

Historicist Interpretations of Subjectivity, Tradition and Norms in Feminist Theology

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A number of new directions are currently being undertaken in feminist theology in the United States.¹ A particularly interesting development has to do with a renewal of interest in theory on the part of feminist theologians. In this essay, I will first discuss theory in general and especially feminist theory and its relation to theology. Then I will explore three issues where the impact of theoretical choices can be clearly seen: female subjectivity, the nature and status of our inherited traditions for theology and the question of norms for deciding what theological positions should gain our loyalties.

In the United States there has been much debate about the value of theory in our postmodern period. General theories about the nature of the human or, in our case the female, or about what reality is really like or even the nature of history have all come under attack. Increasingly thinkers, including theologians, have turned away from the great systems and all encompassing theoretical claims of the modern age. Today theologians and other thinkers are wary of any attempt to speak of humanity, the universe, or

history. These efforts seem, for many, to entail a return to a now discredited universalism and to new forms of essentialism. Hence many thinkers have repudiated any attempt to articulate more general theories.

Feminist theologians have been keenly aware of the arguments about the problematic status of general claims. Indeed probably the greatest challenge to feminist theology has emerged out of the recognition that the underlying assumptions much of early feminist theology made about women's experience were not universal at all but represented the experiences and perspectives of a small elite of mostly educated white women. Feminist theology had claimed to give voice to women as a group, to set forth a depiction of women's experience that was broadly applicable across race, class, religious and national lines. And at first it appeared to many women that feminist theology and other feminist writings had gotten it right, that women's experience truly could be seen to have this common character. From the first there were certainly debates about why women shared so much with some thinkers arguing that it had to do with female biology and others suggesting that our common experience had emerged out of the universal historical experience of male dominance and oppression. Still, the appeal to women's experience was widely accepted. But soon this fundamental assumption of commonality began to be questioned as increasing numbers of women demanded to know whose experience was being talked about. In the United States

¹ Portions of this essay have appeared in «Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms» in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1997, and in «Between the One and the Many: A Response to Delwin Brown's Theory of Tradition», *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1997).

these challenges were raised most forcefully by women of color who did not recognize themselves in the depictions of much feminist theology and who asserted with great force that white feminists were very aware of their own subordinate position but failed to acknowledge their complicity in racism and other forms of oppression.

These criticisms of claims about the common or universal character of women's experience arose precisely during the period when theory in general was being attacked all across the academic disciplines. Theory, in contexts marked by postmodern orientations, looked more and more «totalizing;» it appeared to erase particularity and to espouse a false universalism. Moreover, it seemed overly abstract and distracting from concrete problems that required substantive proposals. Feminist thinkers often sounded an anti-theoretical note, characterizing theory as male and as a diversion from the real work of feminist reflection.

Recently, this has begun to change. Thinkers in many academic disciplines have begun to rethink the value of theoretical exploration and in particular feminists in many different disciplines have turned again to questions of what it means to be female, the meaning of embodiedness, our relation to our particular histories and many other basic questions. Feminist theologians, although somewhat late in joining these debates, are contributing to these conversations in greater numbers now and are seeking to add our voices to current reflections on these matters.

It is important to note that when feminist theoreticians, including theologians, refer to theory today we mean something quite different from the old days when theory meant the articulation of ahistorical claims about reality or humanity that were assumed to have universal validity. Instead theoretical reflection seeks to identify operative assumptions, those implicit and often unacknowledged presuppositions that shape our proposals but often are not critically analyzed. The return to theory is not a new quest for the universal or the always true. Instead it emerges from our recognition that all of our understandings of reality, humanness, history etc, even the most local and particular interpretations of these, are thoroughly conditioned and carry with

them assumptions and premises about the world that need to be examined.

