
FEMINIST THEOLOGY AS A
SPECIAL PHILOSOPHY OF
RELIGIONS AND THEOLOGY
(?) OF RELIGIONS

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Introduction

Every cultural and historical period is marked by burning questions that are a challenge for the people of that time and, looking from a theological point of view, we understand such questions as a sign of the time itself. In this postmodern, global world, which is striving more and more for parity and equality in terms of gender, race, religion, or political affiliation, it seems that the question of women's equality in secular and religious life is becoming ever more ubiquitous and unavoidable. The belief that men are superior to women, which is characteristic of all great world religions, including Christianity, is slowly being upended in the search for equality. Global feminism, in the sense of emancipation that humanizes the world is, for a post-modern person, no longer a question but the path on which we tread. The question of a woman, of her role and the role of the Church in society, is still inexhaustible and is increasingly the subject of various psychological, sociological, social, and other scientific studies and debates. All of society is faced with a new view of women, and also of men. The world is in the middle of an important place of transformation, or a new valuation and formation of gender identity.

At this point institutionalised religion plays an important role, serving as a meaning-producing system that is (jointly) responsible for society's (non)ethical behaviour and vice-versa. Culture and religion are not just realms of passive influence but also meaningful systems for producing meaning. They give the notions, the beliefs that become unnoticed, and the non-rectified patterns by which people live. Negative

gender stereotypes and prejudices are accordingly formed in addition to positive ones in terms of culture, and we absorb them uncritically. An important role here is played by those religions that, according to M. Franzmann, are the main key in individual socio-political structures to opening the door to harmful gender stereotypes and prejudices, and consecutively to a patriarchal mentality.¹ Feminist theologian E. Sorge, for instance, wonders if there has ever been a religion favourable to women.² Religion has in fact played and continues to play a key role in the oppression of women as well as in their struggle for freedom. In this context the question of “her story” and women’s voices within different religions are of utmost importance.

Female voices within various religions

Feminist theology has become a worldwide and pan-religious movement, emerging as a response to women’s experience of discrimination and patriarchal dominance, which regulated and defined their religious and secular lives. Just as individual women’s experiences are different, and consequently women’s efforts within Christianity, the religious experiences within other world religions are also different. But we can still say that what they all have in common is discrimination and the feeling of patriarchal violence that they have had to – perhaps still have to – endure. Although the notion of discrimination and patriarchy can be understood differently in individual cultural-religious spheres, the desire and need to “talk about the female experience” and awakening of women’s voices are universal. In this sense it could be said that feminist theology and religious feminism have together become intercultural and interreligious phenomena. They connect all women, appealing to them to strive for their liberation from the oppression of religious patriarchal domination and violence. This can be compared to struggles against slavery, racial discrimination, or any other kind of genocide. Women’s liberation movements are formed differently in different

¹ Majella Franzmann, *Women and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 60.

² Elga Sorge, *Religion und Frau. Weibliche Spiritualität im Christentum* (Stuttgart: Koehammer 1988), 22.

religions. In any event feminist theology is a pluralist and diversified phenomenon, rooted in women's religious experience, which is full of hopes and unfulfilled dreams and which strives for the liberation and equal evaluation of the female principle of action, as well as for ethic feminisation and harmonisation of the world.

The possibility of *feminist theology as a philosophy of religion* was noted by Pamela Sue Anderson, who saw feminist theology as a new form of philosophy of religions.³ *Feminist theology as a theology of religions* is a relatively new expression, which in the opinion of Rita Gross denotes the awareness that, in the background of religious plurality and diversity, there exists a key common to all religions. In the case of feminist theology it is thus about the common key of how women have experienced patriarchal subordination and discrimination of women by all religions. Gross appeals to all feminist theologians to try to develop the right approach for women's participation in interreligious dialogue to truly come alive.⁴ In this context the term "theology of religions" is acceptable because it indicates the question of the positioning and the negative stereotyping of women within individual religious systems by the dominant patriarchal agenda that is encompassed in the term "theology". In a different context the universalization of the concept of *theology of religions* would be misleading and discriminatory. Religions, precisely in terms of conceptualizing the transcendental, show great internal heterogeneity and diversity: for example, Buddhism and Samkja, the traditional Hindu philosophical schools, are considered to be atheistic rather than theistic, wherefore it is impossible to speak of theology in the narrow sense of the word, which refers to some theos that puts it in the framework of transcendence. This plurality and diversity of individual religious contents, which are the building blocks of individual religious systems, is a great wealth and at the same time a great challenge for postmodern, religiously plural culture.

