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Pluralism, and Secularization:
The Relationship Between Religious Pluralism
and Religious Participation in Sweden

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Abstract

In recent decades, the effects of religious pluralism on religious participation has been a much debated topic among sociologists of religion. During most of the 20th century, the traditional view among sociologists was that pluralism undermines religion because competition between religious organizations was assumed to impair the credibility of religion as such. In the 1980s, however, this view was challenged by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, and since then, the debate about the effects of religious pluralism has been lively. A central point of the discussion has been the relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation in Europe and whether or not Europe should be described as secularized. In this article, some points in the debates about the relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation and about the religious situation in Europe are discussed from a theoretical perspective and illustrated by empirical data from Sweden.

In recent decades, the effects of religious pluralism has been a much debated topic among sociologists of religion. In this debate, an important point of controversy has been the relationship between religious pluralism and secularization. During most of the 20th century, the traditional view was that pluralism undermines religion because competition between religious organizations destroys the credibility of religion as such. Since the plausibility of religion was assumed to require that a single religion is generally accepted and taken for granted, it was taken for granted that religious pluralism would result in a loss of confidence in all religions and thereby lead to secularization (Stark and Finke 2000).

Since the 1980s, however, this view has been widely criticized, most notably by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke but also by other scholars. One reason for this criticism is that the traditional view does not stand up against empirical evidence, such as when the religious situation in the United States is compared with that in Europe. As Stark and Finke put it (2000: 222): “Nevertheless, this view of the corrosive effects of pluralism was and is utterly inconsistent with the American experience. If competition erodes the plausibility of religion, why is the most pluralistic nation on earth among the most religious?” Hence they proposed an alternative view, according to which the lack of religious pluralism is seen as a decisive factor in explaining the very low levels of religious participation in many of the European countries.

For this reason, a central part of the controversy over the relationship between religious pluralism and secularization has concerned the religious situation in Europe: Should Europe be described as secularized or not? Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000: 62) maintain that “although the American case continues to offer a devastating challenge to the secularization doctrine, the secularization thesis fails in Europe too. First, *there has been no demonstrable long-term decline in European religious participation. . . . religious participation was very low in northern and western Europe many centuries before the onset of modernization*” (italics in the original). Stark and Finke (2000: 62) continue: “The second reason to reject claims about the secularization of Europe is that current data do not reveal the arrival of an age of ‘scientific atheism.’ *Levels of subjective religiousness remain high*—to classify a nation as highly secularized when the large majority of its inhabitants believe in God is absurd” (italics in the original).

However, Stark and Finke do see the lack of religious pluralism as a very important factor in explaining the religious situation in Europe. Even if subjective religiousness remains high, the levels of traditional church participation are undoubtedly very low in many European countries, and Finke and Stark (1992: 19) see the lack of religious pluralism as an important explanatory factor for this: “There is ample evidence that in societies with putative monopoly faiths, religious indifference, not piety, is rife. Our contrary perceptions are nostalgic error.”

At least to some extent, this debate seems to depend on different definitions of crucial concepts. Scholars differ in their use of such concepts as religion, religiousness, and secularization. Important questions about religious developments in Europe in recent decades can be answered in different ways, depending on how these concepts are defined (Hamberg 2008).

Secularization can be defined in various ways but is often understood as a historical development that involves both a decline in the social power of religious institutions and a decline in personal piety (Stark and Finke 2000). In the case of Europe, religious institutions have undoubtedly lost power, but whether or not there has been a decline in personal piety is a much debated question. Hence the debate over European secularization has been focused on the development of individual religion.

If secularization is defined as a decline in religiousness, where religiousness is narrowly understood as adherence to traditional Christian beliefs and practices, many European countries have undoubtedly become more secularized in recent decades. With such a definition of religiousness, recent developments may be seen as evidence for the assertion that the secularization process is well underway in Europe.

