

Towards a narrative theological orientation in a global village from a postmodern urban South African perspective

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ABSTRACT

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This article was motivated by two of the major challenges which I believe congregations are facing within the context of ministry, namely postmodernity and globalization. After seeking a fuller description of these two challenges I sought a theological orientation within such a context (postmodern global village) as well as an ecclesiological praxis that could be transformative and redemptive within such a context. I believe to have found in the narrative orientation an appropriate way for doing theology in the postmodern context.

The climax of this journey (story) is in the fusion of horizons between the theory-laden questions of descriptive theology and the historical texts of the Christian faith within the narrative orientation. I discovered that truly transformative and redemptive praxis is only possible within language communities (narrative communities). These narrative communities cannot exist in isolation, but are continuously confronted and relativised by the stories of other communities in the global village and therefore these language communities need to be open to the fragmentation and pluralism of the global village, otherwise they will not be able to respond to the reality of the globalization and postmodernity.

The narrative communities needed a story (sacred story) that did not deny the reality of fragmentation and pluralism, but could incorporate this reality into its story. I found this story in the story of the cross and therefore refer to the narrative communities as communities of and under the cross of Christ. These ideas formed the basis for a transformative praxis within a specific congregation, namely Pastoral Redemptive Communities. These narrative communities are not an answer to the postmodern global village, but

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they do offer a way of proclaiming Christ crucified and allowing the deconstruction of the cross to create a community which is a redemptive alternative to the reality of the postmodern global village.

This journey was a critical journey in dialogue with other disciplines (economics, philosophy, psychology and sociology) thereby opening it up for further dialogue within these other sciences as well as dialogue with other religious communities.

1 DESCRIBING THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

This article is motivated by my search for an appropriate ecclesiological praxis that could respond to the context of an urban congregation from a South African perspective. This context is characterised by the needs of the congregants as well as the needs of the growing poverty stricken communities surrounding the congregation. In my journey into this context of ministry I discovered a division within the urban community between those who actively partake and in some ways benefit from the present economic system and those who are excluded. The concept of the *global village* seems to capture something of a dichotomy as well as a unity of a world united as a global village, but simultaneously being torn apart by increasing poverty and competition which is experienced daily. The village metaphor captures both these tendencies. It describes the tendency towards unity and connectedness, but also describes the limited space of a village in comparison to ‘global megalopolis’ and because of the limited space there is competitiveness within the village and exclusion from the village.

The challenge that motivated this article is that the world has been united into a single global village by the process of globalization and the consequences thereof. Globalization is a process that connects the world via communication and information networks and financially connects and interrelates the world into a village through the global markets and finance markets. “Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (Robertson 1992:8).

The global village is the result of this process where the communication and information networks and the global markets connect the globe to such an extent that never before has the world

been so united. Giddens offers the following description of globalisation: “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990:64). If there is an oil crisis in the Middle East the whole world is affected as the petrol price increases. A terror attack on New York or even the presidential election in the USA affects the international financial markets thus affecting personal investments, pension funds and medical aid schemes. We are living in a global village of interconnectedness, intimacy and interdependence. The global village is experienced when we watch TV in our living rooms, or buy products from all over the world and are exposed to different cultures on the street and when we ‘surf’ the internet.

However, not everything fits into this picture of the global intimate village.

A war in certain parts of the world such as Central Africa, for example the conflict in Rwanda, will not influence the global finance markets. This means that certain parts of the world are excluded or marginalised from this global village. This is not only a reality between continents and nations, but a reality within countries and urban centres where there are marginalised communities.

In the global village the labour market has become global which means a rise in the competitiveness of the labour market and not just for menial labour, but for all levels of employment. An engineering firm in Pretoria does not only compete with other firms in South Africa, but competes internationally thus placing extreme work pressure on the young professional which in turn influences his/her family life.

The global village that seems to be this village of intimacy and connectedness is in reality a village of exclusion and the villagers daily live with the fear of being excluded. They live with the fear to be unemployed, to lose the connection to the finance markets and eventually end up on the street being homeless as this is the story of too many homeless individuals in our urban centres who have lost their employment because of the pressures of the labour market and are left to struggle to survive on the margins of the village.

