

Bulletin

national
secular
society

Issue 83 Winter 2023

challenging religious privilege

IT'S OFFICIAL:

**WE'RE NOT
A CHRISTIAN
COUNTRY**

No religion:
37.2%

Christian:
46.2%

Muslim:
6.5%

No answer:
6%

Sikh: 0.9%

Hindu: 1.7%

Jewish: 0.5%

Buddhist: 0.5%

Other religion: 0.6%

**2021 CENSUS
REVEALS: CHRISTIANS
A MINORITY IN ENGLAND
AND WALES**

**"NO RELIGION" BIGGEST
RELIGION OR BELIEF
GROUP IN WALES,
SECOND IN ENGLAND**

**NSS: ESTABLISHED
CHURCH UNSUSTAINABLE
AND ABSURD**

**ALSO IN THIS
EDITION:**

Teachers call for end
to collective worship

Upcoming discussion
on disestablishment

Islamic theocracies
in the spotlight



Census strengthens case for a secular state

The latest census data revealed that Christianity has become a minority religion in England and Wales. The number of people saying they have no religion saw another significant increase, and minority faiths are seeing growth, too.

These findings provide a stark reminder of just how incongruous the Church of England's established status is. In a nation of such diversity, the state should be neutral in the realm of religion and belief.

Yet in the coming months, when a new head of state is crowned, the favouritism shown towards the Church of England will be underlined by the king vowing to defend the doctrine and privileges of the "one true protestant faith".

The point of a census is to provide the government with the information it needs to develop policies and deliver public services. The message from the census should be that secular reforms

are long overdue.

Any attempts to initiate such reforms will be met with resistance. With only a minority of the population now following the country's official religion, many Christians see evangelism as key to revitalising the church. Our state institutions and public services, such as schools, remain important battlegrounds for those who want to impose their religion on others, whether welcome or not.

Our role is to ensure the right to freedom of religion is always balanced by the right to freedom from religion. Non-Christians should no longer be treated as second class citizens. And nobody should be expected to live under anyone else's religion.

Secularism is the cornerstone of free and equal citizenship. The brave women leading protests in Iran, seeking to replace their repressive Islamic regime with a free, open, secular state,

understand this better than most.

They know that a state separated from religious institutions is necessary to protect everyone's rights and freedoms.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Secularism's role in enabling equality and human rights to flourish is too often unrecognised and hugely underappreciated. In a world where polarisation, authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism are gaining ground, the secular liberal democratic ideals that underpin human rights can't be taken for granted.

Where any religion is imposed or privileged, people's freedoms suffer. Those of us who value freedom of choice, freedom of expression and freedom of belief must be prepared to defend them. Your NSS membership not only demonstrates your commitment to these freedoms, but actively helps to protect them. Thank you.

Child abuse inquiry concludes: no religious exemptions on reporting abuse

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has concluded its seven-year investigation. The final report documents how churches and other religious institutions in England and Wales repeatedly failed to adequately address the sexual abuse of children, allowing it to continue on an industrial scale.

Its recommendations were published in October and include measures we've repeatedly called for. But we're concerned there are gaps which may enable child abuse in religious settings.

Both the NSS and abuse survivors have been adamant that there must be mandatory reporting on child sexual abuse. IICSA recommended introducing

"...neither the freedom of religion or belief nor the rights of parents with regard to the education of their children can ever justify the ill-treatment of children or prevent governmental authorities from taking measures necessary to protect children from harm."

IICSA

such laws and we were pleased it specified that they must not be subject to religious exceptions. It said abuse must be reported even if it is revealed during sacramental confession, despite objections from religious groups.

However, the report specifies that criminal penalties would apply only if mandated persons failed to report cases where they had witnessed abuse, or the victim or perpetrator had disclosed abuse. This would leave many victims

vulnerable, because direct disclosure or witnessing of child abuse are rare.

Other recommendations from IICSA include:

- A redress scheme for survivors. Unfortunately, IICSA proposes the state funds this with "voluntary contributions" from the organisations implicated in abuse. As we know from cases in Ireland, religious institutions are unlikely to foot the bill voluntarily.
- Abolition of the law requiring a civil claim for childhood sexual abuse to be

brought within three years of the victim turning 18. Given the average delay between abuse and a survivor's disclosure is 22 years, IICSA's recommendation to abolish the time limit is welcome.