With a wider definition of religion or religiousness, however, the development in Europe can be interpreted differently. An example of this is given by Stark and Iannaccone (1994: 232), who define religion as “any system of beliefs and practices concerned with ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural.” With the use of this definition, not only church-oriented forms of religion, but also much of what might be denoted unchurched spirituality falls within the boundaries of religion, and it would be misleading to draw a sharp distinction between religion and unchurched spirituality. Hence it is not surprising that Stark and Iannaccone do not find evidence for the secularization of Europe; indeed, they suggest that “the concept of secularization be dropped for lack of cases to which it could apply” (Stark and Iannaccone 1994: 230) and conclude that the “the evolutionary future of religion is not extinction. The empirical evidence is that the vitality of religious firms can fluctuate greatly over time, rising as well as falling, although subjective religiousness seems to vary far less” (Stark and Iannaccone 1994: 249).

Thus if we use a narrow definition of religion, in which the term *religion* is understood as equivalent to traditional church-oriented religion, we may conclude that religion has declined in many European countries while unchurched spirituality has increased. If we use a wider definition of religion, however, we may instead conclude that there is no evidence of a long-term decline of religion, even though the forms of religiousness have changed over time and adherence to traditional Christian beliefs and practices has been partly replaced by the phenomena that are often referred to as unchurched spirituality. The question of religious

change in Europe can thus be answered in different ways, depending on the definitions that are used (Hamberg 2008).

*RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, DIVERSITY, AND MARKET COMPETITION:
DEFINITIONS AND MEASUREMENTS*

Part of the debate about the effects of religious market structures seems to be based on different understandings of crucial concepts, such as pluralism and market competition. In addition, the question of how to measure pluralism or market competition plays an important role in the debate. Hence some comments on definitions and measurements are necessary.

With regard to religious pluralism, we need to make a distinction between several types of pluralism or diversity. The first type, which has usually been focused on in studies of religious market structures, concerns the organizational level, that is, pluralism among churches, denominations, and other religious organizations. I will refer to this as *religious pluralism* or *pluralism at the organizational level*. It should be noted that analyses of the impact of this type of pluralism often combine two dimensions: the number of churches and denominations in the religious market and the distribution of market share among these. The degree of pluralism at the organizational level is one of the factors that determine the available options of religious services and belief systems. I will refer to this as *diversity of religious supply*.

Another type of religious pluralism or diversity concerns the individual level and refers to the degree of pluralism or diversity in people's religious outlooks. This type of pluralism or diversity concerns the degree of heterogeneity in people's religious views and preferences. I will refer to this as *diversity of religious demand*. As I see it, analyses of the effects of religious pluralism need to take both kinds of diversity into account.

Religious pluralism at the organizational level can be measured in various ways, and two components can be assumed to be relevant, that is, the number of religious firms and the relative distribution of market share among them. The more religious firms there are and the more evenly distributed market share is (i.e., more firms having a significant market share), the higher is the degree of religious pluralism. Various concentration indices can be used to measure the degree of pluralism, such as the number of competing firms or a measure that is sensitive to the distribution of market share among the competing firms.

It is important to note, however, that market concentration indices, while taking the number of firms and/or their respective market share into account, do not measure the degree to which the products (the religious supply) actually differ from each other. To take an example, assume that we have two different regions; that in each region, only three churches exist; and that in each region, each of the

three churches has one third of the market. In such a case, an often used type of concentration index, the Herfindahl index, would be identical for the two regions. Assume, however, that in region A, the religious firms consist of a Presbyterian church, a Congregational church, and a Methodist church, while in region B, the religious firms consist of a Pentecostal church, a Congregational church, and a Catholic church. From the point of view of differences in beliefs and in styles of worship, consumers would have a choice between a wider range of options in region B than in region A. Hence the extent to which consumers experience that they have a real choice between different religious goods can be only partially captured by measures of market concentration. These can be used to measure the degree of pluralism or competition at the organizational level but are less well adapted to measure diversity of supply.