There has developed as well a profound sense that our underlying assumptions and basic frameworks of interpretation are not innocent or neutral. They are value and interest laden and are held for a variety of purposes. Moreover, they are deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural and political realities from which they emerged, and continue to reflect and influence. As Rebecca S. Chopp has noted, «the importance of theory consists of its staging the problems and possibilities of politics, culture, and subjectivity.»² Our underlying assumptions have repercussions not only for how we view the world and our place in it but equally importantly for what we interpret to be proper action and forms of relation with other humans and the broader world. It matters, concretely, what we think female subjectivity consists in, how we think we should relate to our religious pasts, what standards we bring to bear on our decision making.

Challenges to Experience and Identity

It is now time to explore several central points of contention within feminist discussions today. In the United States, the most heated debates revolve around the notions of women's experience and women's identities. These ideas have been the most central ones for feminist thought and they are now among the most contested ideas. It was women's experience that functioned as the founding claim upon which other feminist assertions were built. Both the oppression of women and the critical feminist consciousness that named and resisted this oppression were understood to have a significantly similar character for women in very different times and places. Now when cultures, religious traditions or social movements are stable and homogenous then basic claims such as these often go unexamined,

² Rebecca S. Chopp, «Theorizing Feminist Theology» in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 215.

even unnamed. But in times of crisis or transition when earlier held presuppositions are challenged then the need for critical examination becomes acute. We are in such a moment now as previous notions of universal women's experience have been undermined.

These challenges have come from a number of perspectives but I want to highlight two. The first, as suggested earlier, has been from women, especially women of color who have argued that under the guise of representing all women feminist theology and theory have failed to describe the concrete realities of most women's lives. But even more than this, the argument has been that white feminists have masked the differences that not only mark women as distinct from one another but that *divide* women in relation to such things as class or race. When commonality and essential sameness are the guiding assumptions and gender is the primary analytical tool then the conflicts between women disappear. Women of color have been adamant that the result is the reinscription of racist and often classist categories. In contrast, womanists, *mujeristas*, and Asian feminists, among others, have argued for more localized interpretations of experience that trace the historically particular situations of women and resist all attempts to homogenize that experience into an abstract category of women.

A second perspective to challenge the assumptions of commonality of women's experience and the notion of some sort of essential female nature has been labeled variously postmodernism or poststructuralism. Across wide ranges of feminist theory it is now argued that there is neither an unchanging core that characterizes individual humans — an essential self — nor some transpersonal nature that is constitutive of all humans or in our case all women. Rejected here is any form of universal human experience shared by all women across temporal and historical boundaries. Thus there has been a move away from humans or females in general toward the particular, the concrete, the local and the specific.

Many very beneficial things have resulted from these theoretical moves. Feminist thought has been immeasurably enriched and altered by the turn to the particular. Yet despite this appre-

ciation a number of feminist thinkers are beginning to raise concerns about the results of the turn from claims about female experience and nature. In particular, the ramifications of following the poststructuralist path seem problematic. Often the choice before us has been that we either have the autonomous, essentialist self of western modernity (whether male or female) or we have the dispersal of the self or what is being called the disappearance of the subject. The latter allows us to see the many cultural and social factors that condition women's experience but often at the price of undermining any significant sense of human and especially women's agency. In the attempt to move away from an essentialized female self and a universalized women's experience many thinkers have moved toward a non-self, lacking agential capacities. Thus while both these challenges have attacked the essentialism of much feminist thought they have, I think, done so for different ends. The first made by so many women of color has argued against a false universalism and essentialism in order to multiply women's agencies while the postmodern attack seems to undercut precisely these moves. Many persons from historically marginalized groups have commented that it is precisely at the historical moment that these groups have claimed an agential self that such selves are now declared illusions by those who still retain most of the power. From this perspective postmodernism and poststructuralism do not look like strategies of liberation but just new ways of maintaining privilege.

It is not, however, just the loss of the self so characteristic of some forms of postmodernism that is problematic here. The turn to particularity has also raised questions. If women have no shared experience, if there is no general female nature on what basis can women join in solidarity with one another? If many worry about the apparent postmodern loss of the self, for others the turn to self-enclosed particularity has conjured up visions of women isolated in localized communities with few ways to communicate or act beyond the borders of their immediate group.

