

## “The Influence of John Paul II and His Ideas on Education”

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**Richard A Benton**  
*Member, Social Justice Commission  
Catholic Diocese of Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand*

I would like to start this discussion with a quotation not from Pope John Paul, but from the poet-contemplative Thomas Merton:

Christian holiness can no longer be considered a matter purely of individual and isolated acts of virtue. It must also be seen as part of a great collaborative effort for spiritual and cultural renewal in society, to produce conditions in which all can work and enjoy the just fruits of their labour in peace. (*Life and Holiness*, p. 121)

This I believe sums up not only Thomas Merton's view of the role which all persons of good will should play in our society, but also encapsulates the spirit of much of John Paul II's thought and writing on social issues generally, including what should be expected from educators personally and through their work.

When I was first invited to participate in the symposium, I was quite confident that I could make an appropriate contribution to its work as I have had a long involvement in educational, political, and legal research with a strong social-justice element. However, when I received the program which included the topic of my presentation, I found that the challenge was greater than I had anticipated. I could talk with some confidence on John Paul's *ideas* on education. But the influence of these ideas is quite another matter. How do you judge this?

I am going to side-step that question, although I will eventually suggest a few areas where answers may possibly be found. However, I must emphasise that although I am a member of the Social Justice Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Hamilton, New Zealand, I am participating in this discussion in my personal capacity, and nothing that I say should be construed as reflecting the opinions either of my fellow-commissioners, or of the diocese.

It is probably especially difficult for someone in a country like New Zealand to discern the influence on education of a person like Pope John Paul. After all, we have no Catholic universities, and the attention which our spiritual leaders give to the Catholic schools is somewhat limited -- for example, 10 years ago the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference published their collective statements on social issues from 1979 to 1997. It contained 239 pages, of which four were devoted to education. There was no direct reference to John Paul II in that context, although Aristotle was invoked. Furthermore, we are about as far away geographically from Rome as it is possible to get, and, as the Chinese proverb puts it, "The mountains are high [or, in our case

perhaps, the ocean is deep], and the emperor is far away". One senior member of a religious community deeply involved in schools whom I consulted about John Paul's influence said simply that he and his colleagues took scant notice of pontiffs pontificating, and the "Imperial Papacy" had little influence on them -- he wished me well in what he regarded as an impossible task! Certainly, an illustration that the application of the Chinese proverb is by no means confined to China!

This does not mean, of course, that John Paul's ideas may not have had a profound effect on Catholic education in New Zealand, an effect that may indeed have flowed on into the state system as a whole. But I remain unsure of how to gauge this. Observable phenomena may have many different potential causes. I am reminded of a story with which the priest who said the mass I attended on the feast of Christ the King prefaced his homily. A distraught mother decided to enroll her intractable son in a Catholic school, where she had been told that they had the best academic standards and discipline. She was amazed at the transformation in his character -- his grades went from D's to A's, and he became a very much more pleasant person to have around the house. At the end of the semester he proudly brought his report home (in the past his mother had usually been summoned to the school to receive it, along with the news that the school would prefer that her son not return), and it was, indeed, quite glowing. So she asked him in amazement why things were different now. The boy replied earnestly, "Well, the first day I was there I saw that joker that they'd hung up on a cross, and I thought, 'These fellows don't mess about - I'd better toe the line!'"

Thus one might say that the miracle was worked because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of Christian symbolism, rather than because of the superior ambience and ethos of the school. And I think it is quite probable that even in institutions which have been considerably, even profoundly affected by John Paul's ideas, comparatively few people will be aware that these have such an important effect on their experiences and lives. It is highly likely, of course, that those in charge of Catholic institutions of higher education have made a conscious effort to incorporate the key ideas enunciated by John Paul II into the work and life of their institutions. But more often than not, these ideas probably will be reflected in the syllabus and curriculum of the school, intentionally, perhaps, on the part of the curriculum planner, and simply taken for granted, without a thought as to their provenance, by those who are putting them into practice.