We'll be campaigning to ensure these recommendations are enshrined in law and strengthened where necessary to ensure the rights and welfare of children are put first – not religious interests.



Christians now a minority in England and Wales

Opponents of separating church and state usually claim the UK is “a Christian country”. The 2021 Census results can finally put this myth to bed.

The Census results for England and Wales, released in November, revealed that for the first time Christians are a minority, while those with no religion are the second largest group in England at 37%. In Wales, the nonreligious are the largest group at 47%.

The Census also revealed growing religious diversity, with most minority religions seeing gains in numbers.



In the wake of the Census findings, the NSS called for the separation of church and state in newspapers, on radio and on TV. This included our president Keith Porteous Wood being interviewed for Channel 4 News.

What do these figures mean for religion and state?

The established church

Now Christians are a minority group in Britain, the presence of an established state church looks more undemocratic, unsustainable, and absurd than ever before.

Things look even worse for the Church of England when we examine their attendance figures released in December. They reveal just 0.9% of England’s population attend Sunday services – considerably smaller than the 46% of people who said they were Christian in the Census.

Both the Census and the CofE’s own figures confirm that the Church has little relevance to most Brits. Its uniquely privileged position in our constitution is unjustifiable.

The bishops’ bench

One of the most unpopular examples of the Church’s privileges is the 26 seats in the House of Lords reserved exclusively for its bishops – the ‘Lords Spiritual’. They’ve been dealt a further blow on top of the Census, as the Labour Party recently revealed plans to reform the House of Lords in which scrapping the bishops’ bench would seem inevitable. In October we also urged the Commission on Political Power, which was established to examine reform of the political system, to recommend the abolition of the Lords Spiritual.

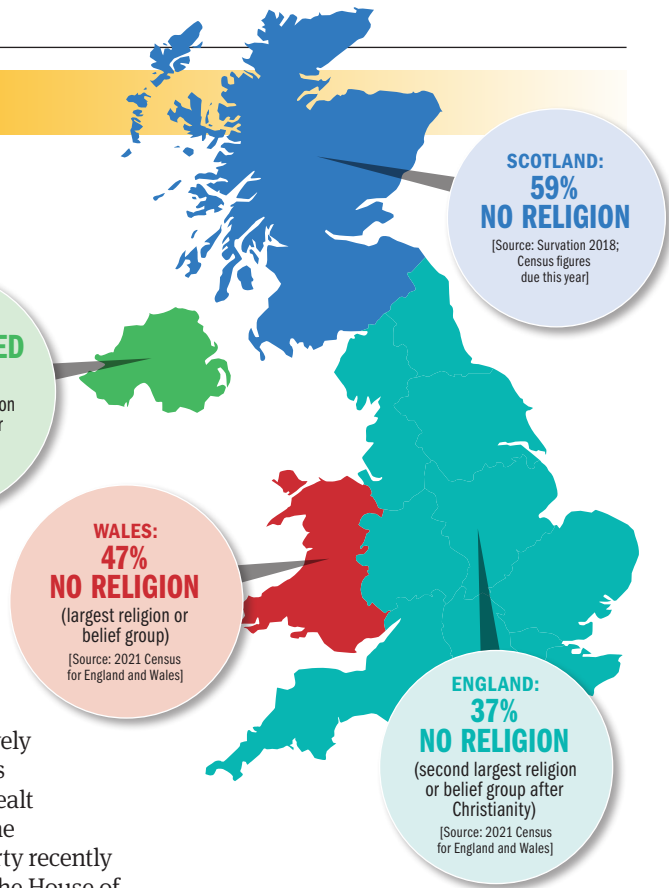
The new king

In his first address to the nation as monarch, King Charles said he would endeavour to serve all his subjects whatever their “background or beliefs” with loyalty, respect and love. But it is impossible for him to serve all his people equally while the monarchy retains its deep connection to the Church of England.

Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, Charles immediately became the Church’s Supreme Governor and



House of Lords, 2022 / Photography by Amabel Mueller



“Defender of the Faith” – that faith being the “one true protestant faith”.