The church exists in the global village and cannot ignore these challenges as she is daily confronted by the reality of the village. Many congregations, especially urban congregations, are today faced

with the challenges of globalisation. These challenges vary from pastoral crises of individuals and families to ethical challenges to which appropriate responses need to be found.

The global village reality has for many families within the congregation become a family crisis as members of the family either seek employment opportunities overseas or are sent overseas on contracts with trans-national companies. The labour market within the global village is international which means that you seek employment throughout the globe, but it also means that you compete for employment internationally. This heightened competition creates a lot of pressure on the individual which in turn affects his/her family life.

The ministry in the local congregation is faced with these pastoral challenges of global families. The ministry is also faced with the challenge of dealing with the fragmentation of families and marriages because the tighter job market places greater demands on individuals. The result is that parents find themselves in a situation where extra hours of work is expected without necessarily receiving extra pay and in the process weekends and Sundays are sacrificed and toddlers are handed over into day care centres within weeks of childbirth leaving parents with an extra burden of guilt.

The number of those marginalised from the village is also growing as more and more people are losing their formal employment. The number of homeless unemployed people increases globally as the gap between rich and poor increases.

The biblical witness of the New Testament calls believers to reach out to the least of the brothers and sisters. Thus the global village poses numerous ethical challenges to the congregation. How does the congregation respond to these ethical challenges of both the villagers seeking to live ethically in the global village as well as seeking to respond to the needs of those living on the margins of the global village?

This search for an appropriate ethical response to the global village is aggravated by **postmodernity**, a term which describes the present era which has challenged and deconstructed the nostrums and 'truths' of modernity. Postmodernity has given rise to a society where there are no longer any absolutes or fundamentals that an individual can rely on because everything is understood to be a

language construction which is constructed and determined by all sorts of social and psychological factors.

Postmodernity did not come about in an epistemological vacuum, but arose together with certain social historical events such as globalisation. Therefore I believe that I can refer to the global village as the *postmodern global village* as these two, globalisation and postmodernity, belong together. Nicholas Boyle, in his book, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney*, argues that postmodernism can be described as the logical outworking of global capitalism.

The *postmodern global village* reality in the urban centres is that the different norms and values are not clearly definable and distinguishable and therefore postmodern life can be described as fragmented as different sets of norms and values apply to different aspects of postmodern urban life (Wilson 1997:27). A certain set of values and norms would apply to the working life and a completely different set of values in the private life of families and again a different set of values for social life with friends. There is another aspect that adds to this fragmentation and that is that individuals and families are often disembedded from their families of origin as well as their cultural social group especially families who have moved across the globe because of globalisation in search of job opportunities.

Life in the global village is also compartmentalised into various expert systems and areas of professional expertise (Harvey 1999 & Giddens 1990). Traditionally the extended family would form the social space in which children are brought up. In the *postmodern global village* parenting is handed over to various expert systems. Where previously families and traditions would have been consulted, in postmodernity a book on parenting will be consulted, the web will be surfed for answers on various parenting issues and then the upbringing of children will be entrusted to professionals in day care centres and preschools.

The dominant ideological narrative of the *postmodern global village* tells the postmodern individual that he/she is free. This freedom is based on individual rights and therefore young parents are free to choose different values, norms and parenting methods to teach their children as they are not held within the traditions and history of their families of origin. Yet this freedom is founded on the

freedom of choice where the individual can choose between differing expert systems and consumer goods and the only limits to this freedom are the market mechanisms. Therefore the postmodern individual understands him/herself as a consumer (Harvey 1999:118) who is free to choose between differing products and expert systems available to him/her.

I would therefore like to describe typical life in the *postmodern global village* as fragmented and disembedded from traditions, culture and history.

2 THE CHALLENGE AND DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

The *postmodern global village* therefore challenges the congregation's ministry to seek an ecclesiological praxis that can journey together with both the villagers and those marginalised from the village towards redemption, without ignoring the epistemological story of the postmodern context. The ecclesiological praxis has to take postmodern epistemology into consideration in its search for an ethical response to the fragmentation, disembeddedness and homelessness of the *postmodern global village*.

