"Pull out the plug!": Spirituality as a pause from pressured living.

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This is an English translation of a chapter in the book, *Guds närmaste stad?* ("God's nearest city?"), edited by Kajsa Ahlstrand and Göran Gunner (Stockholm: Verbum, 2008). Comments welcome.

A New Yorker does not come to a town the size of Enköping without a briefcase full of prejudices. A few weeks before my first visit, I had been back in my native city. In a coffee shop just south of Central Park, the friend I was meeting arrived carrying three cell phones, two in her left hand and one pinned to the strap of her bag. She explained to me that between her work responsibilities and her private life, she needed all three phones. Two of them rang before the end of our quarter-hour chat.

In contrast to that metropolis of high-strung souls chasing their fortunes, my imagined Enköping was a space of serene living in bucolic settings. Surely this tidy town graced by public gardens was not a stage for lives of stress and time-pressure and overwhelming self-responsibility….

And yet, to an astonishing degree, it was. In interview after interview, I encountered people run ragged by the pressures of contemporary life, struggling to make it through their too-full days or a gasping for a free moment in which to catch up. The symptoms of the New Yorkers' high-stress syndrome were showing up in Enköping, too. No one I interviewed was carrying three cell phones yet – but it seemed to be only a matter of time.

The pressed people of Enköping often told me that their spiritual moments -- their moments of feeling whole and alive and connected to something larger -- were the pauses from their pressured living. Such spiritual experience is the subject of this chapter.

Manifold religious expressions

Ludwig Wittgenstein, reflecting on the composer Franz Schubert, noted the varied forms that an "act of piety" might take:

> Recall that after Schubert's death, his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces, and gave each piece, consisting of a few bars, to his favorite pupils. And this act, as a sign of piety, is just as understandable as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too would be understandable as an act of piety. (Danto 2002:16)

Wittgenstein's observation came to mind as I explored the diverse forms of spiritual and religious expression in Enköping. What moments in their daily lives did my hosts think of as spiritual? More broadly, what moments or activities did they particularly cherish, value, or derive strength from?

The people I interviewed described a great variety of moments that were "understandable" – to use Wittgenstein's term – as expressions of spirituality. Or at least, they were expressions of a sense of existential connection and life sustenance that I would want to classify as spiritual.

The diversity of responses came as no surprise in our polyphonic postmodern culture. But what caught my attention was the recurrence of a particular pattern, in which my hosts described their spiritual moments in terms of a temporary escape or exemption from a world of perpetual stress. When one turns off the mobile telephone, people told me, and when one gets away from work and family and media and all the pressures imposed by others – perhaps gets out into nature -- then one may experience something spiritual.

This pattern intrigued me, even though my sample was too limited to prove a trend or to track changes over time or space. So my comments are suggestive, not conclusive. In this chapter I describe and interpret what I heard and saw, in the hope that the picture I paint may reveal something about the nature of spirituality in our particular historical moment.

Initial points of curiosity

Our research team's locality study, or collective portrait, of Enköping was inspired in part by the work of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. As Kajsa Ahlstrand has noted in the introductory chapter, Heelas and Woodhead charted and analyzed the "spiritual revolution" away from churchly, congregational religious practice and toward holistic "spiritualities of life" in Kendal, England.

Heelas, who is married to a Swede, noted the famously low rates of churchly participation in Sweden and predicted that Sweden leads the "spiritual revolution." Was he right about that? And how might one find out?

Another spark of curiosity that motivated us was what in the vernacular of our capitalist era might have to be called market analysis: understanding who is or might want to be involved with the Swedish Church. Since the year 2000, the Church of Sweden has no longer been an official national church. It competes with other religious movements and above all with secular commercial culture. And so far, not so good: the Swedish Church is losing about one percent of its membership each year. Our study probed the cultural context of this transformation.

For me, another area of curiosity concerned processes of *individualization*. This term has multiple resonances and is often conflated with an *individualism* that celebrates human freedom and self-expression. The concept that I have in mind has a more pessimistic lineage, most notably in the works of Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck. I look at individualization as a process of societal change whereby each individual is left to work out more and more of life's challenges on her own, for better or for worse. As fewer risks are socialized, each person must manage a complex game of opportunities and risks alone.