³ Pamela Sue Anderson, "Feminist Theology as Philosophy of Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

⁴ Rita Gross, "Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 61.

Feminist theology therefore critically opposes all forms of oppression, inequality and, discrimination (sexual, racial, class, ethnic, religious, etc.). Just like rejecting the distribution of power along androcentrism, it also rejects the superiority of a particular religion at the expense of another/others. It advocates the recognition of women's humanity and the recognition of the equality of all religions. Rita Gross in this respect rejects the exclusivist and inclusive approach of the theology of religions, on the basis of a critical argument that they both repeat and promote the superiority of Christianity over other religions, and urges feminist theologians to rise beyond discriminatory models and practices of exclusivism and inclusiveness, and to take on a pluralistic model. In her view the pluralistic model makes it possible to gain a more effective visibility of the common denominators of different traditions.⁵

Faced with a cultural and religious plurality, feminist theology is trying to develop a suitable key, a methodology for understanding the (O)ther, and to strive for solidarity and interreligious tolerance and respect in light of interreligious dialogue. In the process it tries to find a critical category of estimation and treatment of diversity within feminist theory and theology: gender, racial, cultural, and religious, etc. Ursula King also points out the importance and necessity of developing a critical approach and methodology that would enable feminist theology to truly face religious pluralism.⁶

The specifics of a post-socialist religious sphere: religious or feminist?

In this section we would like to raise the question of the appropriateness or inadequacy of the established term *feminist theology*, which, especially in post-socialist countries, has a negative rather than a positive connotation. Similarly, Zilka Spahić-Šiljak concludes: "Even today, the majority of women and men in the Balkans, including theologi-

⁵ Gross, "Feminist Theology", 87–89.

⁶ Ursula King, "Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions," in *Pluralism and the Religions: the Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed. John D'Arcy May (London, Cassell 1998), 40.

ans, do not know what feminist theology is and if it is indeed possible to combine feminism with theology”.⁷ Expressions such as feminism, chauvinism, etc. are a priori marked negatively. In the case of feminism we first think of the most radical form, which rejects all that is masculine. The word *feminism* is obviously charged with opposing meanings, weighted with feelings that encourage comments, definitions, and explanations; it has many sub-tones and it is strongly negatively stereotyped. During the long years of various, contradictory, even completely mutually exclusive types of feminism, the word feminism has acquired a lot of weight. Some meanings have prevailed and pushed others away. In relation to feminist theology the reaction is similar both for women and men. When hearing the expression, some people think of certain feminist “commandos” in the field of theology, who are destroying a “sacred area”. Others understand the phenomenon of feminist theology as a form of heresy: “This lack of understanding is, in large part, a hangover from the days of socialism when ideology and political order marginalized and suppressed religion and considered feminism as alien. Consequently, women, particularly women believers, would not dare reveal these two identities in public. Being a feminist was not acceptable, but being a religious feminist was inconceivable, and is still today”.⁸ The negative dimension of the term feminism spills over everything that is related to this term. Feminist theology is therefore predominantly negatively understood and labelled. Many accordingly try to use the milder and friendlier expression of *female spirituality*, which is not the most adequate term. What is female is not feminist *de natura*. Feminism namely sees everything that is female through the prism of a woman’s captivity in the patriarchal clutches of society and puts the whole context under question.

The prejudice towards feminism has led to its general acceptance as a way to crush the society and destroy “family values”. If I quote the Christian fundamentalist, Pat Roberts: “For the sake of feminism,

⁷ Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, “Do It and Name It: Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, 2, (2013), 176.