I would like to suggest that there are emerging alternatives to both the postmodern disappearing self and to what one feminist writer has referred to as the western fantasy of the auto-

nomous self.³ Moreover the alternative I am going to propose is also responsive to those women who have argued that their experience has been eclipsed within many of the theoretical frameworks proposed today but does so without resulting in notions of an isolated particularity. I want to contend for what I have come to call the idea of the historicized subject or what feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner is currently calling the notion of embodied agency.⁴

A Historicized Self

This understanding of human selfhood stresses that human existence emerges out of and only takes place within the thick matrices of both natural and cultural life. Humans are thoroughly biological beings who are part of and depend upon a natural order without which we could not exist. Human existence like all else, is contingent upon the broader cosmic web and both contributes and is subject to its variable conditions.

Moreover, humans are also cultural beings enmeshed in cultural and social worlds that provide us with direction and orientation in life, conditioning practices and determining the possibilities that are open for human becoming. The possible ways humans enact our humanity, the roles we can take, the forms of activities open to us and our interaction with both our fellow humans and broader world are all made possible through the linguistic, symbolic and cultural forms human communities create.⁵ To speak of embedded subjectivity or the historicized self is to acknowledge that we are fundamentally situated within and conditioned by our historical locales.

To claim that humans are conditioned, traditioned beings is not to deny, as so much post-modernism tends to today, that we are also creatures capable of agency, change and self-tran-

scendence. Human beings and the environments we create, both material and symbolic, are certainly conditioned and shaped by what has gone before. We are, however, simultaneously beings who continually recreate and transform our worlds and ourselves in novel ways. Human beings, as historicized selves, are also self-directing and thereby responsible for the content and direction of human development. And importantly, being located, conditioned historical creatures and being self-directing and relatively free creatures are not in opposition to one another but mutually support each other. It is as we creatively interact with our environments, both cultural and natural, that human agency is made possible; it is in and through our embeddedness that human subjectivity emerges, shaped by but also shaping our worlds.

When feminists utilize this view of humans as historicized subjects we can, I think, avoid the traps of ahistorical autonomy and false universalism while maintaining a sense of contextualized agency. In this perspective we are neither autonomous ahistorical superagents nor are we merely constituted by our environments or histories. Instead women, as historical beings, are also constructive historical agents, creating new identities and visions out of the disparate inheritances from our pasts and from the multiple, if not infinite, options of our varied locations.

I think this idea of embedded subjectivity or the historicized self helps to hold together the twin senses that we are both conditioned beings and creative agents but we need to explore several related topics in order to see how all this develops. In particular I now want to turn to the question of how we should understand the nature of the contexts in which we are located or put slightly differently I want to ask about the nature of traditions, including religious traditions.

«Tradition» Re-visited

The question of how we are traditioned, how we live in and out of traditions of interpretation, values and practice is important for all thinkers who espouse more historicized notions of subjectivity. But it is of extreme importance to women and especially women related to reli-

³ Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Beacon Press, Boston 1996.

⁴ *Ibid.*, esp. Ch. 1.

⁵ Cf. Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1993.

gious traditions such as Christianity because so many elements within these traditions have contributed to women's oppression. Now women have argued for a wide variety of stances toward their inherited religious traditions. Large numbers of women have opted to leave the historical traditions of Christianity and Judaism, arguing that these historical traditions are too infected with male power and privilege to be transformed. Many women have, therefore, simply turned from religious communities all together. Others have developed Goddess-centered spiritualities and women centered communities.

But if many women have left these traditions far more have stayed and have continued to ask how they should understand their inherited past and how that past should influence the present. The debates have been especially tension filled around that part of our tradition known as the Bible that continues to shape so many women's lives today. Here, too, there have been multiple, conflicting, answers. Early in feminist debates there was articulated what I term the search for the pristine Bible. Many feminists, especially conservative and evangelical women, insisted that the Bible, as a whole, was not oppressive or patriarchal and asserted that when it was properly understood it was liberating for women. When it had been harmful to women, it was because it had been misinterpreted, especially by males.

