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Church in changing landscapes: God's Mission and Our Own

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Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers in the Church of Finland, I am so glad to be with you today. I offer ecumenical greetings to each and all of you and my gratitude for your invitation to participate in this special consultation on the *Church and mission in changing landscapes*. I am especially honoured by your asking me to present this keynote address and to participate in a distinguished panel on these same matters. I very much look forward to our discussion.

To approach our topic, I can do no better than to sketch how I see our global situation and then to reflect on the church's mission in these changing and often challenging times. I will also focus on three vital questions that will be discussed in the Panel Session. First, in these changing and turbulent landscapes, can the ecumenical movement of unity and mission help and support churches in their various situations? Second, what can the church of Jesus Christ say to people? Third, do Christians have a voice and message in today's world? Each of these urgent questions begs the question whether Christianity matters today.

I want to argue that, yes, absolutely, Christianity and the actions of Christians and their churches can be crucial—one might almost say redemptive—in addressing the problems of our world at their deepest root. Moreover, the ecumenical advances in reconceiving mission and evangelism offer a new paradigm and incentive for such engagement, fully consonant with our animating ecumenical commitment to the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity. Christianity matters, never more so than now, and your work and ours funds that possibility with compelling theology and an inspiring vision. Indeed, the Church has a message to the changing and struggling world. Before we explore what, that message may entail, let us glean a picture of the current global mission context.

The Global Context

The largest context and most pressing challenge today for Christians, for all of us, is the state of the *oikoumene*, the "whole inhabited world." We live in a time of widespread violent conflict, as we see up close in the war in Ukraine and the Gaza conflict. Yet wars, violence, and conflicts are not the only problems of humankind in the 2020s. As your

invitation noted, global problems also include, for example, poverty, hunger, lack of quality education, migration, climate change. How can we understand them in a synoptic view?

Our difficult, even perilous, times, a time of crisis, and our current global context have been described by our most recent assembly as a “polycrisis.” Five immense crises are, in our day, converging:

(1) *Accelerating climate change* threatens lives and livelihoods, wreaking havoc and even causing the extinction of species.

(2) *Increasing economic inequality*, the result of an unjust economic order, has left billions in poverty and stifled progress toward food security and global healthcare.

(3) We are also witnessing *a worldwide recession from the longheld consensus about human rights*, threatening the dignity and legal status of religious and ethnic and sexual minorities.

(4) Likewise, we are recently undergoing *a crisis of governance*, through a retreat from and paralysis of democratic institutions, an advance of authoritarian regimes, the inability of our international institutions to secure peace and well-being, and the rise of mis- and disinformation in politics and media, stoking of societal tensions and xenophobia.

(5) Finally, and most painfully, we are experiencing widespread and frequent *outbreaks of violence within countries and war between them*.

Today’s terrible and unnecessary wars are symptomatic of the whole polycrisis. We all know about Ukraine and Russia, and, since 7 October 2023, the war between Israel and Palestine (a conflict with roots that go back to 1967 and even 1948). But there are many more wars and conflicts going on that don’t get much coverage. There are presently, for example, more than 45 armed conflicts taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Insurgencies, rebellions, and terroristic assaults by extremist groups add to traditional wars between ethnic groups or nations.

What are the main factors in such conflict? The major root causes include those very same realities we mentioned above: political, economic, and social inequalities, extreme poverty, economic stagnation, poor government services, high unemployment, environmental degradation, cultural division related to ethnicity or religion. Religious conflicts are also prevalent in many parts of the world, though a closer examination will reveal that these are mainly grounded in socio-economic and political tensions.