⁸ Spahić-Šiljak, “Do It and Name It: Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” 176.

women abandon their husbands, kill their children, deal with magic, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”⁹

We will hope to overcome this dualistic feminist alternative of “either being religious or a feminist” with a conceptualization that would both include and exceed the understanding of religion either as a home or as eviction. It is therefore crucial for feminists to critically examine religion as one of the oppressive discourses, but also as a potential source of power and vitality in women’s lives.

Feminist theology and religious feminism

Since (Abrahamic) religion has a major impact on the lives of women and, *inter alia*, it strongly co-shapes European culture and society, it is of utmost importance to re-examine the emerging forms of religion and the interpretation of the Bible, or the Koran, since it was the latter that co-created the traditional cultural role of women. Interpreting certain sacred texts in the light of patriarchal frameworks that corresponded to the ethics of the time served to create and promote the negative images of women and femininity. For example, the traditional Abrahamic worldview attributed women distinct, specific, and immutable social roles both in the private sphere of the home and in the public and cultural spheres. At home women are required to be submissive and/or subordinate to their husbands, and in broader society they must to be submissive and/or subordinate to men. Such susceptibility is based on the view that a woman is the property of a man. Male ownership is justified by the story from Genesis 3 as a consequence and punishment for women having brought sin to the world. These fundamental patriarchal assumptions or, even better, kyriarchal (*i.e.* a master, a father, a husband, the power of the male elite) assumptions about the subordinate status of women as second-class citizens are recorded in the Bible and recreated in legal and political culture. Women are forced to be submissive and lenient towards male violence.

⁹ Pat Roberts, “The Top 10: Facebook ‘vomit’ button for gays and other Pat Robertson quotes,” accessed October 22, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/09/us/pat-robertson-facebook-remark/index.html>.

Out of all world religions Christianity has developed one of the most rigorous views blaming women for the origin of evil. In accordance with the Augustinian tradition that shaped Western Christianity both men and women were created with the same soul, except that woman was created as a being that was subordinated to a man in the original order of creation. The woman then rebelled against this subjugation in the Garden of Eden, which resulted in the expulsion of mankind from paradise and the arrival of evil in the world. If she wants to be redeemed, a woman must submit herself to male authority to the point of coercion and abuse. Although women of spiritual virtue can be equivalent to men in paradise, this salvation transformation requires them to be subjected to strict subordination on earth.

Christianity also assumed the Greek dualist ontological hierarchy of the spiritual over the material, of the spirit over the body, and connected the body with physical passions and sin. By their nature women are viewed as being more closely connected with the body and more inclined towards bodily passions. According to Augustine belief female “natural” subordination is associated with this hierarchy of spirit over the body, where all male represents the spirit, and the female is the body.

Judaism also knows the story of the creation of a woman from Adam's rib, her primacy of disobedience to God, and the expulsion from paradise. Since Judaism does not have a doctrine of ruin, this story does not have the same theological consequences as in Christianity. The Koran contains only the story of the simultaneous creation of a man and a woman, but not the story of Adam's rebellion and the accusation of a woman for sin; but this story appears in Islam later, through subsequent comments under the influence of Christianity. Islam does not know the idea of ruin. Both Judaism and Islam see men and women as created for different roles, men for public services and family management, and women for household tasks; but this is not related to the ontological hierarchy of the spirit above the body as in traditional Christianity.¹⁰ Such religious ideas and discourses are embedded in socio-political situations and defend or destroy certain societal trends and efforts. As Gregory

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 71–77.

Baum nicely put it, opinion is inevitably determined and shaped by its historical position.¹¹

As pointed out by the feminist philosopher Caroline Ramazanoglu, millions of women see the meaning of their life in religion. Religion therefore remains a predominant factor in the personal identity and the cultural position of millions of women around the world. Religion is one of the most important and most direct factors that enable a woman to know who she is and gives her life meaning. By renouncing a reform of the established “traditionally” legitimate negative stereotypical images of the female element in religious matters, we would renounce the reform of a very important part of society.¹²

The whole of society is confronted with a new view of woman and, hence, man. The world stands at an important point of transformation or a new evaluation and development of gender identities. Identity is not something stable; it changes with time and space. What can religion offer us during this time of rapid change and transformation? How can it help us improve the quality and ethics of mutual relations and gender understanding and, consequently, raise the quality of life?