The concept of competition with regard to religious markets also needs a comment. As I understand it, the characterization of a religious market as competitive need not mean that the firms in the market consciously compete with each other for market share. They may do so, but a pluralistic religious market may have the characteristics of a competitive market, even if the “producers” do not see themselves as competing for “customers.” The degree to which a market is competitive is related to the degree to which one firm (or a combination of firms) can dominate the market. Even if the producers in a competitive market do not consciously compete with each other, inefficient producers will lose market share or be forced out of the market while efficient producers will gain market share. Hence the market structure will create strong incentives for firms to produce efficiently the kind of goods that consumers demand. Thus in my use, the term *competitive* refers to the market structure rather than to the psychological characteristics of the actors in such a market. Even if the producers in a pluralistic religious market do not see themselves as competing with other producers, the market may still function as a competitive market.

SUPPLY, DEMAND, AND RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

A number of studies have suggested that high levels of religious pluralism are associated with high levels of religious participation (see, for example, Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1989, 1992; Hamberg and Pettersson 1994, 1997, 2002; Iannaccone 1991, 1992; Pettersson and Hamberg 1997; Stark and Finke, 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and McCann 1993). However, the existence of a positive relationship between religious pluralism and participation has also been questioned, on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Bruce 1999; Olson 1999; Voas, Crockett, and Olson 2002).

Different theoretical explanations for a positive link between religious pluralism and religious participation have been offered (see, for example, Stark and Finke 2000). Some relate the impact of religious pluralism to competition between religious firms. The more competition religious firms face, the more likely they will be to adapt their products to the demands of the consumers in order to maintain or increase their market share. Such market adaptation can be expected to result in a rich and diversified supply of religious goods and thus to increase the likelihood that consumers can find religious goods that are well adapted to their individual tastes. Hence, religious consumption will, other things being equal, tend to be higher, the more pluralistic and competitive a religious market is. Associated with this line of thought is the assumption that religious participation will be lower the more regulated the religious sector is, since regulation limits competition and hence has a negative impact on the quality and diversity of religious supply.

For these reasons, some scholars have focused on religious pluralism and its impact on competition between religious firms, while others have seen the degree of regulation as the crucial factor (e.g., Chaves and Cann 1992). Regulation of religious markets limits competition and diversity, while religious pluralism normally benefits the diversity and quality of supply. Hence regulation of religious markets will have a negative impact on the quality and diversity of religious supply, while religious pluralism and competition will benefit the quality and diversity of religious supply and lead to high levels of religious participation (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994; Stark and Finke 2000).

It is worth noting, however, that the relationship between religious participation on one hand and religious pluralism, regulation, and competition on the other hand may vary according to circumstances. For instance, religious participation may sometimes be high in a noncompetitive religious market. An obvious case occurs when regulations enable a state-supported monopoly church to enforce participation. Historically, this has not been unusual in the European context. For instance, church attendance in Sweden was high during the period when the Church of Sweden enjoyed a full monopoly in the religious market. This can be attributed not only to conformity with the prevailing social norms, but also to state regulations, which enforced a certain level of attendance (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994). From a supply-side perspective, the religious situation in contemporary Sweden can be seen as the result of a very long period of religious monopoly or near-monopoly when almost the whole population belonged to the Church of Sweden. Indeed, until 1951, Swedes were not allowed to leave the Church of Sweden unless they became members of another state-approved religious organization. The results of this long-term near-monopoly are as we might expect: With the exception of certain rites such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, the religion that is supplied by the dominant church appears to be in very low demand,

even though a majority of the population still are members of the Church of Sweden. Very few of the members have more than occasional contacts with the church, and attendance at worship services is now so low that the number of parishes is rapidly declining as many of the parish churches are taken out of use and parishes are merged into very large territorial entities.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND IN RELIGIOUS MARKETS

In discussing the effects of religious pluralism, it is necessary to distinguish between the effects on supply and the effects on demand. Obviously, a change in the degree of pluralism or market competition will have different impacts on producers and consumers. Therefore we need to extend the discussion of religious market structures and explore the relationship between religious supply and participation while taking into account the relationship between supply and demand in religious markets (Hamberg and Pettersson 2002).

