis menyusun kajian ini dengan mencermati gagasan Congar tentang tradisi yang hidup dan pemikiran Lonergan tentang perbedaan dari sisi tetap dan sisi historis dogma sebagai upaya untuk memberikan solusi yang lebih menghasilkan buah: ketegangan antara apa yang tetap dan apa yang historis terletak, pertama dan terutama, pada perbedaan-perbedaan kesadaran.

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INTRODUCTION

Once believed to be universal and a-historical, dogmas have undergone innumerable investigations in order to really pinpoint their truth claim. However, when Wilhelm Dilthey proposed the importance of historical consciousness, theologians were given a bigger responsibility to reconsider the way of doing theology, and consequently, reconsider the

meaning of dogmas.¹ Given the fact that dogmas are formulated against a certain historical background, one can no longer hold that its meaning is eternal simply because it is given and guaranteed by the supernatural and sealed by the official magisterium of the Church. It can never be denied that dogmas are formulated by those who, despite the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are the children of their time.

After Wilhelm Dilthey's critique of historical reason², history was no longer perceived primarily as thoroughly permeated and even controlled by the supernatural as it had always been in the medieval era. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of a new awareness that “the meaning of history became man himself: his struggle towards and gradual realization of his natural capacities and ideals.”³

The issue of the historicity of dogma continued to become one of the key issues in the twentieth century and quite a number of thinkers concerned themselves with it, such as: Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell, Édouard Le Roy, M.M. Tuyaërts, Francisco Marín-Sola, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, Claude Geffré and Yves Congar.⁴ Just a brief survey of theological writings is enough evidence that this matter is of great importance in theology.⁵ There have been continuous attempts to find the truth claim of dogmas and the solution has been centering around common sense. Although this solution may seem plausible, in the end it may lead to the trap of conceptualist realism. As this article unfolds, it will be made clear that is so and thus, the author wishes to propose a richer solution to the issue.

In an attempt to pave the way to better understand the meaning of dogma without shying away from historical consciousness, this brief article will explore Congar's idea of living tradition in light of Lonergan's thought on the permanence and historicity of dogma.

¹W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. VIII*, 73, as quoted from D.E. Linge, “Dilthey and Gadamer, Two Theories of Historical Understanding”, 537.

²Sophie Marcotte-Chenard, “The Critique of Historical Reason and the Challenge of Historicism”, *Dialogue-Canadian Philosophical Review*, 61.3 (2022), doi:10.1017/S0012217322000233.

³Linge, “Dilthey and Gadamer”, 537.

⁴The list may go longer. However, except for Yves Congar, I refer to the list given by Guy Mansini OSB in the introduction of his article. Guy Mansini OSB, “The Historicity of Dogma and Common Sense: Ambrose Gardeil, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Yves Congar, and the Modern Magisterium,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 18, No 1, (2020), 111-138, on 111.

⁵John R. Sheets SJ, “Teilhard de Chardin and the Development of Dogma”, *Theological Studies*, Vol 30, Issue 3, 1969, 445-462; Jack A. Bonsor, “History, Dogma, and Nature: Further Reflection of Postmodernism and Theology”, *Theological Studies* 55 (1994), 295-313; Robert C. Koepel, “Between *History and Dogma*: On the Spirit of Tradition in the Demands and Limitations of Modernity”, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 95, No. 1055, (Jan. 2014), 3-20, DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01464.x; Mansini OSB, “The Historicity of Dogma and Common Sense”, 111-138; Anthony Queirós, “Tradition as Formative Environment: Congar and Christian Formation”, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 105, Issue 2 (2024), 105, 169–179, doi:10.1017/nbf.2023.14

METHOD

The method employed in the research is *dialectic*, as coined by Bernard Lonergan.⁶ One has to bear in mind that the term dialectic as a technique of doing research of a theological writing is more technical: it shows some steps in the research behind the writing. Towards the end of the article, the same term is used in a more general and broader sense, that is to say, to show a continuous process of two things that are often in opposition. In this research, it is the tension between the permanence and the historicity of dogma.

As a method of research, the main objective of dialectic is to clarify a certain issue when there are differences and the author discovers that there are genetic differences in Yves Congar's and Bernard Lonergan's horizons. In the exploration of Congar's solution, the author will expose the limitations it presents. It is then that Bernard Lonergan's idea comes to the fore. Lonergan contends that differences have a lot to do with horizons as “fields of vision” that determine the “scope of one’s knowledge.”⁷ That is to say that Lonergan proposes successive stages in understanding to advance Congar's solution to the issue of understanding dogmas.