While it may pay lip service to other religions, Charles’ coronation in Westminster Abbey this year will remain a deeply Anglican affair. He will be anointed with holy oil and consecrated by the archbishop of Canterbury.

In November we wrote to prime minister Rishi Sunak calling for a more secular and inclusive inauguration for our head of state. The UK is the only country in Europe which crowns its monarch in a religious ceremony. Our letter followed reports from the UCL Constitution Unit which said the coronation should “be less overwhelmingly Anglican” and “affirm that the state embraces all of its citizens equally”.

Britain’s diverse tapestry of religions and beliefs, where Christians no longer dominate and the nonreligious make up an increasingly large percentage, cannot be adequately served by a head of state who promotes one Christian denomination above all other beliefs.

■ We’re hosting an online discussion on February 15th on the future of church and state – see more on the back page.

It is time for the Church and the state to be separated

Stephen Evans called for a secular head of state in *The Independent*

What does the Census mean for education?



Jandrie Lombard, Shutterstock

“The collective worship is pretty much meaningless in schools that are not faith based. The census results show it is archaic.”

Nikki McGee, lead teacher on religious education at a trust which runs 18 schools in Norfolk, speaks out in *The Guardian*

Falling numbers of Christians, and rising numbers of those of no religion and other religions, should prompt an urgent review of Christian privilege in our education system.

One third of state schools in the UK are faith schools, the vast majority of which are Christian. Faith schools have exemptions from equality law which allow them to discriminate against children and families who do not share their faith. And Christian groups exert significant control over the religious education (RE) syllabus in all state schools.

But perhaps the most egregious example of Christian imposition on state schools is the legal requirement for all schools to hold daily acts of Christian collective worship. Following the Census results, teachers and education professionals across the UK spoke out in the media calling for an end to collective worship laws.

Abolition of mandatory collective worship can't come soon enough. In August, Poulner Infant School in Hampshire applied for an exemption to collective worship as two thirds of its parents do not identify as Christian, but it was denied. The ideal solution is to remove this archaic law for good.

JOIN OUR CAMPAIGN:

www.secularism.org.uk/end-compulsory-worship

“No plans” to remove religious appointees from Scottish councils despite protests

We wrote to Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville calling for an end to automatic places on education committees for religious appointees. Religious representatives have voting rights in most councils and are able to influence local education policy. Our letter followed protests from Shetland Isles councillors required to appoint a religious representative in August.

But Somerville replied that there are “no plans” to change the system. She said religious appointees are necessary due to the existence of denominational schools and the requirement to teach RE.

Faith schools and RE should not be used as justification to continue this anachronistic imposition on councils. Scotland should work towards ensuring its whole education system is inclusive, secular and free from religious control.

NSS tells government to keep its word on unregistered faith schools

The government has confirmed that its flagship Schools Bill, which would have introduced measures to tackle unregistered faith schools, will be scrapped.

We wrote to the government in September when we heard the bill may be shelved, urging them not to abandon plans to increase powers of inspection for education watchdog Ofsted and to introduce compulsory ‘children not in school’

registers. These measures would help stop children being denied a secular education in unregistered schools.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan has said the government would continue to prioritise the ‘children not in school’ register. We will keep lobbying the government to put in place effective policies to crack down on unregistered schools.

More independent faith school failures

We've continued to highlight how independent faith schools often prioritise religious ideology above the education and welfare of children. Ofsted reports published in November revealed:

- Shiras Devorah High School, a Jewish secondary school in London for girls, does not teach about human reproduction in science.
- Two Jewish schools in Hackney have been failing inspections for eight years'

running. Talmud Torah Chaim Meirim Wiznitz School does not allocate enough time to secular subjects, while pupils at Beis Trana Girls' School achieve very few formal qualifications. Neither teach relationships and sex education (RSE) adequately.

Islamic theocracies in the spotlight

The ongoing uprisings in Iran and the controversies surrounding the FIFA World Cup in Qatar have drawn the world's attention to the horrors of Islamism.

The latest wave of protests in Iran began in September after 22 year old Mahsa Amini was reportedly beaten to death by 'morality police' for 'improper' hijab.