The fading solidaristic society used to reassure the citizen: "We're all in this together." The individualized society, by contrast, declares: "You're on your own" (Lakoff 2006).

Individualization does indeed contain certain liberating elements -- at least for the savviest players of the social game, who can win on a previously undreamt of scale. But the process should not be mistaken for a general trend toward increasing freedom. Rather the contrary, as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002:4) write:

> Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labor market, the education system, the welfare state, and so on.

In other words, people are forced to do more and more managing and strategizing, whether they wish to or not.

A normal result is insecurity and anxiety. Our life journeys become what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:3) call "tightrope biographies," in the sense that even a single misstep or misfortune can send us tumbling off our tightropes toward unemployment and poverty. Bauman describes the prevailing sentiments of instability and insecurity:

> Nowadays everything seems to conspire against... lifelong projects, permanent bonds, eternal alliances, immutable identities. I cannot build for the long term on my job, my profession or even my abilities. I can bet on my job being cut, my profession changing out of all recognition, my skills being no longer in demand. Nor can a partnership or family provide a basis in the future. . . . togetherness lasts no longer than the gratification of one of the partners, ties are from the outset only 'until further notice' . . . . (Bauman in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:3)

It is the mixture of exhaustion (the constant strategizing to stay afloat) and anxiety (the ever-present risk of sinking) that frame the psychological climate of an individualizing society. What happens to people's inner lives under such conditions? What becomes of spirituality? Bauman (2001:159-160) offers one answer:

> Individuals have been offered (or, rather, have been cast into) freedom of unprecedented proportions – but at the price of similarly unprecedented insecurity. And where there is insecurity, little time is left for caring for values that hover above the level of daily concerns – or, for that matter, for whatever lasts longer than the fleeting moment.

Our study offered a chance to test Bauman's claim and to see how people spoke about their (as Bauman correctly surmised) "little time" left for concerns beyond the quotidian.

The empirical work

The locality study began with a survey conducted by my colleagues, which was sent to 2000 lucky residents of Enköping. More than 1000 people filled it in – a surprisingly high result, given that there were 45 questions over 18 pages. The possible self-selection involved – between the roughly half of the recipients who threw it in the trash and the half who slogged through it – has been discussed elsewhere in this volume.

About 100 survey respondents volunteered to be interviewed, and my colleague Erika Andersson and I contacted more than 30 of them. Eventually we were able to meet 23 of these persons for taped interviews, averaging about 45 minutes each.

How did we choose whom to call? Partly, we sought a wide demographic range. For example, we looked for immigrants, who were underrepresented as a whole, and people of different social classes. I scooped up the few people who were

politically active, while Erika was especially interested in those involved with holistic well-being practices.

Once again, the selection and self-selection biases need to be noted – the winnowing of our pool from 2000 to 23. We cannot claim that our results are necessarily representative of larger populations. What do the interviews with these 23 individuals really tell us about Enköping? And does this pretty little town represent anything more than itself -- can it help us understand whether Sweden leads the "spiritual revolution"? Such questions were frequently asked in our research seminars, here in the country that sociologist Alvin Gouldner once claimed had the world's most positivistic social science.

As an interpretive anthropologist, I was trained at the opposite end of the positivism spectrum. One of my former dissertation advisors, Michael Herzfeld, saw anthropology as an art, not a science. One of his books was based on the story of a single person, the Greek novelist Andreas Nenedakis, and yet Herzfeld made clear that the book was an ethnography in the sense that, by means of one person's experiences, it sought to make sense of a wider cultural milieu.

In that interpretive spirit, we set out to do interviews that were partially standardized, partially open-ended. We sought to hear about what mattered most to our hosts, how they spend their time (on a typical day, a typical week), and what moments and activities were most important to them. We followed up with further questions about the activities they had named, and – late in the interviews (to avoid putting words in respondents' mouths) – we turned to questions about spiritual and religious moments and activities.