This question and the issue will be presented in light of efforts how not to establish a relationship from the two integrities of a man and a woman, i.e. two diverse but equal totalities, from a constructive difference into the more valuable, i.e. the male and the inferior, which at least in the past used to be female.

A Christian feminist theology emerged in response to the patriarchal androcentrism of Christianity, a critical theology of liberation where a new subject, the woman, “gets to have the word”. Feminist theologians try primarily to question and review historical memory critically and to recognize and raise women’s value in it. This need is so much stronger because deep in our collective memory there is still a rooted prejudice about women’s powerlessness and inferiority. The reconstruction of the past within the scope of the movement for women’s liberation thus tries to recapture “her-story”, which, in the opinion of feminist theologians,

¹¹ Gregory. M. Baum, “Remarks of a Theologian in Dialogue with Sociology,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Horace Barnes (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 11.

¹² Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminism and the Contradictions of Opression* (London: Routledge, 1989), 151–152.

is never told in the particularly male “his-story”.¹³ Such a reconstruction is of paramount importance in relation to the issue of gender equality within individual religions. Until the emergence of Christian feminist theology there was no serious questioning of the negative explanations of the texts of Genesis and other biblical passages relating to women. This is why negative interpretations have dominated Christian tradition for almost two thousand years. With the development of feminist theology more and more women saw that the message of the Bible was quite patriarchally coloured. There is not much trace of the female element in the Bible and, if there is, it is only a fleeting reflection of women as an object that is understood and represented through the eyes of men. Feminist theology and feminist studies of religion developed on the basis of participation in the feminist movement, which seeks to change the relationship of superiority and susceptibility. Within them the explicit link between feminist criticism and social change has been present from the outset. Feminist theology and feminist studies of religion have become a vibrant area of research that has transformed from analysing and criticising male texts to the reconstruction of women’s legacy in the prevalent religious traditions and beyond them, and has, at the same time, focused on the constructive transformation of patriarchal traditions and the creation of new values. Women’s theological voice and religious authority developed as a result of a critical reflection on the experience, the arousal of awareness, and the wording of feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation, committed to feminist struggles toward changing and transforming Abrahamic religions. Since emancipatory fights in religion are an essential part of social and cultural discourses, feminists from religious circles of radical democratic rights are founded on spiritual foundations. They thus contribute to common radical democratic feminist struggles for equal membership and the full power of decision-making in society and religion.

Because of the marginal position that women have in individual religions and their hierarchical systems women’s voices have been rather muted. Women have become accustomed to being passive members

¹³ Catharina Halkes, “*Primo bilancio della teologia femminista*,” in *La sfida del femminismo alla teologia*, eds. Mary Hunt and Rosino Gibellini (Brescia, 1980), 163–164.

of the communion they belonged to. The stories in which women participated were told by men and women's fate was tailored by men. Women's life testimony became the confession of men, not of themselves. As a result, in all major religions around the world, various feminist movements have called upon women to put themselves in the role of an active subject and speak about their own religious experiences themselves. We talk about various forms of religious feminisms (Islamic feminism, Jewish feminism, Christian feminism, pagan religious feminism, the Goddess movement, etc.).

A discussion of Islamic religious feminism must make mention of Amina Wadud, a world-renowned professor of Islamic studies who is the mother of five children and has long stood in the front battle lines of the so-called "*sexual jihad*", the fight for women's rights in the global Islamic community. Her life experiences as a religious Muslim woman are deeply associated with Islamic reforms: she seeks to link intellectual discourse with strategic activism and holistic spirituality. Amina Wadud became internationally known as a woman who led Muslim Friday prayer in New York, provoking media debates, as conservative Muslims around the world condemned her of blasphemy.