The epistemological story follows the development of truth and knowledge from modernity to postmodernity. In modernity faith and religion and the thirst for knowledge was to a large extent the search for universal metaphysical truths. This was a search for a universal foundation on which to base all knowledge. In the development of the epistemological story this search changed dramatically in the movement away from the modern to the postmodern. There were numerous philosophers and thinkers who challenged the idea that one could find a universally verifiable foundation of knowledge, like Ludwig Wittgenstein who challenged this foundation of knowledge and truth by arguing that between reality and language there is no direct connection and that humanity has no direct access to reality, but that the only connection humanity has is language. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 1961:56). This means that our world is limited by our language and our reality is basically a language reality. Or as Freeman says it: "If texts refer to anything at all, it might be held, it is only to other texts, this chain of 'intertextuality' being endless, infinite; and what this implies, in turn, is that there may really be no 'lives' apart from this infinite play of language itself" (Freeman 1993:8).

Truth and knowledge was thus determined by the language used and dependent on the communities of research (Karl Popper) who would work within paradigms (Thomas Kuhn, in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) which would be falsified by the development of new paradigms.

Gadamer, in his book *Truth and Method*, argued that truth and knowledge were to be found in symmetrical dialogue. Thinkers like Ricoeur (*The Symbolism of Evil*) and Habermas (*Communication and the Evolution of Society*) brought in a critical element into this dialogue between the subjective self and the texts and traditions.

Knowledge and relative subjective ‘truth’ can thus only be found in critical language communities where no group dominates the other. Such ideal speech communities are idealistic and probably impossible to find or create. Does this mean that in postmodernity we have to resign to the fact that all knowledge and truth is relative and that the world is at the mercy of those who have the greatest power to create ideologically constructed realities which dominate all other constructed realities? Yet there remains a hunch that there is more to life than this socially constructed language reality.

This ‘more than’ constructed reality is passed on in stories and metaphors.

“If the realities we inhabit are brought forth in the language we use, they are then kept alive and passed along in the stories that we live and tell” (Freedman & Combs 1996:29).

It was within this context that I discovered narrative thinking as a possible alternative. “...narrative and story appear to provide a cure, if not a panacea, to a variety of Enlightenment illnesses” (Hauerwas & Jones 1989:1).

Narrative thinking responds to numerous of the challenges that postmodernity raises. Human action is only intelligible in narrative form and human life and identity is fundamentally narrative, and so the narrative seems to accommodate the postmodern understanding of ontology, subjectivity and agency. The narrative also opens new doors to the postmodern understanding of epistemology. The two paths that lead to knowledge are the path of analogy and the path of metaphor. The path of analogy, which traditionally has been the path of science, has become very aware of its limits in the postmodern era

through thinkers like Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn and even this path of science is not universal and ahistorical, but historical and embedded within a tradition. On the other hand the path to 'truth' and knowledge via metaphor continually runs the risk of ideological construction of realities which was pointed out by thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas. Both of these paths can be interpreted as narrative because they are always historical and embedded within traditions of the past providing tools in the present for the search for answers for the future. These two narratives need each other. The metaphorical narratives are necessary to continually remind the narrative of analogy of its limits. The analogical narratives are necessary to keep the metaphorical narratives from ideological construction of realities which are then presented as universal truths and absolutes.

As I was looking for an ecclesiological praxis that could respond to the ethical and pastoral challenges of the global village in a postmodern context, I discovered that narrative theology might open new doors to such praxis. Can the truth of the Christian faith be compared to the truths of modernity which were thought to be universally verifiable? Or should the Christian truth be understood within this postmodern dialectic of analogy and metaphor?

I would argue that there is enough evidence to support the idea that the Biblical witness understands truth in the context of this dialectic or this critical dialogue between the narrative of analogy and the narrative of metaphor.

It is not just coincidence that the dominant literary genre in the Bible is narrative. The Bible uses narrative to convey its 'truths' (Stroup 1984:136). The soteriological aspect and confessional aspect of the Christian faith are also fundamentally narrative in structure.