Bishop Antonio Ledesma in the last chapter of his collection of homilies and addresses *Healing the Past, Building the Future*, sums up John Paul's legacy as "solidarity, dialogue, and fullness of life." These three concepts, values, concerns, recur over and over again in his writings. They are articulated especially clearly in his view of the role of the Catholic University, and indeed of all universities and institutions of higher education, as expressed in his *Apostolic Constitution* for those institutions. Bound up with these is his focus on the human individual as a personal being -- the partaker and witness of Divinity present in the world. Again, we can see the same vision of mankind present in the works of Thomas Merton:

There is "no such thing" as God  
because God is neither a "what" nor a "thing"  
but a pure "Who,"

the “Thou” before whom our inmost “I” springs into awareness. (1962, p.13)

John Paul notes in his *Apostolic Letter at the Beginning of the Third Millennium* that

We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person ...” (29).

This Person, of course, is Christ, but we as human beings share this divine personhood:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of the supernatural vocation reveals the *greatness* and the *inestimable value* of human life even in its temporal phase. (*Evangelium Vitae* 2, p.4.)

Thus he points out in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994) that “One cannot think adequately about man without reference, which for man is constitutive, to God” (p. 35). Towards the end of that work, commenting on chairs of ethics in universities with which he and his collaborators had been directly associated, he observes that “The concept of “person” is not only a marvellous theory; it is at the centre of the human *ethos*” (p. 209). This ethos is built on a web of relationships grounded in love and justice, and linking people with each other and with God. John Paul freely acknowledges the influence which the “philosophers of dialogue”, like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas have had on his thought, and he notes that the path taken by these writers “passes not so much through being and existence as through people and their meeting each other, through the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou.’ *This is a fundamental dimension of man's existence, which is always a coexistence* (p.36, emphasis in original). Among human institutions, educational institutions in particular have a vital role in promoting and sustaining the ethical dialogue which transforms “coexistence” from a concept to a lived reality.

This concern for people as people, reflected so strongly in his dialogic philosophy, is one of the links between John Paul’s thought and that of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, whose own defence of human personality (2003), essentially a translation of the sacred into the language of the post-secular world, reflects a convergent world view. John Paul’s influence is thus direct and indirect, reinforced by and reinforcing the work of other people of good will, some far outside what might normally be considered the ambit of the Church. John Paul II, of course, is himself one of a long line of philosophers and theologians, with the most immediate contemporary influences on his ecclesiastical writings and policies, judging by the footnotes and references in his work, being his illustrious predecessor Pope Paul VI, and the work done at the second Vatican Council (of which, of course, he was an active and influential participant).

Dean Mejos, a member of the faculty of the University of Asia and Pacific, one of the sponsors of this symposium, recently published a very interesting exposition and analysis of Karol Wojtyla (i.e. John Paul II)’s theory of participation. It is important to be aware of the importance which John Paul placed on participation, as it underlies

much of what he has to say about education as a process, and the way that educational institutions ought to function. In this way of looking at the world, there is a very close relationship between morality and development -- personal fulfilment comes through acts which are morally good, and that enhance the personal goodness of the individual. This is further enhanced when people act in *solidarity* to achieve the common good.

To develop as a person, then, requires a congruence between persons and actions - - alienation negates this, reducing people to ciphers, "cogs in the machine", rather than enabling them to be free agents contributing together to the good of the whole. Thus John Paul puts great emphasis on people-in-association, as opposed to people-in-isolation. For him, individualism and totalism (the complete subordination of the individual to the will or interest of the mass) are equally damaging to the person. As Mejos puts it, "individualism says that the common good is a threat to oneself while totalism says that any individual good is a threat to the common good" (2008, p. 9).