Respondents' views of their society

Enköping markets itself as "Sveriges närmaste stad" ("Sweden's nearest city"), a reference to its proximity to three larger population centers. Two of my interviewees modified this piece of municipal self-branding and said that the place was "Sveriges tråkigaste stad" ("Sweden's most boring city"). When asked what was most interesting to him in Enköping, a young man answered with a laugh that "ingenting" ("nothing") was. He continued: "Så slår Uppsala och Stockholm oss på fingrarna så det är liksom en mindre stad helt enkelt. Det finns mindre av det mesta och det finns som inget som är intressant." ("So Uppsala and Stockholm knock us out, so it's like a smaller city quite simply. There is less of most things and there is nothing that is interesting.")

For him and others in this nearest of cities, it was all too easy to compare with nearby alternatives. Often there was a perception that real life -- life with a more energetic pulse -- was someplace else. For middle-aged and older

individuals, the comparison could be to Enköping's advantage. A woman living on a disability pension on the outskirts of town considered Enköping rather busy. As for spending time in Uppsala, that was "jättejobbigt" ("super-strenuous"); there was "så mycket brus" ("so much bustle") she said, that she walked around "i min egen bubbla" ("in my own bubble"). On her rare trips to Stockholm she had found "ett enormt brus, människor som springer" ("enormous bustle, people running all about"). As a native New Yorker, I was struck by the relativity of perceptions of tempo.

Other portrayals of the town took up demographic issues. When asked to describe Enköping, a church worker told me: "Det är en gammal bondestad. Det är högerstyrt, rätt så klassiskt svenskt, mitt intryck är att det är väldigt segregerat. Det finns vissa områden där det bor invandrare men annars så bor det inte några invandrare på andra ställen. Men ute hos oss finns det ingen människa som inte är svensk." ["It is an old farming town. It is governed by [parties of] the right, quite clasically Swedish, [and] my impression is that it is highly segregated. There are certain areas where immigrants are living, but otherwise there are no immigrants living in other places. Out in our part there is no one who is not Swedish."]

To that description one might add that the ethnic Swedes who live near the immigrants are usually those with the least economic resources and the most social problems. We see the faint outlines of an underclass even here, in this comfortable town in the nation that is ranked best in the world on the United Nations Development Program's Human Poverty Index.

Do the residents of Enköping see these differences? The city's head of social services, Anita Jalkemyr, told me that "människor i allmänhet ser inte att andra har det dåligt. Man kan invaggas i en uppfattning att alla i vårt land har det bra. ... Det är svårt att svara på. Människor som har det bra ställt tror jag konstaterar att vissa har det som vi och andra har det ännu bättre. En och annan kanske har det lite sämre." ["people in general don't see that others have it rough. . . . I think that people in a good position observe that some people are in our situation and some have an even better situation. Maybe a couple have a little worse situation."] Poverty, she feels, has become more invisible and less interesting as a subject for journalists.

Almost every person we spoke with -- left-leaning as well as right-leaning -- felt that their society was changing in a largely negative way. A truck-factory worker observed: "Det har blivit ett hårt klimat, anställningsmässigt och så" ["it has become a hard climate, in terms of employment and such."] A man who works in a pizza restaurant said: "Det finns ingen respekt, alla försöker lura varandra. Och dom kallar det affärsmässigt. Folk tänker inte på andra, de bara tänker på sig själv, hur dom kan vinna lite mer av allting." ["There is no respect. All try to

cheat one another. And that's called [being] businesslike. People don't think about one another, they only think about themselves, how they can win a little more of everything."]

Some of my hosts identified problems in terms of individualization. An unemployed woman from the transportation industry noted: "Det blev lite kallare mentalitet, var och en ska ta hand om sig själv på nåt vis. Samhället tar inte lika mycket ansvar för individerna. .... nu är det mycket mer av dom här nyliberala värderingarna som finns att i första hand ska man sköta sig själv, och man ska klara sig på egen hand, och gör man inte det jag då får man väl ta emot lite allmosor." ["It has become a little colder mentality, each one shall take care of themselves in some way. Society doesn't take as much responsibility for individuals ... now there are much more of those neoliberal values that first and foremost one should take care of oneself, and one should manage on one's own, and if one doesn't then one has to receive a little alms."] And an educator said: "man alltmer menar att individen själv ska klara av sake roch ting utan stöd. ... Och det misstänker jag är en slags övergångsperiod sen kanske det blir mer som i Amerika. ... Det är lite oshyssta spelregler." ["one more and more means that individuals themselves should manage a lot of things without help. ... And I suspect that this is a sort of transition period and then perhaps it will be more like in America. It's a little dishonest rules of the game."]