This critical dialectical dialogical character between the two narratives (analogy and metaphor) I discovered to be part of the Christian and Jewish traditions. In the Jewish tradition there is the dialogical structure between the Halacha (law and tradition) and Aggada (narrative) which Denecke describes in his book, *Als Christ in der Judenschule*, and in the Christian tradition there is the dialogical dialectic between law and grace which can be compared to the necessary critical dialogue between the narratives of metaphor and the narratives of analogy.

With these two narratives (analogy and metaphor) I would like to proceed and seek an appropriate ecclesiological praxis within the *postmodern global village*.

If these two narratives to truth are both contained in the Biblical narrative and the Christian tradition, then it is in these narratives and in the communities created by these narratives that I would need to search for appropriate ecclesiological praxis that could respond to the ethical and pastoral challenges of the *postmodern global village*.

One of the fundamentals of protestant thought is *sola Scriptura* which means that alone through scripture we will find the truth. Therefore, in line with Gadamer's understanding, we bring the horizons of the context into a critical dialogue with the horizon of the Gospel and allow the Gospel to re-author and re-formulate the horizons of the context. This re-formulated horizon would be the narrative that creates community and a new reality. This however is too easy as it does not take cognisance of the horizons of the marginalised which continually challenge the realities of congregants and secondly it does not take into consideration the reality of fragmentation in the *postmodern global village*. The horizon of the context is not that clear, but is piecemeal and fragmented. The horizon of the Gospel is not that clear as well and needs to be unpacked (historical critical exegesis). This fusion of horizons is not just a matter of bringing my cultural, social and traditional horizon into historical critical dialogue with the Gospel because for many individuals in the *postmodern global village* their own horizon is not that clear but is made up of numerous fragmented horizons and is disembedded from all clearly definable traditions and cultures. The question that is also immediately raised is why *sola Scriptura* in a pluralistic context? What about the other religions and their 'authorities'? Are they excluded from this dialogue?

Jürgen Habermas spoke about ideal language communities which could rationally defend their claims over and against other communities. The narrative truths are defended rationally by validity claims (narrative of analogy) and Browning (Browning 1991:71) has put forward five such claims. I would like to incorporate these claims in my search for an appropriate ecclesiological praxis. With these validity claims communities can enter into critical dialogue with other religious communities without excluding anybody and thus different communities can participate in the ethical dialogue.

The first claim is based on the visional level which inevitably raises metaphysical validity claims. Within the narrative theological orientation I discovered the Biblical narrative to be a narrative testimony to the revealed truth of the story of the Triune living God within history.

This truth is:

- not an universally verifiable, ahistorical, abstract truth, but a narrative truth revealed in story and passed on through story;
- not essentially a coercive truth that through violence seeks dominance over others, although church history certainly tells a different story.
- an inclusive truth as it sees diversity as blessing and includes both villager and marginalised into a community of the cross.
- responds to the fragmented reality of the *postmodern global village* not with violence or coercion, but with love and openness – the openness of a sending Father, who sends His Son and Spirit in love and who will one day unite all to himself in glory (Moltmann 1992).

The second claim is on the obligational level.

Every single human is embedded in some narrative which places certain obligations on the individual. In the *postmodern global village* people are in search of global ethical standards and norms, but these global standards and norms can no longer be found. It is impossible in a pluralistic society to formulate universal ethical/moral norms, because on what basis would this be done? The only basis there is, is the ‘hidden’ metanarratives of the *postmodern global village* that say that there are no authoritative narratives and that the individual is the last authority. The individual needs to choose from the religious spiritual consumer market that which best suits his/her lifestyle. The wheel of history cannot be turned back to a modern understanding of universal standards, norms and truths. The narrative of the *postmodern global village* also places certain obligations on the fragmented and disembedded individual who has lost his/her traditional and historical narratives. Therefore I use the term hidden narrative because the postmodern

individual believes him/herself to be free from any obligational narratives yet the *postmodern global village* has an ideological narrative that shapes and forms certain characters. MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, describes three such characters which oblige to the hidden narrative of the *postmodern global village*. These three characters are: the rich aesthete, the manager, the therapist.