Participation is the antidote to alienation -- but this does not preclude opposition. It is very important to note this. Conformism on the one hand, and avoidance (non-participation) on the other both subvert solidarity, which is based on trust and commitment to a common cause. Those who sincerely believe that certain courses of action are inimical to the legitimate aspirations and goals of the group -- taking into account the interests also of others -- have a duty to speak out, and the right to be listened to. Saying nothing is thus the same as doing nothing -- in both cases, solidarity is broken, as mindless conformity, like avoidance, is actually a withdrawal from an informed and principled participation with others in pursuit of the common good. Those who withdraw silently or conform for the sake of conforming are no longer part of the network of persons interacting with each other in love, that is with a mutual concern for each other's interests, as members of a community, rather than as serfs or members of a herd. Freedom, as John Paul points out in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (The Splendour of Truth) is dependent on the truth, and thus failure to provide justified opposition, to speak the truth, undermines freedom.

The freedom with which Christ has set us free ... encourages us to become the *servants* of all. Thus the process of *development* and *liberation* takes concrete shape in the exercise of *solidarity*, that is to say in the love and service of our neighbour, especially of the poorest: "for where truth and love are missing, the process of liberation results in the death of freedom which will have lost all support". (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 46, p.103, emphasis in original)

For much of the rest of my discussion, I am going to highlight some aspects of John Paul's *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities*, which distils his thinking on education in general, and of course particularly higher education. He sees a Catholic university as "born from the heart of the Church" and "located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution -- an "incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity" (\*1)<sup>1</sup>. The Catholic University he sees as having a privileged

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers preceded by an asterisk signify a paragraph number in Pope John Paul II's *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities*.

task, "to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth".

Very importantly, he notes with pleasure that there are:

... very many Catholic scholars engaged in teaching and research at non-Catholic universities. Their task as academics and scientists, lived out in the light of Christian faith, is to be considered precious for the good of the Universities in which they teach. Their presence in fact is a continuous stimulus to the selfless search for truth and for the wisdom that comes from above. (\*2)

In harmony with his view of people as persons freely united in solidarity, he sees education in the light of "... the dialogue of the Church with the cultures of our times", which is "that vital area where" [ quoting from his 1979 *Discourse to the Cardinals*]:

"the future of the church and all the world is being played out as we conclude the 20th century". There is only one culture: that of man, by men and for man. (\*3)

he sees it as the role of a Catholic university in particular to engage in a holistic search for truth -- a "free search for the whole truth about nature, man, and God".

... by means of a kind of universal humanism a Catholic university is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme truth, who is God. That is a search for "their wisdom without which the future of the world would be in danger." (\*4)

There is, of course, much detail about the particular mission of the Catholic University in the light of the principles mentioned above, but for the rest of this paper I will concentrate on the ideas in the Constitution which pertain to education in general.

John Paul notes that:

Scientific and technological discoveries create an enormous economic and industrial growth, but they also inescapably require the correspondingly necessary *search for meaning* in order to guarantee that the new discoveries be used for the authentic good of individuals and of human society as a whole. (\*7, emphasis in original)

At stake in this, as Jürgen Habermas also discerned, and constituting a special responsibility for Catholic universities, is "*the very meaning of the human person*" (\*11). John Paul therefore charges the "entire ecclesial community" with the responsibility for supporting existing Catholic universities and establishing new ones. He sees *all* universities as "an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities", and goes on to say that, as universities each possesses:

... that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of truth and the common good. (\*12)

The point about academic freedom is very important, and I will return to it in due course.