In a perfect religious market, one would expect demand and supply to be in equilibrium. The supply of religious goods that religious organizations provide should match the demand from potential customers. In a pluralistic religious market, this may also occur, at least in the long run. However, in a religious market that is characterized by, for example, state regulations, a potential demand for religion may exist that is not met by the existing religious organizations because the market structure might not provide enough incentives or opportunities for other religious organizations to establish themselves. In such a market, although demand for the existing religious supply may be low, there may exist a latent demand for other types of religion that are not supplied by the existing organizations. Thus what appears to be a low level of demand for religion may instead be a low level of demand for *the available forms* of religion. Although the level of latent demand may be very difficult to estimate, an attempt to understand changes in religious market structures needs to take both demand and supply factors into account. Moreover, we may assume both that the effect of changes in religious supply will vary depending on the religious demand structure in a society and that the religious demand structure in a society will (at least in the long run) be affected by the religious supply structure.

Religious Supply

We may have reason to consider which aspects of supply are most likely to be affected by religious market competition. For a religious organization, there are limits to the extent to which a change is possible without endangering the identity and legitimacy of the organization. In addition, the nature of changes that are likely to occur needs to be specified. For instance, we would expect central parts of

the religious doctrine to be relatively resistant to change, while the liturgical form and style of worship services and the type of other religious activities that are offered are probably more likely to be changed if a church perceives a shift in demand. For example, a church may choose to increase the share of the types of worship services that are found to attract the most participants. Thus the changes in supply that are most likely to occur to meet a perceived change in demand are of the kind that are in accordance with central religious traditions and hence do not endanger the legitimacy of the church.

A special situation may occur, however, if a church has a very heterogeneous membership, as is the case in the Scandinavian Lutheran churches, to which the majority of the population of the Scandinavian countries belongs. For instance, the Church of Sweden in 2015 has approximately 65 percent of the Swedish population as members. However, only a small minority of the members adhere to traditional Christian beliefs, while the majority of the members hold other types of religious beliefs—such as belief in a nonpersonal transcendent power, spirit, or life force—or express no religious beliefs at all. Hence the Church of Sweden contains members (as well as clergy and other employees) who belong to what Stark and Finke (2000) denote as different niches in the religious market, and a large majority of the members belong to the liberal or ultraliberal niches. As a result, the Church of Sweden now depends for its economic survival on members who do not share its central beliefs, as the members who still adhere to traditional Christian beliefs and practices constitute a minority that is far too small to serve as an adequate economic basis for the church. In such a situation, a church may choose to modify its religious doctrines so as not to offend the members who belong to the ultraliberal or liberal niches and whose religious beliefs differ from those that have traditionally been held by the church. Many theologians and scholars in Sweden (including myself) would say that such a development is now taking place in the Church of Sweden. Although the church does not officially renounce the texts (dating from the 16th century) in which the Evangelical-Lutheran confession is established, many of the clergy and bishops, including the Archbishop, now express beliefs that are contrary to the confession to which the church officially adheres.

Normally, however, we would expect religious pluralism to affect mainly such things as the form and style of worship services and the type of other religious activities that are offered rather than doctrinal beliefs that are crucial for the church's theological identity. Hence the argument, based on sociology of knowledge theory, that religious pluralism will undermine religious plausibility structures and thus cause a decline in religious participation needs to be qualified. This argument often seems to be based on the assumption that the main effect of pluralism is to create a multitude of competing doctrines, that is, a diversity in beliefs (see Blau, Land, and Redding 1992). This assumption may be warranted in

the case in which different religions compete. In a situation in which religious pluralism is created mainly by the existence of a number of churches or denominations within Christianity, however, differences in doctrinal beliefs may be less important and less evident (at least to those who are not theological experts) than are differences in, for example, the forms for religious worship or the strictness in enforcing certain standards of behavior. To the extent to which this is the case, the possible negative impact on plausibility structures caused by differences in theological doctrines will probably be more than offset by the advantages to consumers of having a wide choice between different forms for worship or between more or less strict denominations.

It is also worth noting that the diversity of religious supply depends not only on the degree of diversity between religious organizations, but also on the degree of diversity within organizations. Religious organizations may allow more or less freedom of internal variation with regard to beliefs, forms for religious worship, or degree of strictness. Hence the diversity of supply in a religious market would be only partially measured by taking into account the number of religious firms, their market shares, and differences between firms with regard to the goods they supply. To obtain a more accurate measure of the total diversity of supply in a religious market, one would also need to measure the internal variation of supply within these firms. Needless to say, it would probably be impossible to construct such a measure of the diversity of religious supply. In this instance, as in many other instances in social scientific studies, the available measures have to serve as proxy variables for the theoretically optimal measures that are not available.