Anti-regime protests have been gaining momentum since 2017, led largely by women. In Iran women are subject not only to misogynistic modesty codes, but also bans on activities including singing and dancing, discrimination in court, and restrictions on travelling abroad.

The subjugation of women in Iran is rooted in the Islamist ideology at

the heart of the regime. Recent polling found a majority of Iranians support a secular state and oppose mandatory hijab.

Like Iran, Qatar's state religion is Islam and sharia is the main source of legislation. And the picture is very similar to Iran: women and LGBT+ people face severe oppression and persecution, while brutal punishments are issued for 'crimes' including 'blasphemy'.

It was therefore both disappointing and nauseating to see FIFA officials actively discourage criticism of Qatar's regime out of 'respect for diversity'.

Those of us who enjoy the liberties of democracy have a duty to defend these principles and speak up for those crushed under theocratic tyranny.



In October Stephen Evans joined a demonstration in London against Iran's regime



Scottish councillors resist 'Islamophobia' definition

Following NSS advice, councillors in Aberdeenshire have voted not to adopt a definition of 'Islamophobia' that could undermine freedom to criticise Islam.

All councils have been put under pressure to adopt the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims' definition of 'Islamophobia'. The definition has been rejected by the UK government and widely criticised by human rights experts because it conflates religion with people and may conflict with equality law.

At a meeting of Aberdeenshire Council's Business Services

Committee, Stephen Evans warned the definition may be a counterproductive way of addressing anti-Muslim bigotry.

The committee instead voted in favour of a motion to "note the definition of Islamophobia", "condemn all discrimination against race or belief", and "agree to address any anti-Muslim bias or prejudice identified in Aberdeenshire".

We hope other councils take note of this approach, which strikes a balance between upholding free speech and protecting people from harm.

Opposing 'blasphemy' laws around the world

We briefed MPs ahead of a debate on blasphemy laws in Commonwealth nations in October. Our concerns included parliamentarians' tendency to refer to the 'misuse' of blasphemy laws, which implies the existence of a legitimate usage.

We were pleased that many MPs supported abandoning blasphemy laws, including Fabian Hamilton who asked the Minister for Development to review the government's position on the term 'misuse'.

Following the debate, we wrote to Minister of State Vicky Ford calling for rhetoric concerning the 'misuse' of blasphemy laws to be abandoned and for the repeal of blasphemy laws in Northern Ireland.

We also warned the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in September that a recent resolution to tackle intolerance based on religion or belief must not be hijacked by groups who want to install 'backdoor' blasphemy laws.

Aberdeenshire Council councillors vote not to adopt the definition of Islamophobia

Stephen was quoted in the local Scottish press following the vote

MPs lobby for more religion in community services, including healthcare

In September, the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on faith and society published a report, 'Keeping the Faith 2.0', which said faith groups will receive "increasingly significant" amounts of public money to run community services such as healthcare. The report

outlined how partnerships between local authorities and faith communities can be embedded as a "new normal" in Britain.

Increasingly aggressive moves to involve more faith groups in delivering publicly funded community services include the government's

£1 million 'faith new deal' grant. This grant, launched in 2021, was exclusively for religious groups to deliver public services. Groups without a religious ethos could not apply.

The 16 recipients of this fund were announced in July – and we discovered at least one of those groups may be engaging in unethical practices.

All Souls Serve the City in London was given £7,747 for its 'Tamar' project, which

aims to "restore hope" to people exploited in the sex industry, including trafficked women. But we found evidence on Tamar's website that its evangelical Christian volunteers use this opportunity to preach to their vulnerable clients, including giving them Bible lessons.

The case demonstrates the serious problems caused when the government offloads public services to faith groups without any safeguards in place.

"We are appalled that the government should have set aside funding specifically for religious groups to provide such sensitive services when many organisations, with years of expertise and experience in the Violence Against Women and Girls Sector, are facing funding crises."

Selma Taha, Executive Director of women's rights group Southall Black Sisters, responds to government funding of Tamar

JOIN OUR CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT SECULAR PUBLIC SERVICES:
www.secularism.org.uk/public-services

THE GOVERNMENT'S "NEW NORMAL" OF FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY SERVICES: A TIMELINE

Sep 2020: Conservative MP and evangelical Christian Danny Kruger publishes a report recommending the government "invite the country's faith leaders to make a grand offer of help" in community services.