When it came to their own experiences of these societal changes, almost everyone reported a lack of time in their lives. This concern was presaged by a note on one of the questionnaires done earlier in the project, where a cook wrote: "Hoppas att jag inte skickade in pappren för sent. Det har hänt väldigt mycket i mitt liv som tagit jättemycket tid." ["Hope I didn't send in the paper too late. There has happened terribly much in my life that has taken enormously much time."]

Complaints of overwork were nearly ubiquitous. The worker at the pizza shop reported "no time left over for anything else, just work." ("Ingen tid över till något annat, bara arbetet.") He worked seven days a week. A retired warehouse manager complained of the speeding up of work: "One can't cut down on people, twenty men reduced to ten who shall do even more work, that can't be sustained in the long run." ["Man kan inte skära ner folk, tjugo man till tio som sen ska göra mer jobb, det håller inte i längden."] A woman employed in social services similarly described the speeding up of work that has occurred since her agency was privatized.

The same patterns applied outside of work. Interviewees described the flood of information they have to deal with, and one woman attributed the demise of civic organizations to the fact that no one has time anymore to serve on their

boards. She continued: "Det tror jag är det största hotet mot landsbygden -- tidsbristen."

Depictions of the spiritual

In each interview, we came eventually to questions about moments, activities or experiences that our hosts considered spiritual (*andlig*).

A woman who works for the Church of Sweden described spirituality as "en känsla av att man deltar i ett större sammanhang. En upplevelse av det i sin person." ["a feeling that one takes part in a larger context. An experience of that in one's person."] A young computer enthusiast was among the few who distanced themselves from the term: "andlig för mig det är att man söker bekräftelse om att universum fungerar på ett visst sätt och istället för att gå efter vetenskap och undersökningar så gåt man efter känslor och det andra har sagt." ["spiritual for me is that one seeks confirmation that the universe functions in a certain way, and instead of going by science and research, one goes by feelings and what others have said."]

A youth-services worker contrasted spiritual with what she saw as the religious person's definite belief in God: "Men andlighet då är man nog mera öppen för, ja man behöver inte vara så klar över vilken gud. Men man tror kanske på ett högre väsen, eller tänker att det finns andra deminesioner i livet. Och så. Jag det finns så mycket med österländsk visdom, som inte är direkt någon religion, som jag tänker är mer andlighet." ["But with spirituality one is rather more open for, ja, one doesn't need to be so clear about which god. But one believes perhaps in a higher being, or thinks that there are other dimensions in life. And such. There's so much with Eastern wisdom, which isn't directly any religion, that I think is more spiritual."]

Asked to describe spiritual moments or experiences of their own, our interviewees most often named times when they were alone and free from pressures imposed by other people. A middle-aged man who worked as an artist answered thus:

"En stund för sig själv och bara stänga av, stänga av mobiltelefoner, stänga av radioapparater och låsa ute omvärlden en stund då kanske man kan va lite andlig med sig själv och då behöver man inte tro på nån gud eller Jesus och en massa andra samsagor …. ska jag vara andlig med mig själv då skulle jag sätta mig ner och stänga av allting jobb och så och omgivning, folk, rubb och stubb. Stänga av mobiltelefonen, rycka ut jacken, stänga av radion."
["A moment for oneself and just to turn off, turn off the mobile telephones, turn off the radios and lock out the surrounding world, a moment when perhaps one

can be a little spiritual with oneself and then one doesn't need to believe in some god or Jesus or a mass of other stories .... If I am to be spiritual with myself then I should sit myself down and turn off everything job-related and such and the surroundings, people, the whole lot. Turn off the mobile telephone, pull out the plug, turn off the radio."]