A narrative theological orientation and interpretation of the Biblical witness and the Christian tradition does not offer a universal standard, nor does it offer the global village a moral code which will solve all the problems and crises. It offers the world a narrative truth that shapes and determines a community (congregation) which seeks to live in response to this narrative truth. It offers the individual a narrative truthful horizon which is in a critical dialogue with the fragmented horizons of the postmodern individual and in the fusion of horizons a re-authoring takes place. This re-authored story shapes a certain character which is obliged to respond to the world in a certain manner. This cannot be spelled out in a code of conduct, but is a continuous hermeneutical process and thus I believe appropriate to the *postmodern global village*.

The third validity claim is based on the tendency-need level.

The *postmodern global village's* understanding of the individual has become a self-fulfilled prophecy. It understands the individual to be an autonomous consumer bound by nothing but him/herself. This kind of understanding creates certain tendencies and therefore needs continuous innovation so that consumption never ends and global capitalism can thrive. The narrative that the theological orientation, which is in a critical dialogue with the social sciences, offers the *postmodern global village* is a different understanding of humanity with different tendencies and needs.

The fourth validity claim is based on the environmental and social level.

If one looks at the environment as well as the social reality of the globe it is clear that the various narratives in the global village are confined by these constraints. Various environmental groups are seeking to create awareness that the consumer narrative of the *postmodern global village* cannot not continue *ad infinitum*, but has certain environmental constraints. I believe it is also clear that there are social constraints as the ever growing gap between rich and poor countries will eventually lead to a social political explosion.

The biblical narrative offers a different and more sustainable understanding of the relationship between humanity and environment as well as between rich and poor. The biblical narrative and especially the incarnation of Christ as well as his death on the cross incorporate fragmentation and disembeddedness into its narrative without denying it.

The fifth validity claim is on the rule role level.

The *postmodern global village* narrative creates certain characters with certain rules and roles as a response to the tendencies and needs of the capitalist global markets. The biblical narrative offers a different character which responds to different tendencies and needs and thus lives by different rules and roles which could be seen as being redemptive within the *postmodern global village* by offering an alternative to the destructive rules and roles of the *postmodern global village*.

3 PASTORAL REDEMPTIVE COMMUNITIES AS AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRAXIS

The ecclesiological praxis that I am looking for needs to accommodate these validity claims so that the church can be in dialogue with the other religious communities.

What kind of ecclesiological praxis is necessary so that the Biblical narrative can play such a determining role as to create communities with certain characters?

The traditional ecclesiological praxis of Sunday mornings with an hour worship service and a few activities such as Bible studies, woman's fellowship, confirmation classes and the odd retreat does not seem to be sufficient.

There are those that argue that in the *postmodern global village* one would need to return to a form of monasticism where the biblical narrative can have such a reality creating effect for example MacIntyre in his book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

Is this the only alternative – to withdraw from the *postmodern global village* into a monastery?

I do not believe that this is the only alternative, but there needs to be a balance between withdrawing from the society and critically and prophetically engaging with society, where the community can also be in critical dialogue with other religious communities. The

early church recognised the necessity of this alternative reality and thus the idea developed of *Altera Civitas* (Augustine 1958) which was seen as an alternative to the Roman Empire. The *Altera Civitas* was not a withdrawal from the Roman Empire, but it was an alternative reality within the Roman Empire (Florovsky 1957:133f). I believe that the early church can guide us in seeking an appropriate ecclesiological praxis in response to the *postmodern global village*.

What I found to be a necessary ecclesiological praxis was a community that critically and redemptively engages with the *postmodern global village*, but at the same time is determined and formed by the biblical narrative. In the specific congregation I am working in we went through a process of workshops describing and seeking a deeper understanding of the *postmodern global village* and then turned towards scripture and brought these two horizons into a critical dialogue with each other. The result was the establishment of Pastoral Redemptive Communities.

These communities are communities which seek to create the necessary space and format for the biblical narrative to create alternative and redemptive realities responding to the challenges of the *postmodern global village*. “Our only escape from destructive histories consists in having the virtues trained by a truthful story, and that can come solely through participation in a society that claims our lives in a more fundamental fashion than any profession or state has the right to do” (Hauerwas 1981:127).