Early 2021: APPG on faith and society remove the 'non-proselytising' clauses from their faith covenant, which was originally designed to maintain smooth relationships of mutual trust between local authorities and faith groups contracted to deliver community services.

Sep 2022: APPG on faith and society launch 'Keeping the Faith 2.0' report.

Dec 2020: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government launches a review into the government's engagement with faith organisations. NSS criticises the review as "designed to reach a conclusion which will please religious interest groups".

Sep 2021: Government announces new £1 million 'faith new deal' fund exclusively for faith groups to deliver community services. Recipients include an evangelical Christian group which appears to preach to trafficked women.

Preaching doctor must attend 'professional boundaries' training

For several years we've raised concerns about Dr Richard Scott – a Christian GP in Kent who evangelises during consultations, prompting multiple complaints from patients.

"...most people are desperate, they'll at least listen."

Dr Richard Scott explains why he introduces faith into consultations with people with depression or anxiety in an interview with BBC Radio 4, 2019

Dr Scott must now attend a 'professional boundaries course' as part of a settlement with NHS England.

He had previously refused to attend the additional training which NHS

England said was necessary for him to remain on the 'Performers List for England' – a register for health professionals offering primary care. A planned tribunal was called off following the last-minute settlement.

A 2012 General Medical Council investigation found Dr Scott had caused a patient distress by telling him he would suffer "for the rest of his life" if he did not "turn towards Jesus".

In a submission to the GMC's review of the personal beliefs guidance last autumn, we said evangelism that targets people who are ill or vulnerable is exploitative and patients should be protected from it.

Assisted dying: Parliamentary inquiry announced

We've welcomed the Health and Social Care Committee's decision to open a parliamentary inquiry into assisted dying. The existing law in England and Wales is cruel and unpopular: helping an individual to die is punishable by up to 14 years' imprisonment. We're keen to ensure that religious objections don't stand in the way of necessary reform. MPs will make their recommendations to government on the next steps in a report following the inquiry.

In addition to this inquiry, we responded to two consultations in Scotland last year voicing our support for reforming the law to allow the choice of assisted dying under certain circumstances.

Challenging religious misogyny in Scotland

In June Scottish National Party MSP Natalie Don launched a consultation for a Member's Bill which would pardon all those convicted under the Witchcraft Act 1563. Most of those accused of witchcraft were women. We responded in support of the Bill, and also highlighted ways in which religion still promotes misogyny in Scotland – including via the charity sector.

A prime example of this emerged in August, when a fundamentalist Christian group which promotes outrageously sexist views registered as charity.

We reported Moray Coast Baptist Church to Scotland's charity regulator OSCR for breaching charity guidelines through its misogynistic sermon. Unfortunately, OSCR has past form of allowing charities to promote hateful and extremist views as long as those views are "in accordance with" the religious beliefs of the charity.

US preacher probed after telling Brit followers women's 'primary function' is housework

Our exposure of Moray Coast Baptist Church's misogyny was widely reported in the media, including *The Mirror*

"This is the primary function of a woman: to be married, to have children, and to tend to household affairs – the cooking, the cleaning, the washing up"

"I wouldn't want my wife going around looking like something the cat dragged in... But I don't want her to look sensual, only when she's around me"

"Society would be a lot better if women would submit to their husbands and tend to their children and take care of their home. The world wouldn't be in the mess that it is in today if that were the case."

From a sermon by pastor Donald Clough of registered charity Moray Coast Baptist Church

JOIN OUR CAMPAIGN TO SAFEGUARD THE CHARITY SECTOR FROM RELIGIOUS ABUSES:
www.secularism.org.uk/charities

Judge's pro-religion statements spark impartiality concerns

In October we referred Judge Richard Marks KC to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office after he said a murderer's actions were "more" shocking because of her "religious devotion".

We said these remarks fell short of impartiality requirements set out in the Guide to Judicial Conduct, because Marks implied that religious people normally behave in a more moral way than non-religious people.