Media all over the world discussed the admissibility of a woman leading men in prayer, and for many Wahhabists defaming this author has become even more popular: the influential Islamic activist Shaykh Jusuf al-Qaradawi devoted a part of his program on Al Jazeera to attacking the author and denounced her act as non-Islamic and therefore heretical. On the other hand Gamal al-Banna, Hasan al-Banne's younger brother and the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, wrote a shorter book in which he argues that the author's deeds are supported by Islamic sources and are thus completely orthodox.

Amina Wadud devoted her life to the fight against sexual prejudices and in this segment she critically calls into question various patriarchal institutions within Islam. Although Amina Wadud leads the so-called "*sexual jihad*" against the persistent patriarchy, she does not question whether or not something is wrong with Islam, why Islam is a problem, or why Islam is a kind of deficient religion. She considers Islam to be the very religion that strengthens her struggle for justice. Islam forces her to be uncompromising in its honesty and morals. Amina Wadud

does so in the context of a critical analysis of Islamic theology and the reconceptualization of the relationship between a Muslim and her god. She is building the so-called *tawhid paradigm*, which does not consist only of pure monotheism, but also of sincere and complete submission to God. According to her paradigm a person who submits to God accepts the vow of morality and autonomous action. The divine vow that God offers to people results in a steadfast commitment to justice, integrity, truthfulness, and resistance to all forms of supremacy and oppression that deprive people of their autonomy in order to be accountable before God for their own moral judgment and actions.

Similar to Amina Wadud, also Azizah Z. Al-Hibri notes that in Islam your biological sex is not decisive; however, your religion is.¹⁴ Most Muslims would agree with the statement that only on the basis of open obedience to God can the individual achieve real freedom. Often the difficulty of this transfer is ignored. Wadud's insights and painful fighting discourses in order to submit herself to God are inspiring. She warns of many forms and "disguises" of hypocrisy, wickedness, despotism, and oppression that a man meets on his path toward submitting to God. From a theological point of view the worst traps are when people take on the roles of God and use the name of God in the process of suppressing autonomy and the will of other human beings. Wadud, as well as her colleagues dealing with Christian feminist theology, describes the ways in which divine authority, text, or law is transformed into instruments used by those who have the power and desire to suppress others. Wadud's intention was, inter alia, to illustrate how Islam can be transformed on the basis of its own egalitarian tendencies, principles, articulations, and implications. The concepts of Islam and the concepts of justice were always relative to actual historical and cultural situations. You have to live Islam, says Wadud: "Neither their "Islam" nor my "Islam" has the ultimate privilege. We are all part of the complex whole, in constant movement and manifestation through the history of the multiple, human-constructed "Islam".¹⁵ Her opinion is that patriarchal control over what it means to be human is depriving women of their

¹⁴ Marjana Harcet, *Alahove neveste* (Ljubljana: Monitor ISH, 2007), 21.

¹⁵ Amina Wadud, *Inside the gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 50.

God-given power. Therefore, in her attempt to transform historical practices of sexual asymmetry, the author relied on the Koran, which remains her main source of inspiration. She confirmed the idea that sexual justice is essential for the divine order of the universe. "Being a woman means being human. I cannot be more or less than a woman," says Amina Wadud, "this is my humanity".¹⁶

In order to be able to surrender meaningfully to God, says Wadud, Muslims must critically examine their texts, laws, habits, and thoughts. A critical attitude towards divine texts or laws is an essential component of the Muslim vow to God, and it is also a decisive part of the effort to surrender meaningfully. It is necessary to achieve autonomy over oneself, since an individual cannot completely surrender what they do not possess.¹⁷

Wadud notes that the understanding of the primary sources of Islam depends on the interpretation of an individual, since it is neither fixed nor static, and adds that the interpretation of religious texts has so far been the privilege of men. She adds that the prevalent male structure (deliberately) misinterprets sacred texts with the aim of excluding women in Muslim countries.¹⁸

The most important feature of the modern struggle of Muslim women for rights is their rejection of the claim that they cannot be as free and equal to men as good Muslim women. They deny this. On the contrary they insist that a woman becomes a true Muslim only when she has achieved freedom and equality as an individual citizen.¹⁹

Similarly, the Pakistani feminist Farida Shaheed has argued that Muslim feminists, if they want to be effective, must act within the Islamic religious system of beliefs. If feminist teachers, lawyers, or activists want to effectively advocate a legal, economic, or any other type of reform,

¹⁶ Wadud, "Inside the gender Jihad," 30.