The strategy and practical implication is that these communities need to meet regularly so that the horizons of the biblical narrative can challenge and re-author the fragmented life of the postmodern individual as well as taking the needs of those living on the margins of the village into consideration. These communities do not only need to meet regularly, but they also need to allow the biblical narrative to challenge their individual stories. In these communities they need to seek to describe and interpret the reality of the *postmodern global village* from the perspective of the Christian narrative truth and in light of this truth seek to re-author their private, social and professional lives. This is not a once off exercise, but a continuous critical hermeneutical journey.

I would like to conclude by highlighting some of the elements of the Christian narrative and how it responds to the challenges of the *postmodern global village* and how the Christian narrative can

offer the global village a redemptive alternative. This alternative can be defended within the context of the five validity claims and thus enter into critical dialogue with other alternatives of other religious communities.

These communities are embedded in the story of Christ crucified. If the story of Christ is the dominant story of such communities then there are certain vital elements in the story of Christ that need to be taken into consideration.

3.1 Christ's incarnation

Christ's incarnation according to the Gospel stories began in the crib in Bethlehem and ended on the cross of Golgotha. The incarnation thus forms a leading metaphor in the story of Jesus. The community is guided by this metaphor and is challenged to enter into the brokenness of the global village. This means to enter and describe and seek a fuller description of the brokenness of the global village which I have described in this essay as fragmentation as well as the reality of those suffering on the margins of the village. This guiding metaphor of incarnation certainly does not allow for a withdrawal from the world, but rather a deeper description and 'understanding' of the reality. Thus the community should be encouraged to engage with the social, political and economic narratives as they seek to describe the reality of the *postmodern global village*.

3.2 Community of the cross

These communities are not only guided by the metaphor of the incarnation, but are defined by the story of the cross of Christ. There are certain elements in the story of the crucifixion that re-authors the communities' relationship to the world and to themselves. The community of the cross thus interprets itself as a community of justified sinners who are in solidarity with a world that is condemned by the law (Moltmann 1992). The question the community needs to ask itself is, What laws condemn and hold the *postmodern global village* in captivity? What law is the cause of fragmentation, poverty and suffering that condemns the world to death?

In the *postmodern global village* the individual is caught within the narratives of commercialism, consumerism and capitalism and these narratives form a law that binds the individual to understand him/herself only as a consumer and to understand his/her freedom only within the bounds of the market. The community of

the cross stands as an alternative to these laws of the *postmodern global village*. The passion story of Christ offers alternative dramatic (narrative) resources with which to re-author a story which does not flee the reality of the *postmodern global village*, but faces this reality with a redemptive (liberating) alternative.

3.3 Community under the cross

A community under the cross is a community which is under the 'authority' of the deconstruction of the cross. A community that is defined and described by the cross is a community that is no longer defined and described by the idols of power, but deconstructs these idols and ideologies (Moltmann 1992). Thus the community is liberated from the godforsakenness of the world which has turned towards the worship of idols. Yet no community can exist in state of permanent deconstruction and therefore continually construct values and new narratives, but it constructs these new narratives in the awareness that they are constructed and in need of the deconstruction of the cross. "Moreover, true Christian existence can only be present in the best of all possible societies, or, in symbolic terms, can only 'stand under the cross,' and its identity with the crucified Christian can be demonstrated only by witnessing non-identification with the demands and interests of society" (Moltmann 1974:17).

3.4 Community of the Resurrection

A community that lives in Christ's victory over the world and through this victory is drawn into the hope of God's redemptive history with the world. It is the hope of the resurrection that creates the necessary space for the community of believers to be communities *of* and *under* the cross.

4 CONCLUSION

The above two examples describe how the Pastoral Redemptive Communities are formed and determined by the narrative of Christ and how this determining narrative offers an alternative to the challenges of the *postmodern global village*. These communities are communities of and under the cross of Christ and therefore they can never be complacent or understand themselves to be the answer or the model for ecclesiological praxis. They do not propose to be that, but they indicate a direction on the journey of proclaiming Christ crucified in the *postmodern global village*.

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