Time of one's own was named by many others as well, including a young woman who works in a factory: "det betyder ju att man försöker hitta en stund för sig själv varje dag och att jag kan hitta nånting att koppla till mig själv och jag kan ju föreställa det som min andlighet. Sen har ju jag den föreställningen att det finns nått högre väsen som vi har med oss men är vi för stressade och ignorerar det så kommer vi i obalans med oss själva så ser jag det som en helhet. Sen så vill jag också att jag varje kväll har en stund för mig själv innan jag somnar där jag summerar kvällen och också som jag är uppväxt med ber en aftonbön…."

When asked what they did to feel well (*att må bra*), respondents answered in a similar vein, emphasizing time sequestered from others. A woman who advocates for fellow disabled persons said: "Då sätter jag mig i fåtöljen och sen så sätter jag på mig hörlurar också lyssnar jag p åen bok, och så lägger sig katten i knät på mig och sover och så tar jag fram handarbete. Då hämtar jag krafter." ["Then I sit myself down in the armchair and so then I put on the earphones and listen to a [recorded] book, and so the cat lies down on my knees and sleeps and so I take up my needlework. Then I recover my strength."

Several interviewees emphasized time spent in nature. A social services worker explained: "…när jag arbetar så arbetar jag så intensivt med människor och så nära, så att jag tycker det är väldigt skönt att bara få vara ensam. Sen är det så rogivande att var ute i en båt -- man lämnar ifrån sig all stress och all oro; det finns inte så mycket man kan göra, man måste bara vara där på båten….Jag försöker lära mig det att man behöver vara ledig ibland … att kunna koppla av. Men det här med båten, det är en källa för återhämtning kan man säga." And a woman working as a personal assistant said that she sought out "tid för att tänka och reflektera -- det ska till exempel ta 20 minuter att cykla till idrottsföreningen, för under den tiden så hinner man tänka och få ett lugn. Istället för att bli skjutsad och lyssna på radio samtidigt." ["time to think and reflect, for example taking twenty minutes to cycle to the sports association so that during that time one has time to think and get a pause. Instead of being driven and listening to the radio at the same time."]

<u>Spirituality as a pause from pressured living</u>

These moments of what respondents described as spirituality and personal healing followed a discernable pattern. They involved one or more of the following elements:

1) A move from a *mediated space* of over-stimulation (e-mail messages, cell-phone calls, TV, radio) to a *sequestered space* of low-tech or no-tech calm, often out in "nature."
2) A release from *measured time* (scheduled, counted, accountable) into *exempt time* (missing the bus and sitting alone at the stop, stepping out to see the stars after completing the day's duties).
3) A temporary escape from *other people's expectations and demands* – even the implicit expectations that come with sharing public spaces – into a *protected space of solitude*, a space and time of one's own.
4) A shift from *self-responsibility* (doing what one ought to do, meeting internalized expectations) to *passivity and receptivity*.

These seem to be the key ingredients of a certain kind of present-day spirituality, a spirituality that is *a pause from pressured living*. We might even designate the moments in question as *individualized observances* to emphasize their ritual character: they were regularly repeated experiences, they were often actively sought out, and they were seen as uniquely valuable for personal sustenance.

Such observances would seem to be a logical result of conditions of individualization. People are overwhelmed with demands on their time and floods of information to process; and they are forced continually to strategize, choose, manage and market themselves in a game which offers no endpoint of security at which to stop and relax. It is perhaps not surprising that under these circumstances, people cherish and celebrate the rare moments when they are allowed to be alone and cut off from such pressures. Under conditions of individualization, to be spiritual is to stop.

Here one might note that certain other areas of present-day culture seem to offer similar qualities of solitary, sequestered and relatively passive sustenance -- that some observers have chosen to label as spiritual or religious.

Consumer culture is one candidate, and we may recall Georg Simmel's (1978[1900]:237) discussion of the conceptual similarities between God and money -- what he calls "the final pacification in which the effect of money approaches that of a religious mood .... calmness of the soul ... feeling of standing at the focal point of existence."

Or what of sports spectatorship? The writer Garrison Keillor (2005) describes how "The sports station [on the radio] gives you a succession of men whose absorption in a fantasy world is, to me, borderline insane. You're grateful not to

be related to any of them..." But he also notes their self-forgetting enthusiasm; they are "...having so much fun they achieve weighlessness -- utter unself-consciousness..." Might not that "utter unself-consciousness" remind us of what William James (1994 [1902]) presented as the twice-born religious person's "abandonment of self-responsibility … throwing the burden down"?