Another, perhaps even more widespread orientation toward the Bible has been what is termed a «canon within the canon» approach. In this perspective women acknowledge the male character of much of the Bible but insist that the essential biblical message was and is liberating to women. For these women, much of the Bible is oppressive and has to be rejected in light of the true vision at the heart of the Bible. Hence parts of the biblical message are used to critique the rest.

Recently, a different approach has gained adherents. Increasingly, feminist theologians and biblical scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have stated that the biblical material is predominately the product of males, that it is often anti-female and has had a long history of being utilized to oppress women.⁶ As such it must be thoroughly criticized. But the Bible and the rest

of our religious inheritance are not monolithic; they also contain intimations of more inclusive and just visions and where that is true, such visions should be seen as resources for the creation of a new human society. Thus, for many Jewish and Christian feminists the Bible has been demythologized and is no longer understood as the repository of unquestioned divine revelation. Still, as a compilation of human interpretations of God and of human life, the Bible can be seen as a set of resources for persons within the biblical traditions. The difference between this approach and the canon-within-the-canon orientation is that all of the Bible is now brought under critical scrutiny as fallibly human.

I have come to identify most with the last position stated. Still, I have felt that this view lacks an adequate understanding of the nature of traditions, including religious traditions to bolster its conclusions. Recently I have been trying to articulate what I am calling a historicist interpretation of tradition to match the notion of the historicized subject talked about earlier. In doing so I have found the work of a number of cultural theorists helpful and have turned especially to the work on the nature of tradition articulated by my colleague in the United States, Delwin Brown. First I will state several central elements in his argument, then say where I am different and suggest how these discussions help us to understand subjectivity and how we should relate to the past.

A Historicist Interpretation of Tradition

Delwin Brown, in his book *Boundaries of our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, seeks to explore the question of human historicity, of how we as humans are shaped by and in turn shape our histories.⁷ He carries out this investigation by developing a theory of tradi-

⁶ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Beacon Press, Boston 1992.

⁷ Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*. State University of New York Press, Albany 1994.

tion and especially of human life within the matrix of living religious traditions. Brown's theory takes shape as he elaborates the ideas of culture and tradition in conversation with the work of Hans Georg Gadamer and especially with contemporary cultural theorists such as James Clifford, Marshall Sahlins, Roy Wagner and Raymond Williams. With these thinkers, Brown defines culture not as an arena of stable symbols and meanings but literally as the «struggle to create, maintain, and recreate individual and collective identities.»⁸ It is, Brown tells us, «the negotiating of identity amid chaos and order.»⁹

Tradition is a way of getting a handle on this cultural negotiation and of understanding that a culture in any given historical moment always emerges out of historical trajectories that fund it. Tradition is that «dynamic stream of forces» within which we live and within which we can also die. Traditions are historically constructed and passed on complexes of meaning and being within which communal and individual identities are formed. Moreover, the specific identities — as women and men, Christians or Buddhists, Americans or Swedes — that take shape are always characterized by both continuity with those historical lineages and departure from them. For Brown such continuity and creative novelty are not oppositional dynamics but are both at work in the formation of historical identity.

Brown develops his argument through a nuanced and complex set of steps. I will only highlight a few claims that directly relate to the concerns of this essay. Brown asserts that while traditions have identities and contain specific contents they are always collections of multiple, diverse and conflictual meanings, values and practices. Traditions, including religious traditions such as Christianity, are never singular or univocal and can, therefore, never be reduced to one core or authoritative meaning. Moreover, traditions are always being contested both in terms of their internal content and in relation to their boundaries. Traditions are, thus, never finished matters but are always undergoing

negotiation. It is finally through negotiation with and about our inherited traditions that we humans become the specific individuals we are.

Together these elements suggest a picture of traditions that is quite different than many found in American theology today but that resonates well with the ideas of contextualized agency developed above. Traditions can never be reduced to a small body of texts or to what is currently a favorite phrase in the United States — a singular, unchanging depth grammar that we need to be faithful to in each new historical moment. Nor do traditions have some core or essence that shapes all their manifestations. Instead traditions are fluid, porous, exceedingly diverse complexes of meaning and value that have accumulated throughout history and continue to undergo change.