¹⁷ Anja Zalta, "Amina Wadud in borba za enakopravnost spolov," in *Ženske in religija*, eds. Nadja Furlan and Anja Zalta (Ljubljana: Nova Revija, 2007), 289–290.

¹⁸ Wadud, "Inside the gender Jihad," 22.

¹⁹ See also: Mahnaz Afkhami, G. H. Nemiroff, and H. Vazir, *Safe and Secure. Eliminating Violence against Women and Girls in Muslim Societies* (Baltimore: SIGI 1998), 7. See also M. Cooke, "Multiple Critique. Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson & Kwok Pui-Lan (New York: Routledge 2001), 142–160.

they cannot and should not persuade female believers to choose between feminism and their own religious convictions.²⁰

All religious belief systems and all institutional practices increasingly subject to intensified feminist reviews.

Conclusion

Despite all that is written above, many men would oppose the claim that women in the world's major religions are perceived as second-class creatures in contemporary times. The commonly used terms "equal but different", and "equivalent but complementary" are thinly disguised real-life inequalities. All religions, which are a reflection of diversity, underline in their fundamental teaching the equivalence and equality of both sexes. The findings of feminist theology or various religious feminisms remind us of this. Christian feminist theology and Islamic feminism thus also draw attention to the fundamental purpose of Christian and Muslim law, which is to defend the social justice and equality of every individual, thereby expressing the equivalence of all before God. The personal relationship of an individual with God is the most important thing for the Muslim, and therefore every man or woman should have the same right to practice Muslim religious rituals, for all of Allah's worshipers are equal before Him. The same applies in Christianity.

At this point I agree with Rosemary Radford Ruether, who says that religious or theological feminism is a key alternative to the false duality between anti-feminist religious fundamentalism and liberal secularization.²¹ All of the world's religions, especially in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have seen important movements of religious feminism developed, seeking to confirm the full equality of women as equal partners to men, not by general refusal of tradition, but rather by embracing deeper ethical and spiritual values. According to Jewish

²⁰ F. Shaheed, "The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy: Legal Systems, Islam and Wo/men," *South Asia Bulletin* 6, 1 (1986): 12–13. - **preveriti strani, na speltu so navedene 38-44.**

²¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ženske v svetovnih religijah: diskriminacija, osvoboditev in reakcija," in *Ženske in religija*, eds. Nadja Furlan and Anja Zalta (Ljubljana: Nova Revija, 2007), 21.

feminist Ellen Umansky Jewish feminism confirms the deeper values of Judaism, namely male and female equality, dignity, and value.²² Christian feminists try to find the confirmation of Jesus' essentially liberating message in the New Testament²³. Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud and Riffat Hassan are trying to consolidate Mohammed's egalitarian message in their social environment. They try to show that messages such as the fact that a woman was created secondly, and only from Adam's rib, do not have a place within the teachings of the Koran.

Religious feminists in various world religions therefore tend to restore ethical and spiritual traditions and do not reject religion on account of secular materialism. This very renewal, on the basis of the same sacred value of all people, women as much as men, is the only answer to the false duality of anti-female religious fundamentalism on the one hand and secular materialism, which is not interested in the values of the common good, on the other.

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²² Ellen Umansky, "Feminism in Judaism," in *Feminism and World Religions*, eds. Arvind Sharma and Katharine K. Young (New York: Suny Press, 1998), 180.

²³ For example Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (NY: Crossroads, 1983).

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