This polycrisis reflects the multivalency of empire today, which declares its (dis)order is the only way, truth and life. My work in South Africa and leadership of the WCRC pointed to this destructive nexus of powers, powers which Christianity is called to counter through its witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ alone. So, as we frame our common witness it is in the common context of the global threat to all life posed by empire.¹

¹ A definition of empire by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, *Dreaming a Different World: “We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind. An all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while exploiting creation, imperiously excludes, enslaves*

These global trends, each of which engenders incalculable human suffering, are the broadest context in which Christians and Christian churches are living their ecumenical fellowship today. Their scale is global, their peril imminent, their solutions uncertain, threatening the integrity of life on earth as we know it. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22-24, “the whole creation has been groaning.” But we can see in the realisation of common witness and visible unity that in Christ, there is a new creation! (2 Cor 5:17)

And where is Christianity in this picture?² Christians comprise almost a third of the global population, and their numbers continue to grow in line with population growth. Continuing a decades-long trend, numbers of Christians are growing dramatically in Africa and Asia, such that the center of global Christianity is now in the global south (66%). This is reflected in the member churches of the World Council of Churches and presents new opportunities and challenges to the global ecumenical movement. Further, the most robust growth is among evangelical and Pentecostal churches, who have only recently become more ecumenically committed.

I believe that, though the global crises facing us are dizzyingly multiple, their confluence tells us that, at their heart, we are suffering from a global, civilization-wide crisis of values and systems. It is a spiritual crisis, a profound challenge to rethink our toxic cultural values and economic systems in light of their deadly impact on the possibility of sustaining our species and life on this planet.

Church and Mission

Can the ecumenical movement of unity and mission help churches in their situations?

First, to mission. I believe that the most recent developments in thinking about mission and evangelism can be of catalytic importance to contemporary churches, especially in clarifying their essential roles.

Attempts to define Christian mission have resulted in prolonged and relentless debates. Even more difficult is the task of determining the aims of the mission. If we attempt a more specifically theological synopsis of “mission” as the concept has traditionally been used, we note that it has been paraphrased as (a) propagation of the faith, (b) expansion of the reign of God, (c) conversion of the heathen, and (d) the founding of new churches.² Lesslie Newbigin states that:

The Mission of the church is everything that the church is sent into the world to do: preaching the gospel, healing the sick, caring for the poor, teaching the children, improving international and interracial relations,

and even sacrifices humanity. It is a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed. It is the colonisation of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit of lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.”

² For statistical sources on the latest trends in global Christianity, see Gordon-Conwell research on encouraging trends (<https://research.lifeway.com/2023/09/19/7-encouraging-trends-in-global-christianity-for-2023/>) as well as concerning trends (<https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/09/6-concerning-trends-in-global-christianity/>).

attacking injustice. The Missions of the church is the concern that in places where there are no Christians there should be Christians. In other words, Missions means to plant churches through evangelism.³

Properly understood, the Church is a function of mission and mission is the function of the Church. The church is not the sender, but the one sent (1Peter 2: 9). Its mission ("being sent") is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its mission. Missionary work is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work. More so, it is the church at work in the world. This missionary dimension evokes *intentional*, that is, *direct* involvement, in society; it moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary work such as evangelism and work for justice and peace. The understanding of the church as sacrament, sign, and instrument has led to a new perception of the relationship between the church and the world. Mission is viewed as "God's turning to the world".

What then is mission today? Emilio Castro answers this question somewhat succinctly. He states that God's mission and ours is to bring in the "Kingdom".⁴ And the goal of the 'kingdom' is life in its fullness. Hence the 'kingdom' has to do with the welfare of the whole person, not excluding the social, political and economic aspects of life. Since God is interested in the life of the whole person, so must we if we are to take our responsibilities of mission seriously.

Kritzinger also selects the theme of the "kingdom of God" in his definition of Christian mission: "We understand Christian mission to be a wide and inclusive complex of activities aimed at the realisation of the reign of God in history. It includes evangelism but is at the same time much wider than that. Perhaps one could say that mission is the 'cutting edge' of the Christian movement- that activist streak in the church's life that refuses to accept the world as it is and keeps on trying to change it, prodding it on towards God's final reign of justice and peace."⁵

No doubt, mission and mission theology have been central in developing the ecumenical movement. Although it had been evolving for more than 40 years, missional theology took a leap forward with the 2012 publication of *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. While radical in its implications for reframing mission and evangelism, as well as church life, *TTL* was also deeply rooted in classic Christian theology, especially about God's life in Trinity, the central meaning of the gospel, and the work of the Spirit in the world. The new mission affirmation gave us a new paradigm for thinking about mission and evangelism, offering fresh analysis of our contemporary world and lifting up the lived experience and insights of those on the margins for the life of the church. As the Mission Affirmation proclaimed:

"The church is a gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world. We must participate in God's mission in unity, overcoming the divisions and tensions that exist among us. The church, as the communion of Christ's disciples, must become an inclusive community and exists to bring healing and reconciliation to the world." (New Affirmation, #10)

³ LESSLIE NEWBIGIN, *Mission and Missions*, Christianity Today, August 1, 1960, p. 23.