What does this mean for our understanding of human subjectivity and what implications does it suggest for how we should relate to our traditions? First, it is clear that ignoring the past is impossible and not very advisable. Humans are shaped by what has gone before us, both by our ancient and more recent history. The present is funded by the past. To use language, to have feelings, to engage in meaningful action all require the resources wrought by our forebears.

But if the past constitutes the present, if human life is always receptive in nature it is never merely responsive nor only repetitious of the past. This is the case both because the past is not settled but also because it is full of diverse and contending values and meanings. For those who tell women to abide by the dictates of their religious traditions the answer here is that there is no unitary center or self-defining core that women or men could faithfully replicate even if they wished to do so. The Bible and the rest of the Christian tradition are full of multiple possibilities that could never be appropriated simultaneously. And these traditions are always being contested as varying groups claim one value or another, one vision of reality over against other ones as appropriate for today.

But it is not only that the past is the realm of contested and unsettled meanings and values. It is also that we humans always engage our inheritances from particular locales for particular purposes. The particularity of our interpretive loca-

⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

tions means that we are always highlighting some elements over others, calling on certain values and criticizing others; that is, not only is the tradition shaping us but we are shaping it as we encounter our varied inheritances. All appropriation of a tradition entails, therefore, its creative transformation into something new that then becomes a part of that inheritance. Just as there is no creation of a tradition out of nothing so there is no simple repetition or perfect translation of a tradition's resources into a new idiom that somehow retains their essential meanings.

All this suggests that the historical character of women's and men's lives deeply ties us to our historical traditions but those traditions have no essentialist content to which we can or should conform. There is certainly no free-floating agency but neither is there a narrowly conditioned self who is only trapped within an oppressive past. This view both acknowledges the ambiguity of history but also gives us license to struggle with it, neither denying its importance nor uncritically submitting to its dictates. It allows us to stop pretending the Christian tradition is nonpatriarchal, or that it has a liberating essence that is the true Christian core or that it is only male created and to be rejected. Instead, a position such as this pushes us to confront our histories for what they are — multiple, complex, ambiguous, full of tragic and even evil elements but containing contending possibilities that can contribute to our lives and identities.

Fragmented Identities and Constructed Solidarities

I find this interpretation of tradition very helpful. But I also have certain problems with it that lead me to suggest modifications. I think Brown is too optimistic about the character of our inherited traditions. Because he is convinced that traditions have enormous internal plurality and that creativity is always a part of any appropriation of the past, Brown assumes that traditions, including religious ones, exhibit remarkable adaptability. I think Brown's position lends support to too easy a leap from the plurality of resources to the adequacy of such resources for today. That is to

say, I understand fully why many women opt to leave their inherited traditions.

Brown also does not, I think, take into enough account that all traditions are arenas characterized by unequal distribution of power and with struggle over the resources of the traditions. Though he speaks of conflicting values he does not always appear to understand what is at stake in the battle for a tradition's inheritance. Certainly any feminist perspective would need to highlight this reality.

And finally Brown tends to think humans reside within clear, if ever changing perimeters, living out of and within individual traditions. I want to suggest that humans are rather shaped by plural traditions, by many conversations that commingle in ways that give individuals and communities distinctive identities. James Clifford also argues for the recognition of our multi-traditioned status, referring to contemporary life as «existence among fragments.»¹⁰ Clifford states that «twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols and languages.»¹¹ Contemporary identity does not take shape within one tradition however plural and porous but at the juncture of many. This is to say that not only do women sometimes opt out of one tradition for another but that often plural traditions contribute to our identities. More chaos may be the result but the creative possibilities are exploded in ways beyond that imaginable in Brown's scheme.