There is considerable emphasis on John Paul's writing on the integration of knowledge. In the Constitution, for example, he states that "each individual discipline is studied in a systematic manner; moreover, the various disciplines are brought into dialogue for their mutual enhancement." (\*15). He sees research in a Catholic university as having four essential components, two of which -- the search for an integration of knowledge, and an ethical concern -- have clear application to any university, and two which are likely to be more clearly manifest in a religiously oriented institution -- a dialogue between faith and reason, and a theological perspective. (\*15). To him, the integration of knowledge is not simply an abstract, theoretical process, but involves people as well as ideas. He sees a university as "a 'living union' of individual organisms dedicated to the search for truth". This is where the dialogue between faith and reason becomes important in the context of a Catholic university. However, the concern for the ethical and moral implications of research and the way it is conducted, "because knowledge is meant to serve the human person", is undoubtedly something relevant to all institutions of higher learning. John Paul II insists that "men and women of science will truly aid humanity only if they preserve 'the sense of the transcendence of the human person over the world and of God over the human person'" (\*18). Where teaching is concerned, he stresses the importance of interdisciplinary studies -- in the case of a Catholic university, informed by theology and philosophy.

Within this framework, the university community is also seen as an organic whole, combining teachers, students, administrators, and non-academic staff essentially as labourers in the same vineyard. They are there to support each other, each with their own particular responsibilities and roles. It is interesting that in the Constitution he explicitly notes that "the dedication and witness of the non-academic staff are vital for the identity and life of the University". How often the cleaners and the secretaries are completely forgotten about, but this does not happen in the vision of John Paul II -- he includes them in the same paragraph in which he comments on the roles of directors and administrators (\* 24).

John Paul sees the basic mission of the University as "a continuous quest for truth through its research, and the preservation and communication of knowledge for the good of society." In the case of the Catholic University, this mission is carried out and advanced by people inspired by Christian principles (\*30). All universities are immersed in human society, and are therefore called to service, so that they may become "an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society" (\*32). They are therefore concerned with the study of serious contemporary problems, and the duty of speaking "uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, which but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society" (\*32), and the promotion of social justice (\*34). The importance of

cooperation between universities is also stressed, specifically in relation to Catholic universities, but again, this is something relevant to all universities. The need for universities to give service to their communities is also noted, and particularly in relation to cooperation with other institutions in a region "on behalf of the development, of understanding between cultures, and of the defence of nature in accordance with an awareness of the international ecological situation." (\*29). There is thus, for John Paul, an assumption that a Catholic university will integrate faith with life (38). One could simply substitute the word "ideals", or "values" here in relation to the proper activity of any university.

Cultures and cultural traditions are also given a prominent place in John Paul's writings, and according great value, because they are expressions of a common humanity. However, he does not idolise, or idealise them, and he clearly recognises the dynamic nature of culture. He notes, for example, that "traditional cultures are to be defended in their identity, helping them to receive modern values without sacrificing their own heritage, which is a wealth for the whole human family. Universities, situated within the ambience of these cultures, will seek to harmonise local cultures with the positive contributions of modern cultures." (\*45). In this connection, the Catholic university has a special responsibility to take part in dialogue with people from other religions. (\*47) The presence of lay people and of people from other religious traditions in Catholic universities is both acknowledged and valued; however, in the norms laid down for governing these institutions it is noted that, in order "not to endanger [their] Catholic identity", "the number of catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a minority within the institution, which is and must remain Catholic" (Article 4, page 42).

While the importance of academic freedom is stressed, it is not an absolute. Section 3 of the norms, for example, provides that "In ways appropriate to the different academic disciplines, all Catholic teachers are to be faithful to", and all other teachers are to respect "Catholic doctrines and morals in their research and teaching. In particular, Catholic theologians, aware that they fulfil the mandate received from the church, are to be faithful to the magisterium of the church as the authentic interpreter of sacred scripture and sacred tradition." This is, of course, constraint on academic freedom, but not one without parallel in the secular world. In a very interesting recent article in the New York Times, the columnist Stanley Fish reviewed a forthcoming book *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom*<sup>2</sup>, which grapples with this problem. Fish comments approvingly that:

In short, academic freedom, rather than being a philosophical or moral imperative, is a piece of policy that makes practical sense in the context of a specific task academics are charged to perform. It follows that the scope of academic freedom is determined first by specifying what that task is and then by figuring out what degree of latitude of those who are engaged in it require in order to do their jobs.