DISCUSSION

Broad as the problem may be to address, the author wishes to explore a more specific issue: how to not completely resort to common sense when tensions occur due to historical consciousness. The thoughts of Congar and Lonergan will help create a solution that does not stop on the technical level. On the contrary, the dialectic between Congar and Lonergan may serve as a framework from which one can work out the best solution whenever problems regarding dogma and history arise.

The Problem of Dogma and History: Common sense as Solution

One of the consequences of historical consciousness is that nothing is immune to the historical context wherein it is formulated, not even dogmas –which once were always held to be beyond history.⁸ Congar captures the predicament brought about by the Modernists as follows:

⁶ Bernard Lonergan, ‘1 Dialectic of Authority’, in *A Third Collection*, 2021, doi:10.3138/9781487513665-002.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, in Robert M. Doran & John D. Dadosky (eds.), *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol. 14*, (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 221.

⁸For more one can study for example John Henry Newman, *An Essay of the Development of Christian Doctrine*, (London: Aeterna Press, 2014). In brief, in the book, Newman states that Christian doctrines grow and are enlarged while being faithful to principles, which remain the same. Newman is quite optimistic that the development –not corruption!-- moves in the direction of deeper understanding of the mystery of the faith. This book makes for fascinating studies. Nevertheless, it will not be an object of investigation in this present article since the focus is more on the aftermath of the crisis of modernism in the Church.

The modernists always dissect the primitive fact, separating its divine and hence absolute value from its intellectual expression, considered as relative, variable, and subject to vicissitudes of history.⁹

The primitive fact is the Revelation and dogmas are the formulation of that primitive fact. Dogmas are formulated because it is deemed necessary to have a set of propositions, which is inevitably adjusted to both the attempts to be faithful to the spirit of Christ and the Christian spirit in the believers (theologians). Problems arise when historical consciousness is involved: how dogmas –of which process of formulation is bound to history– can claim the truth which is in a sense universal and eternal.

Some thinkers tried to solve the problem by turning to common sense. The formulation of dogmas follows the logic of common sense and therefore dogmas are accessible and understandable both across the ages and to all manners of men and to all cultures.¹⁰ As God has entered a particular history, every formulation of the Revelation is bound to particularity and it is a historical necessity that Christianity has borrowed the Greco-Latin form to express the experienced Revelation. This historical necessity means invoking what can be translated through common sense so that the unsayable religious experience can be communicated to all.

However, resorting to common sense does not solve the problem. One reason is that one has to understand what this common sense is. Guy Mansini identifies that authors supporting common sense as the solution of accessibility and understandability use the scholasticized theories of common sense. He notes,

The scholasticized common sense ... contains ... not only the first and self-evident principles of reason ... but also ... the shared opinions of men on the nature of man and on fundamental moral principles. ... [Common sense means] its contents and not some faculty of reason distinct from the speculative and practical intellect, includes the first principles of the intellect, practical and theoretical, but also such things as the conviction of human freedom of choice, the immortality of the soul, and of the reward of our good and evil deeds on the other side of death, things understood as the shared opinions of men on the nature of man and morals.¹¹

One can at least point out four weaknesses in this notion of common sense. Firstly, there is a confusion of the content and the operation of common sense. Secondly, this confusion leads to arbitrariness when it comes to values. It is as if there was a list of universally accepted values that everybody of common sense would come to exactly the same judgment. And thirdly, following Bernard Lonergan, common sense is always particular. In his own words, “Common sense is a specialization of intelligence in the

⁹Yves M.J. Congar, *The History of Theology*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 190-191.

¹⁰Mansini OSB, “The Historicity of Dogma and Common Sense”, 124.

¹¹ Mansini OSB, 124-125.

particular and the concrete” and “[It] is common without being general...” Furthermore, Lonergan contends that even though common sense tends to generalize, the generalizations produced by it “are not meant to be premises for deductions” but merely “communicate pointers that ordinarily it is well to bear in mind.”¹²

Lastly, epistemologically speaking, this notion of common sense implies that the first principles somehow coincide with or even are contained in common sense. Mansini identifies that this, in turn, will lead to “conceptualist realism,” which “is nothing more than an elaborate, historically suspect and epistemically misleading stratagem to ignore the historicity of dogma, an excuse to elide the historical studies.”¹³