Religious Demand

As was mentioned above, the hypothesis that an increase in pluralism at the organizational level and an associated increase in the diversity of religious supply will lead to an increase in participation builds on the assumption that there exists a latent demand that is not being met by the existing supply. Hence an increased diversity of religious supply that gives consumers more choices may enable this potential demand to be realized. However, the effects of changes in the diversity of supply may depend on the situation. An increase in religious pluralism may well have both negative and positive effects on participation, and the net result of such negative and positive effects will probably differ according to how pluralistic a society is. In a society that has previously been very homogenous with regard to religious beliefs and practices, the introduction of a new and different religious group will perhaps undermine plausibility structures for the dominant religion and thus undermine its status as taken for granted. In such cases, overall levels of religious participation may conceivably decline. However, once religious pluralism has been introduced, it seems likely that a further increase in pluralism

will no longer affect plausibility structures to the same extent, and we can expect the effects of increasing pluralism to have a positive effect on participation. However, in a further development toward an even more pluralistic market, the effects of increasing pluralism need not be the same at all stages. When a certain level of religious diversity has been reached, a further increase in diversity may have little effect on participation. In other words, one can expect floor effects and ceiling effects to occur (Hamberg and Pettersson 1997).

Hence we need to take into account at which stage, in a development from a religious monopoly situation to religious pluralism, a society is at a given time. Initially, an increase in pluralism may possibly lead to a decline in religious participation. At a later stage, however, a further increase in pluralism may not affect plausibility structures, at least not to the same extent. Instead, the positive effects of more choices for the individual may outweigh the possibly negative effects on plausibility structures. At an even later stage, a further increase in pluralism might not add much to the choices that are already available to consumers; in that case, the addition of new religious firms may have little effect on participation. Thus the net effect that an increase in religious pluralism can be expected to have on religious participation will probably depend on the level of pluralism in a society.

Moreover, even if an initial effect of emerging religious pluralism is that participation declines, the explanation need not be that pluralism has undermined plausibility structures. An alternative explanation could be that in the previous monopoly situation, legislation and/or social norms enforcing church attendance kept participation at an artificially high level (see Hamberg and Pettersson 1994). In such a case, the emergence of religious pluralism may well lead to a decline in participation to a level at which religious consumption better corresponds to real demand.

CHANGES AND IMBALANCES IN THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS SUPPLY AND DEMAND

It seems reasonable to assume that in a given society, an imbalance may exist between the diversity of religious demand and the diversity of religious supply. As a result of historical developments, a society may have a low level of religious diversity at the supply level and a high level of diversity at the demand level or vice versa.

That such imbalances between supply and demand are conceivable might be inferred from the fact that the organizational structure of the religious market in most countries has a deep and persistent nation-specific historical rooting (Martin 1978), making it more or less resistant to rapid changes, while individual belief systems and value structures seem to be more sensitive to economic and social developments, such as changes in education, communications, and welfare systems

(Inglehart 1997). Undoubtedly, “people’s religious choices display a great deal of inertia, due not only to effects of indoctrination and habit formation, but also to the nature of religious commodities” (Iannaccone 1991: 163). However, it can be argued that while people’s religious preferences and choices change slowly, the structure of the religious market probably tends to change even more slowly. Hence imbalances between supply and demand in religious markets may exist as a result of such time lags.

Another factor to be taken into account is that religious socialization will be inefficient in societies with low levels of religious participation. In such societies, subjective religiousness will typically be idiosyncratic and heterodox, though far more widespread than organized religious participation (Stark and Finke 2000). We would expect such societies to be characterized by great diversity of potential or latent religious demand, related to the diversity of beliefs. In other words, where religious participation is low, the latent religious demand should tend to be heterogeneous. Accordingly, the introduction of a more diversified religious supply may conceivably have more impact on religious participation in a country where a large share of the population has only occasional contacts with the churches than it would in a country where adherence is high. Hence an increase in the diversity of religious supply may have more impact in societies where religious participation is low than it would in societies where participation is high.