⁴ EMILIO CASTRO, *Freedom in Mission*, WCC, 1985, pp.56-60.

⁵ J. J. KRITZINGER, *The South African Context for Mission*, Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 1988, p. 34.

Since then, the paradigm has only deepened and expanded. The Arusha conference in 2018 combined the insights of postcolonial and liberation theologies to elaborate on Transformative Discipleship. Pope Francis affirmed a similar direction in his thinking about mission and discipleship. And the WCC 11th Assembly further wove those directions into its message and into the Pilgrimage.

The new missiological framework is truly ecumenical (including Catholics and Evangelicals and Pentecostals in its process) and consonant with our other programmes and initiatives.⁶ It provides an overarching framework in drawing attention to the missions of the Triune God in our mission. It points to a new *modus operandi* in Mission from the Margins, and it draws out the implications for a Christian lifestyle that does justice in the concept of Transformative Discipleship. As *Together towards Life* reminds us:

“Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God, where the love that binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. The missionary God who sent the Son into the world calls all God’s people and empowers them to be a community of hope. The church is commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces, in the power of the Holy Spirit” (Mission Affirmation, #2).

In its most recent developments, missional theology has more fully embraced a fully critical appropriation of Christian traditions and practices through commitment to decolonial analysis. This will prove key, I believe, to developing more contextually appropriate, fully enculturated forms of Christian witness and creating local and global communities of resistance, reconciliation, and deep solidarity. The decolonial exigence also rightly focuses our attention on the continuing scourges of racism and gender injustice, prime legacies of centuries of colonial and patriarchal sway over all cultural spheres (social, economic, legal), including religion.

To summarize, ecumenical organisations are saying a few things: It is God’s mission, and we must partner with others in transforming the world. We must embrace the holistic view of mission. We must help churches to go outside the gate (from internal to external), the local congregation is most essential for mission - it is where mission happens. We need to put our energy and focus on local congregations empowering and enabling them to be missionally shaped. Dynamism, justice, diversity, and transformation are key concepts of mission today. Of particular significance, it speaks of the role of the church in mission and affirms local church initiatives in mission. The ecumenical movement brings this wider perspective of Christian mission to churches and enables them to work together in unity to transform the world. Let us explore this a little deeper.

Unity in Mission

Second, to the Pilgrimage. As you know, the WCC sees its work and the life of the churches as a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. In our Pilgrimage, we unite our worldwide fellowship of churches not only around our shared Christian faith, which remains our vital centre, but also in the specific interests of justice, love, peace, and hope. That is faith’s imperative and our clear vocation and God’s mission in the world. It too can be an invaluable resource and source of inspiration for the churches to build their

⁶ Especially perhaps with the latest directions in Faith and Order and the latest insights into ecumenical *diakonia*.

ministries around these perennials but pressing gospel imperatives. Justice, reconciliation, and peace: They bolster Christianity's relevance and offers a message to the world directed to God, spirituality and humanity. So, what is the church's mission and message to the world and where can Christians find unity in mission?

Justice: The cry for freedom and justice is loud for many in the world today. We are surrounded by the need for economic, gender, and climate justice. God uses several instruments to reach and transform the world, including and especially the church. Therefore, the church needs to hear and respond to this painful cry. The mission of the church is to follow in the footsteps of proclaiming Christ's love to the world. The church needs to stand where God stands and not get mixed up with the rich and powerful. The language of love is best expressed in standing up for truth, siding with the poor and holding out hope amid injustices and sufferings. Together we can make a difference in the world. Together we can live and fulfil God's vision for the world. Together we can say Christianity matters.

Love and Reconciliation: Christianity also matters because it is a gospel of love and reconciliation. With all the suffering and pain in the world today, what the world needs is love. Properly understood and if practiced well, the Christian faith is the message of love. John 3:16 tells us that "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." God is love and those who love God must love others (1John 3:11-15). We live in a world full of hatred, and we hear hate speeches and witness racial and ethnic conflicts in so many different places.