A less direct resort to common sense is found in some magisterial documents. Mansini lists the documents as *Humani Generis* (1950), *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), *Unity of Faith and Theological Pluralism* (1972), *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), *Interpretation of Dogma* (1990), *Fides et Ratio* (1998). Then, Mansini summarizes the attempts to deal with the problem of dogma and history in the documents –which indirectly resort to common sense– in nine points¹⁴:

1. Dogmatic terms are not tied to a particular philosophy or culture or scientific achievement.
2. They are not technical terms, but *common* or *basic* expressions though sometimes “refined.”
3. They are rooted in and reflect necessary and universal human experience.
4. They and the dogmatic statements composed of them are true (and not merely “approximations”).
5. These terms and expressions are universally accessible, or forever accessible, or at least not to be discarded and replaced.
6. Moreover, these terms have found approval by the magisterium.
7. For all that, the expressive terms of dogmatic statements can be further perfected.
8. Their historical relativity of conditioning is acknowledged.
9. Last, they have not been simply received but have been hammered out by the Church in her own work of giving expression to revealed truth.

It is clear now that no clear solution is successfully proposed for the problems related to dogma and history. Both the direct and indirect endeavors to resort to common sense do not yield a certain framework from which theologians can grapple with.

¹²Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in Frederick E. Crowe & Robert M. Doran, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol. 3*, (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 198-199.

¹³Mansini OSB, “The Historicity of Dogma and Common Sense:”, 125.

¹⁴Mansini OSB, 135.

Nevertheless, the impasse is not inevitable. This is where Congar's idea of living tradition may come as a great help to solve the problems.

Living Tradition: Congar's Contribution

Congar's research written in his double volume of *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*¹⁵ is exhaustive. His meticulous effort to go down the rabbit hole of the history of theology has led to discoveries of various elements that allow for the understanding that tradition is living. This very discovery will serve as the foundation for Lonergan's idea of dialectical process to be explored in the next part of this article.

Congar treats living tradition in "Tradition and Magisterium from the Council of Trent to 1950", chapter 6 of the first book of his double-volume in which he treats the matter by surveying the long history of theology. Congar begins his exploration and discovers that the idea of living tradition was first developed by the Tübingen School. However, Congar notes that the expression itself was not coined by the school. Though rare, one can find the expression in the Fathers or in ancient conciliar or papal texts and later became more widely used around the time of the Reformation.¹⁶ It was Francois Fénelon who brought this idea to the Tübingen School: to Johann Michael Sailer, then to Johann Sebastian von Drey, and then to Möhler. Although the idea has gradually become mature, Congar suggests that Möhler was the one that developed the idea.

Regarding this Tübingen theologian, Congar notes that

He [Möhler] criticizes in particular the idea of a revelation handed on *partly* in texts and *partly* by oral tradition. Tradition for him is a mode of communication which covers the whole of Christianity and encompasses Scripture. "Tradition or the living Gospel, always proclaimed in the Church, extends to the whole spirit of Christianity and to all its doctrines." Scripture and tradition are not two independent and parallel sources, they include, fulfil and condition one another, the living in the other. The interpretation of the relationship between Scripture and tradition in terms of *partim ... partim ...*, which the Council of Trent itself did not impose, is merely a Catholic counter-proposition to the Protestant dissociation of the two but this questionable opposition must be overcome. Tradition contains and preserves everything, it is the Gospel living in the Church.¹⁷

By criticizing the *partim ... partim ...* Möhler supports the inseparability of the Gospel as written words and that which is living in the people of God. The historically constituted fact that there is some kind of separation between the two is brought about by the need to formulate what was originally *within* to become an adequate *outer expression*.

¹⁵Yves M.J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions, An Historical and a Theological Essay*, translated by Michael Naseby & Thomas Rainborough, (Oxford: Burns & Oates Ltd, 1966).

¹⁶Congar, 190.

¹⁷Congar, 193.

Möhler's starting point is the mystical-spiritual unity because “the Spirit unites all believers into a spiritual community, through which it communicates itself to those who are not yet believers.”¹⁸ In short, before all the formulations, there was this unity in the Spirit. The written texts for Möhler are expressions or witnesses of living tradition; however, they are necessary because they permit the historical verification of continuity and the concrete awareness of communion, which cannot grow without some form of expression.¹⁹

Although Möhler, in his *Unity in the Church* treats the role of the hierarchical magisterium, it was in Roman theology, especially from Giovanni Perrone onwards, that the idea of living tradition had to do with the magisterium in a more “collegial” or “synodal” way. Congar reveals that in Roman theology the subject or organ of tradition in the full sense is not only the hierarchical magisterium but includes the whole body of the faithful.²⁰ Later development provides the distinct roles of the magisterium and the faithful: one is to teach with authority, the other to guard; one is responsible for transmitting the objective tradition, the other for the conservation of the objective tradition.