THE RELIGIOUS MARKET IN SWEDEN

Because Sweden is often described as one of the most secularized countries in the Western world, a brief discussion of Sweden may serve as an illustration of the effects of religious pluralism or lack of pluralism. The religious situation in contemporary Sweden can be seen as the result of a long period of religious monopoly or near-monopoly, and the effects are what we would expect according to supply-side theory. Although a very high percentage of the population are still formal members of the church, few Swedes have more than occasional contact with the church, and the attitude toward the church on the part of most Swedes can probably be best described as indifference (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005). Thus the situation in Sweden supports the conclusion of Finke and Stark (1992: 19) that “in societies with putative monopoly faiths, religious indifference, not piety, is rife.”

However, it can be shown that even in Sweden, an increase in religious supply can lead to an increase in religious participation. In empirical studies of the religious market in Sweden, my late colleague Thorleif Pettersson and I studied the effects of diversity of supply, both with regard to organizational pluralism and with regard to diversity of supply within the Church of Sweden (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994, 1997; Pettersson and Hamberg 1997). We used both cross-sectional data and longitudinal data. In these studies, the unique Swedish church

statistics enabled us to study local religious markets at the municipal/parish level, that is, at the level at which theoretically we can expect the effects of religious pluralism and diversity of religious supply to be most evident. The unique data that are available for Sweden also made it possible for us to measure religious participation in a way that avoids the statistical problem of dependence between the variables used to measure religious pluralism and religious participation that Voas, Crockett, and Olson (2002) pointed to as a problem in some studies of the effects of religious pluralism.

Although the overall degree of religious pluralism in Sweden is very low, our studies indicate that regional differences in religious pluralism, although small, do have an impact on participation. In two studies based on the Swedish church statistics, we tested the hypothesis of a positive relationship between the degree of religious pluralism and the level of religious participation (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994; Pettersson and Hamberg 1997). The results were consistent with the assumption that pluralism has an impact on participation: In the municipalities where the degree of religious pluralism was higher than average, religious participation also was higher. These studies indicate that the different degrees of pluralism in Swedish local religious economies may partially explain the regional differences in participation. However, the results do not indicate that the degree of pluralism should be regarded as the only factor influencing the level of religious participation. Rather, the degree of pluralism seems to be one among several factors that influence participation.

The effects of religious supply on religious participation have also been empirically studied from another perspective. In a study of changes in the supply of worship services and in church attendance within the Church of Sweden, we were able to show that attendance at worship services had developed better in parishes that had considerably increased the diversity and/or availability of worship services than in parishes that had not (Hamberg and Pettersson 1997). Both increased availability of worship services and increased diversity in types of services were positively related to increased attendance. Thus a rich supply of worship services in a parish seemed to lead to increased attendance.

Hence the very low levels of church attendance that generally prevail in Sweden need not be due to a general lack of demand for worship services; it may also be due to a lack of demand for the types of worship services that are usually provided. As a long-term effect of the very low degree of religious pluralism in Sweden, there may be a latent demand that is not being met by the existing supply in the religious market.

Thus the Swedish example supports the assumption that we would make on the basis of supply-side theory: The trend toward declining participation is not necessarily irreversible. Changes in religious supply can under some circumstances reverse a previously declining trend and lead to an increase in participation or,

in other words, to a revitalization of religion. Although we must expect the existence of time lags, changes in religious supply will over time affect religious participation in different ways, sometimes leading to declining participation and sometimes to increasing participation.

Moreover, although traditional church-oriented religion has declined drastically in Sweden during the past century, especially since the 1950s, there has been no obvious decline in religion as such. Rather, traditional forms of religion have, at least partly, been replaced by various forms of individual religion or unchurched spirituality (Hamberg 2003; Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005). Thus Sweden can be seen as a good example of the long-term effects of a very low degree of religious pluralism: Traditional church-oriented religion has declined, but we have no reason to assume that religion defined as “any system of beliefs and practices concerned with ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural” (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994: 232) has declined.

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