This is very much what John Paul tried to do in formulating his norms for safeguarding academic freedom within Catholic universities, while at the same time

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<sup>2</sup> Finkin & Post, 2009.

protecting their integrity as Catholic institutions. Again, because of the holistic nature of John Paul's vision, this integrity should be reflected in the lives people live as well as the courses that they teach. Again, even within purely secular institutions, "gross moral turpitude" is a common ground for censure or dismissal – the problem always is, of course, to define "gross", "moral", and "turpitude" within the educational enterprise, a task perhaps for lawyers as well as philosophers and theologians.

At the core, fundamentally, education for John Paul is about fostering holiness. Here again, I quote Thomas Merton who, I think, is one of John Paul's forerunners on this topic:

If the salvation of society depends, in the long run, on the moral and spiritual health of individuals, the subject of contemplation becomes a vastly important one, since contemplation is one of the indications of spiritual maturity. It is closely allied to sanctity. You cannot save the world merely with the system. You cannot have peace without charity. You cannot have social order without saints, mystics, and prophets. (McDonnell 1974, p.375)

John Paul also emphasises the vital role of education, even the most basic education, in the liberation of the human person:

It is important then that as far as possible *the developing nations themselves* should favour the *self-affirmation* of each citizen, through access to a wider culture and the free flow of information. Whatever promotes *literacy* and the *basic education* which completes and deepens it is a direct contribution to true development, as the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* proposed. These goals are still far from being reached in so many parts of the world. (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 44, p. 98.)

This process of liberation begins in the family, where, for John Paul, "parental love ... finds fulfillment in the task of education as it completes and perfects its service of life". This "concrete educational activity" is enriched "with the values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service, disinterestedness and self-sacrifice" (*Familiaris Consortio* 36). Importantly, such education should facilitate the growth of "a correct attitude of freedom with regard to material goods, and the realization that "man is far more precious for what he is than what he has" (*Ibid.*, 37). The values underpinning such an education are thus clearly at odds with the consumerist ethos which is currently so pervasive in the "first world".

John Paul's stress on a basic education that is completed and deepened is also noteworthy. In a recent commentary on the United Nations second Millennium Development Goal, Gene Sperling points out that the wording of the goal, the provision of "primary" education for all children by 2015, has been interpreted in many countries in a way that makes it "pathetic" (2006, p. xii). Those formulating the goal no doubt thought of "primary" as a proxy for "basic" – that is, at least eight years of schooling, and preferably at least ten (Cohen et al., 2006, p.26), but in many places it has come to mean as little as five or six years, an extremely shallow goal which will not open the way to the advantages of a solid basic education and the broadening and deepening of consciousness, understanding and potential for action which should and can flow from this. John Paul's stress on completion and

deepening is further underlined by the experience of scholars and practitioners alike in examining what may underlie sometimes glowing statistics about access to educational opportunities:

... enrolment does not necessarily mean attendance, attendance does not necessarily mean receiving an education, and receiving an education does not necessarily mean receiving a good education. (Cohen et al., 2006, p.4)

This stress on parental rights in relation to education brings with it, in John Paul's view, equally important responsibilities – the family is the primary “educating community” but by no means the only one. While parents have an absolute right “to choose an education [for their children] in conformity with their religion”, they also have “a serious duty to commit themselves totally to a cordial and active relationship with teachers and school authorities” (*Ibid.*, 40).

The provision of access to a good and ultimately self-sustaining education is of course something which involves the whole community, not just parents and school authorities, and I was intrigued to find John Paul II quoted explicitly in this context not in a document prepared for or by theologians or educators, but in the Annual Report of a highly successful commercial bank. For some years UnionBank of the Philippines has been sponsoring a learning system integrating developmental reading and values education for second graders, which has reached almost a million children in metropolitan Manila and some provincial cities and towns. This is part of the bank's commitment to fulfilling its corporate social responsibility obligations, which, the bank's 2004 Annual Report notes (p. 36), are inspired by John Paul II's observation “Indeed, besides the earth, man's principal resource is man himself” (*Centesimus Annus*, 32).