After having conducted careful studies in the development of the idea of living tradition by exploring the thoughts of John Henry Newman, Matthias Joseph Scheeben, and Maurice Blondel—which for the brevity of the article cannot be included here—Congar asserts that:

Fundamentally, tradition is but one instance of what is demanded by the mystery of the Church in its totality. The Church has in herself something truly human and something truly divine, but she is one Church, at once an object of history and an object of supernatural faith, rather like Christ himself. There could well be a monophysitism of tradition neglecting its historicity, just as there could be a Nestorianism underrating what is divine in her. The apostolicity of the Church, which guarantees her formal visibility, can also be described historically, and formal apostolicity, which can only be discerned by a dogmatic criterion. The case of tradition is strictly parallel. But formal apostolicity is realized in the actual, concrete fact of material apostolicity, which it is the work of historians to establish. Documentary lacunae exist in both. They appertain either way to that kenosis which is the law of the whole economy of salvation, and in which we see at work the condescension of God. Scripture too is full of difficulties and obscurities which do not make it any less the Word of God.²¹

Having pointed out Congar’s position on the matter, it is then safe to conclude that, first of all, he believes that tradition is demanded since the Church is built upon the mystery of incarnation: human and divine at one and the same time. Secondly, it follows

¹⁸Johann Adam Möhler, *Unity in the Church or The Principle of Catholicism Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries*, translated by Peter C. Erb, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996): 81.

¹⁹Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 195.

²⁰Congar, 197.

²¹Congar, 220.

then that the Church by nature has two two-fold dimensions: human and divine. And thirdly, the two perichoretic realms are to be treated as distinct yet inseparable. Fourthly, Congar's distinction between "formal apostolicity" and "material apostolicity" is the locus where living tradition *is* taking place: the *Tradition* always goes in a dialectical relationship with the *traditions*. And lastly, when such is how one is to understand tradition, then the meaning of dogma is always a dynamic interplay between the "formal" and the "material." Hence, the meaning of dogma is not fixed but it is to be put in *praxis* in a continuous process of "passing on" and "accepting passed on and putting it into practice", that is to say, *a living tradition*.

The Permanence and the Historicity: Lonergan's Contribution

The matter that the present study deals with is to find a solution on how to understand dogma when it is inevitably set against the background of historical consciousness. While Congar has prepared the way toward the solution by proposing that living tradition *could* be the locus of the dialectic between the formal and the material apostolicity, one more step is needed, that is: how to do the dialectic. Here one can notice the limitation in Congar's idea. This is where Bernard Lonergan's idea of the permanence of dogma and its historicity comes into play. In "Doctrines," chapter 12 of his *Method in Theology*, Lonergan pens this as his sixth functional specialty. In the first place, Lonergan offers his theory of how doctrines can develop.²² For this Canadian theologian, doctrines can develop through a process of the "ongoing discovery of mind."²³ The ongoing discovery of mind is a process whereby human consciousness undergoes successive stages in development while interacting with contexts and in turn a more developed human consciousness will change the contexts.²⁴ Following the dictate of the universal, unrestricted, pure desire to know, human consciousness will be more differentiated as it interacts with whatever it is that becomes its context(s)²⁵. This very interaction is recorded in statements that are always in the process of dialectic with one another and as both the human consciousness and the statement it produces are also developing.

To clarify the matter, Lonergan gives examples from the history of theology. In the beginning, the Old and New Testaments set the basis of Christian theological edifice.

²² Vincent Birch, Growth of the Christian Idea: An Application of Bernard Lonergan's Thought to Discourse on Doctrinal Development. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 88(2023), 137-154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231160651>

²³Lonergan, *Method in Theology*: 297.

²⁴Lonergan, 285-296.

²⁵For Lonergan, the contexts are: a) material and b) formal. The material context is what is written and canonized; the formal context is a set of interwoven questions and answers that reveal the meaning of a text. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*: 291.

Later on, the first Greek councils further developed the basis. And one should also note that the Greek council had at least two different contexts: a logical context and a metaphysical one. The metaphysical context became fuller during the golden era of Scholasticism. Within this whole process, human consciousness became more and more differentiated. As such, the process keeps going until today. Just as this process is happening, a question arises: How to judge whether the process goes in the right direction or not? How are we sure that we grasp the truth better and deeper?