Even erotic spectatorship has sometimes been described as spiritual. A newspaper article (Sydöstran [Blekinge], May 2005) quotes a former Yugoslavian policeman who opened a strip club near the Swedish town of Jönköping: "People come to us to relax and look at beautiful gals. It is a wonderful form of contemplation." The contemporary American spiritual writer Thomas More (1998:100) similarly observes: "Whenever I see men standing passively in small groups before magazine racks filled with pictures of men and women in various levels of undress and sexual pose, it seems obvious that they are wrapped in contemplation." He writes that such "sexual meditation" is done "in a rather humble, if not humiliating, posture" and may be seen as religious. Is this also an abandonment of self-responsibility in a solitary, sequestered, and relatively passive form?

With all these examples, we can ask, do we choose to call them spirituality or something else, such as recreation, rest or entertainment? We can also ask, is the element of passivity an indispensable part of spirituality under conditions of individualization? Are there, by contrast, high-activity forms of spirituality that we should consider in our account?

Implications for the Swedish Church

If many persons find spiritual sustenance in solitary, sequestered forms, where does this leave the Swedish Church? For people who cherish time of their own, relieved of the pressure of responding to others, organized church services will not be high on the agenda. This was the case even for the church worker I interviewed: "Det är inte viktigt isig att gå på gudstjänster, jag gör det ibland men det är inte för att det är där jag får mina andliga upplevelser. För jag kan tycka att det är ganska tråkigt, sitta och titta lite på programmet: ja det är bara tre punkter kvar." ["It is not important in itself to go to church services, I do so sometimes but it is not because it is that there I get my spiritual experiences. For I can feel that it's rather boring, to sit and look a little at the program [and think] yes, it's three points to go."]

Even those who go to church more regularly sometimes described it a bit of a burden, one more thing to worry about on the week's crowded schedule.

Could the Swedish Church offer any sort of "individualized observances"? It's not obvious how, since the spiritual moments I have been describing generally took place when the interviewees were alone, and at unscheduled times of their own choosing. The best I can think of in this vein would be a church-sponsored park or nature sanctuary where people could walk by themselves, perhaps encountering some beautiful sculptures or signposts here and there.

The lunchtime music offered on certain workdays at the main church in Enköping seems to be a step toward satisfying the yearning for individualized observances; but the activity is still too collective and too scheduled. Providers of holistic spirituality, or New Age as it's more often called, may fare better here, in that they sell products that can be used at home to mark out and sanctify time of one's own: yoga mats, candles, crystals, incense, bath oils. It is possible that even massages could function as individualized observances: although they are normally scheduled in advance and a provider is present, there is normally silence or meditative music rather than conversation, and one doesn't have to think about the provider's needs.

The holistic movements also meet the expectations for wide-ranging choice that are a characteristic of individualization and of consumer society more generally. There are hundreds of products and services to choose from, even in little Enköping. By contrast, the church seems to insist on one-size-fits-all, as the personal assistant explained in her interview: "Religiös för mig innebär att man har tagit sig en religion och har vissa regler som man ska följa för att om man inte följer dem så tror man att man inte mår bra … för mig är det jättekonstigt att det ska finnas regler som ska passa in på alla individualiteter för det stämmer inte alls." ["Religious for me implies that one has taken on a religion and has certain rules that one must follow because if one doesn't follow them one doesn't feel well ... for me it is very strange that there should be rules that should fit all individualities, because that's not so at all."]

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002:xxii) describe how under conditions of individualization, we are left to seek individual, private remedies to collectively produced problems and risks: "How one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions."

At a certain point in time, the Swedish church may have functioned in the opposite manner: as a systemic solution to biographical contradictions. The doubts and traumas of individual existence -- finding one's path in life or facing the death of a loved one -- were made less crushing by the collective work of the church.

Today, for many of the people I interviewed, the church is just one more systemic contradiction, and they walk off in search of solutions to their overstressed lives alone -- relieved to be alone.

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