The description of female identity or subjectivity that emerges here looks something like this: Women are historical beings who exist within and develop our identity within internally plural traditions and at the intersections of multiple traditions. As such our communal and individual identities are often composite, hybrid, sometimes fragmented, whose unity is frequently temporary, wrought out of multiple resources and

¹⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography Literature and Art*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1988, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

constraints. This means that we must say good-bye to any easy assumptions about a common women's experience or a common female nature. Women's experiences and identities are always particular, sometimes sharing things in concert with other women and other times having more linkages with men. Gender is, in this view, not the only or the always most prominent way human beings are identified and the category of gender is one very important but not the only analytical tool we need to trace the complexities of women's lives. Moreover when we do trace the particular contours of women's lives we must be prepared to interpret them not within the confines of singular traditions such as Christianity or Swedish culture but at the juncture of multiple histories and influences.

Earlier I stated that the turn to particularity has focussed feminist attention on the concrete realities and differences that shape real women's lives. But I also stated that there has arisen a profound concern that all we are now left with is individual women, isolated in self-enclosed communities with no capacity for solidarity across the borders of our local situation. And indeed the picture I have been sketching seems to go in precisely that direction: the historical particularity of women's lives overrides any abstract commonality. Several factors mitigate this conclusion. Nothing in this view suggests that our locations are impermeable or that we are condemned to narrow group loyalties. In fact, as women acknowledge that our lives are put together from multiple sources we are able to testify to the open borders of human experience. Women weave our identities out of varied, sometimes contradictory, and always plural influences. And that we do so indicates that as individuals and as women in groups we are also able to reach across divisions of race, class, or national, ethnic or religious boundaries. But this also tells us that our solidarities with other women are made not given; they are forged out of our efforts to create new personal and individual identities. And they depend not upon some shared common essence or universal women's experience but upon risk taking, courage and imagination that critically examine the intricate relations that shape our connections with one another.

Negotiating Visions

These ideas lead to new considerations about how women should argue for our claims, theological and otherwise. In much feminist theology the argument was that our claims should be tested against the critical feminist consciousness that had emerged from the recognition of women's common experience and the struggle. For some feminist theologians who espoused more strongly the liberating nature of Christianity an additional move was made that said feminist claims were legitimate because they cohered with the authentic tradition. The force of this essay is that there is neither a shared feminist consciousness or experience nor is there an essential Christian tradition that authorizes our positions. Our experiences and inheritances are diverse. And while we may trace the resonance between our current claims and past ones, doing so tells us about our lineage but not about the validity of our claims. To say something is biblical does not answer whether it is valid for today.

Judgments about what values we should hold today, what practices we should enact, what forms of community we should support are, I want to argue, influenced by the past but they are finally our responsibility in every contemporary moment and context. It is we who need to articulate the norms and standards for our time, recognizing their debt to the past but accepting responsibility for what we espouse in the present. And when we do so we need to also accept that our visions are just like all human visions, fallible, contingent, morally ambiguous and caught up with the realities of power and interest that characterize all things human.

Admitting both the contingency and the multiplicity of our visions does not lead, however, to a sense that all visions or proposals are equal. Feminists, from our varied locations, need to make the case for our hopes and dreams to other women and to the larger social context. The question is on what grounds can we and should we do so. I am suggesting that we forego both appeals to a supposed common experience and to an essential tradition as grounds for validating our competing proposals. In their place we should ask what difference our claims make to

real lives in differing circumstances. If women and men are not humans in general but always concretely, then we need to ask ourselves what might result from living one way rather than another, out of one set of values rather than another and one imaginative vision of what life might be like rather than another. What difference do these questions make to our bodies, to our communities, to the communities and persons affected by our more specific locale, to the larger web of human life and nature? Recognizing that our claims are always limited, we must interrogate ourselves and others concerning who is left out, what new and often covert

privileging is taking place. Realizing that our proposals foster and nourish certain goods while inhibiting other, often compelling goods we need to answer why we have chosen these values, these goods and not others that have been left aside. From the position developed herein, reality is not easily divided into good and evil, women and men, Christians and others. It is far messier and always ambiguous. And it demands not self-righteous assertions that we have the truth and others do not but more chastened calls for self-critical and open-ended conversations with many others about ways to improve our human condition.



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