In harmony with this view of the inherent value of people both as individuals and as members of social groups, the encyclical *Familiaris Consortio*, from which I quoted earlier, incorporates a charter of family rights (s. 46. These include both:

... the right to bring up children in accordance with the family's own traditions and religious and cultural values, with the necessary instruments, means and institutions,

and

the right to emigrate as a family in search of a better life.

It is important to note here, that again in contrast with the spirit of the age in many so-called advanced societies, John Paul here implies that immigrants have the right to remain themselves, albeit in a new context, and that the state should, through its educational and social policies and institutions help them to retain their cultural identity while enabling them to participate in their new society. The integration of immigrants into their new community is thus a process of adding to their knowledge, skills, abilities and understandings, not simply replacing what they have treasured and brought with them with what is considered appropriate by the host society. Furthermore, by supporting immigrant communities in this endeavour, the host

society is concurrently enriching itself by opening up to the contribution which the newcomers can make to the life of the wider community.

Not surprisingly therefore, in many contexts, and possibly most notably in *Fides et Ratio* "On the Relationship between Faith and Reason", Pope John Paul also underlined the importance of giving serious attention to philosophy in any educational curriculum, and the need for theologians to pay attention to this in their search for truth. Time and again, he reiterated importance of quest for objective truth – an unfettered relativism was a road to nowhere except disaster.

One legacy of John Paul II which is visible, in education and in the daily activities of the church, was his reaching out not just to other Christians, but with genuine respect and affection for other religions – e.g. in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), which was produced under his guidance, the words of his earlier encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (47, p. 107) are repeated to a far wider audience:

The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day." (841, p.244)

and, a few sections further on:

The Catholic Church recognises in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet yet near since he gives life and breath and all things, and wants all men to be saved." (844, p. 244).

While I was contemplating the content of these remarks, I asked a prominent member of the secular clergy for some assistance. I received a benign smile, and a response not very different from that of my friend in the religious order. However, it really unlocked the key to John Paul's influence, which, even where it cannot be seen, can certainly be felt. My clerical friend said that he had little time to read directives which occupied just one sheet of paper, let alone those which went on for many pages. He was a pastor, and his first duty was to minister to the needs of his people. If our Commission, for example, wanted to communicate with him, we would be ill-advised to try to do it on paper, because our brilliantly worded missives would probably end up "in the drawer" (which, judging by the twinkle in his eye, I interpreted as meaning, more likely than not, the waste paper basket). If we wished to communicate with him or his parishioners, we had better to come and do it personally. They would be happy to listen to our message, but very unlikely to read it.

It is here that Pope John Paul's brilliance shines forth. He was, of course, an accomplished actor, and made full use of this talent in communicating the gospel and his ideas on how it could be lived out in the modern world. Many of his visitations were superb pieces of theatre, vehicles for communicating the message of the Church to hundreds of thousands, at times many millions of people throughout the world. By the same means, the "messages behind the message", the stress on dialogue, on coexistence, on love, on forgiveness, reached far beyond his Christian community, resonating with people of good will of other faiths, and of no religion at

all. At the same time, he left an enduring legacy, in the form of his written works. Even if they may have ended up in some clerical drawers, or stuffed at the back of overcrowded bookcases, his encyclicals and other official letters and exhortations are extremely important sources of inspiration, examined assiduously not only in universities, but also in adult education courses and private study groups throughout the world, as also especially is the Catechism produced under his guidance and inspired by his work and that of his immediate predecessors. But perhaps his pastoral work, just being with people, has been even more important, for several generations of people born during his pontificate, in putting his mark on their daily lives. This has undoubtedly spilled over into education, even in places, like my country, where the average person, and the average teacher, may have little awareness of the profound influence for good that Pope John Paul II has had on them.

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