The Lonerganian answer is of course: to perform a dialectic. In this case, Lonergan offers a careful distinction between the “Permanence of Dogmas” and the “Historicity of Dogmas.” Lonergan treats the idea of the permanence of dogmas by exploring the constitution *Dei Filius* (DF). Lonergan notes that in DF, the “permanent meaning of dogma is the meaning declared by the Church” or the “meaning which the Church understood and understands.” However, he is quick to recognize that the “meaning of the dogmas is not apart from a verbal formulation” and finally he asserts that

... it seems better to speak of the permanence of the meaning of dogmas rather than of its immutability. ... Again, it is permanence rather than immutability that is meant when there is desired an ever better understanding of the same dogma, the same meaning, the same pronouncement.²⁶

It seems that Lonergan gives a complicated puzzle. The permanence of dogmas here does not amount to immutability. However, Lonergan adds that the permanence of dogmas has two grounds: *causa cognoscendi* and *causa essendi*. *Causa cognoscendi* means that what God has revealed and the Church has infallibly declared is true in the sense that the meaning it possessed in its own context can never be denied truthfully. *Causa essendi* means that the meaning of dogmas is not a datum, nor is it a human truth but the revelation of a mystery hidden in God.²⁷

Next, Lonergan moves to delineating the historicity of dogmas. The historicity of dogmas that Lonergan means is more than just the fact that dogmas are formulated in a certain historical context and hence they bear the marks of the *Zeitgeist*. Lonergan goes further than just stating that fact. One should recall now the ongoing discovery of mind that implies that human consciousness moves from undifferentiated to differentiated, i.e., from the rough and un-nuanced capacity to process data to the very sophisticated minds that can understand various different shades of meanings and understand things deeper and deeper.

²⁶Lonergan, 300.

²⁷Lonergan, 301.

In Lonergan's own words,

For dogmas are statements. Statements have meaning only within their contexts. Contexts are ongoing, and ongoing contexts are related principally by derivation and by interaction. Truths can be revealed in one culture and preached in another. They may be revealed in the styles and fashion of one differentiation of consciousness, defined by the Church in the style and fashion of another differentiation, and understood by theologians in a third. What permanently is true is the meaning of the dogma in the context in which it was defined. To ascertain the meaning there have to be deployed the resources of research, interpretation, history, dialectic. To state the meaning today one proceeds through foundations, doctrines, and systematics to communications. Communications, finally, are to each class in each culture and to each of the various differentiations of consciousness.²⁸

By historicity, Lonergan means that a certain dogma is formulated by a certain level of differentiation of consciousness. Dogmas are the products of a certain stage of differentiation of consciousness. As such, they are historical. However, this does not imply that Lonergan is promoting historicism. Just as knowledge is discursive, so is the grasp of the truth of God. Human beings proceed from one stage of differentiation of consciousness to another deeper stage of it. To understand the meaning of dogma one has to be aware of the stages of differentiations of consciousness. That way, historical researches that may unearth various facts behind a dogma should be a problem because they may add to make our understanding more nuanced.

This proposal by Lonergan can only take place when tradition is perceived as living tradition. It is within living tradition that the discerning between what is permanent and what is historical is to take place. Living tradition is a locus where all the faithful are performing dialectic to understand the truth better because more nuances are grasped along the ongoing discovery of mind.

CONCLUSION

History is indeed important in understanding dogmas; yet, when too much emphasis is put on it, one fails to understand that dogmas are in fact products of particular historical contexts. Historical consciousness then brings about a fresh challenge as to how one is to understand dogmas. Some thinkers make numerous attempts, although not successful, to solve the tension between the truth claim of dogmas and the fact that they are the products of certain historical context and hence cannot be said to have the truth which surpasses any historical epochs. It is Congar's living tradition that succeeds in laying the foundation

²⁸Lonergan, 302-303.

to solve the problem. Living tradition does pave the way toward this new understanding. However, it does not suffice and a more nuanced solution is offered through Lonergan's distinction between the permanence and the historicity of dogmas. The tension between the permanence and the historicity does not lie at the factual-historical level; on the contrary, it has to do with the ongoing discovery of mind: the differentiations of consciousness. When one is to understand the meaning of dogma and to find its truth claim, it is imperative that, first and foremost, he be aware of the stages of differentiations of consciousness. Only then can the faithful live by dogma that is contextual and true.

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