The Investigations Office dismissed our concerns. It said it was Judge Marks' discretion "whether or not to follow the guidance of the Equal Treatment Bench Book". It stated, without further explanation, that the judge's language was "not inappropriate".

The judiciary must be neutral in matters of religion. Unfortunately, this isn't the first time judges have made inappropriate comments about religion. In 2018 we raised concerns about Sir Charles Haddon-Cave telling Parsons Green bomber Ahmed Hassan that "Islam is a religion of peace".

Scale of unnecessary animal cruelty in religious slaughter exposed

In 2021 we encouraged our supporters to back proposals from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) for mandatory labelling for meat from animals slaughtered without stunning in accordance with religious rites. In September, Defra said nearly 97% of responses on this issue expressed support for compulsory labels.

The need for such labelling couldn't be more pressing. This year, Defra figures revealed over half of all cattle slaughtered without stunning for kosher meat was rejected as not meeting religious requirements but was "fit for wider consumption". This suggests the meat was sold on the general market unlabelled. Additionally, parts of animals slaughtered by kosher methods which are not themselves considered kosher are routinely sold on the non-Jewish market unlabelled.

We also responded to a Defra consultation on changes to public sector food and catering policy in England which intend to deliver

"positive animal welfare benefits", but do not include a prohibition on non-stun meat.

Instead, the proposed policy requires menus to "take account of" religious and cultural dietary needs of consumers. We warned the policy could create a duty for public sector organisations to actively supply halal and kosher meat from animals slaughtered without stunning, despite most of the public opposing these slaughter methods on animal welfare grounds.



Free event! The future of church and state: Perspectives on disestablishment

We're delighted to announce we're holding a free online discussion on the future of church and state this February.

Now Christians are a minority in England and Wales, the established church has never looked so out of place. But how can disestablishing the Church of England be best achieved?

Join us as we discuss the issue with the experts in this free online event. We will explore not only how cutting ties with the Church benefits the state, but also the rarely-heard arguments from those within the Church who support a secular state from a religious perspective. Speakers include:

Dr Jonathan Chaplin, specialist in Christian political thought and the Director of the Centre for Faith in Public Life.

Dr Katie Edwards, academic, author, cultural commentator, and broadcaster.

Dr Martyn Percy, academic, theologian and former Church of England priest.

The event will take place on Zoom, February 15th, 6-7pm. Find out more and book your place: www.secularism.org.uk/events



NSS events challenge religious threats to democracy

Due to train strikes our 2022 Bradlaugh Lecture had to be moved online at the last minute. It was a success nonetheless, with people tuning in from around the UK to hear veteran women's rights campaigner Pragna Patel urge feminists to "reclaim the secular histories" of past struggles. She spoke about her experiences defending author Salman Rushdie and said hope comes from "movements for self-determination led by ordinary women everywhere". These include the recent protests by women in Iran to "overthrow not just their hijabs but also the fundamentalist noose of oppression".

"Bradlaugh would have been proud of the Iranian women."

Pragna Patel



Taj Hargey, Mohammed Amin, Stephen Evans and Yasmin Rehman at our event in Birmingham

In September we co-hosted an event in Birmingham which explored how to challenge Islamist extremism to protect the UK's democracy. The event brought together Muslim campaigners and scholars to discuss the challenges and tensions between Islam and secularism, and how they might be overcome.

ENGAGEMENT

We held talks and outreach events throughout the autumn:

■ Keith Porteous Wood gave two speeches at a meeting of La Libre Pensée in Lyon, France, on justice for victims and survivors of child abuse in the Catholic Church.



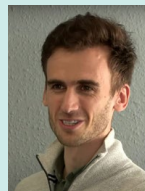
■ Stephen Evans gave talks on church-state separation at our affiliate humanist groups in Bournemouth and Brighton.

■ Head of campaigns Megan Manson introduced secularism to a scout troop in Whitstable.



■ Campaigns officer Jack Rivington spoke to South London Humanists on Wednesday about our campaign to end faith schools.

■ And campaigns officer Alejandro Sanchez presented the secularist case against non-therapeutic infant male circumcision at the charity 15 Square. His talk is available to watch on our YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/@NationalSecularSociety



@RichardDuncker

Please get in touch if you'd like us to give a talk at your group.

national secular society

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