There is so much of brokenness, pain and suffering in the world. What is the message of the church in such a context? How do we work toward healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation? In part based on my experience in South Africa, I believe that, following the example of Christ's love, churches ought to help people to be brought into spaces to forgive, be forgiven, and seek reconciliation. The love of Christ reconciles a lost and broken world, not only to God but to the whole creational order which is renewed by the sacrifice of Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5).

Peace: Christianity matters because it is a gospel of peace. We have already mentioned that we live in very troubled times of raging violence, conflicts and wars. There seems to be no peace. Political leaders and countries believe that they can find solutions through violence. They are so mistaken. A culture of violence seems to pervade our world today. The WCC speaks against violence and calls for dialogue to resolve problems and conflicts.

The WCC has over the years worked for peace in the world. We spend a great amount of time, energy and money to work for peace. I went to Ukraine and Russia, to Israel and Palestine, Sudan and recently to Colombia, where we engaged with church leaders, politicians, presidents and other groups trying to work for peace. It is no easy task. Even churches express different views, we are too caught up in religious nationalism, often used as instruments of states and politicians whether rightly or not, that is not the matter. The truth is that if we are to truly follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, then we must be peacemakers, peacebuilders, and peacekeepers. I have seen how churches are in disunity and discord with one another because they are influenced by politics rather than their faith. Admittedly, it is difficult to not be influenced by the realities and experiences of our times. But how can we allow God's Word and Spirit to speak to us and to use us as Christians as instruments of justice, peace and reconciliation that leads us to unity? Christianity matters, because our Lord calls us to proclaim peace to the world. Yet there

can be no peace without justice. Christians are called to work for just peace in the world. And this should be an inevitable part of the churches mission in the world.

The Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity thus reframes our historic commitments—to unity, public witness, and service—to meet head on the existential challenges we face today: to walk in this world in ways which make all things new. This sacred journey, in which churches around the world take up the concrete work of justice and peace, will direct and embody the life, witness, and programmatic work of the council over the coming years. It evokes and supports a theology of companionship that extends the reach and effectiveness of our ecumenical community, our public commitments, and our collaboration in service. The WCC wants to show up where the churches are. We want to walk and work and pray with them, to learn from them and be present everywhere that there is evident need. As an organization, the WCC may not have the most financial resources, but through our fellowship we have access to the knowledge and creativity, dedication and faith of Christians all around the world.

A Christianity that matters must be guided by spirituality, renewal, impact and relevance. We must address the numerous challenges in our world, country, and context. Christians must work together for justice, love and peace as we proclaim the message of saving grace in the Jesus Christ to a broken and suffering world. Vital Christianity must speak of transformative discipleship, theological renewal, reforming churches, technological and digital integration if we want to reach young people, inspiring worship, relevant liturgy, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, decolonial imperatives, and Christian unity.

Discipleship and God's reign

What can the church of Jesus Christ say to people? What do we have to offer?

Christian churches today, in my opinion, can offer people what they always have: a deeper communion with God and fellowship with each other, a path to liberation and salvation, and a lifestyle of authentic discipleship as a follower of Jesus and his way.

To me, the realities we discussed in relation to mission and to the Pilgrimage also render the churches' perennial work more gospel-centred and more relevant to our hurting world. Christians and the Christian church are called to follow the example and mission of their Lord as they proclaim good news to the world. Our common witness is to the way of Christ's new world of justice, reconciliation, and unity. Through Christ's transforming Spirit, this world is coming to counter the empires of today. The reign of God is a world emergent here amongst us, where Christ's Spirit and Christ's people call to repentance those powers and systems of empire today. Our unity is vital to counter the division, inequity, and violence of today with a counter-vision of justice and reconciliation.

That is why I find the concept of Transformative Discipleship so personally compelling. It is closely akin to our notion of nonviolence and to Jesus' personal way of nonviolence. But it is also our key tool in ecumenical work. Whether in missions, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, humanitarian work, or advocacy for peace and security, the bedrock of our commitment and effectiveness lies in our personal faith commitment to following in the ways and footsteps of Jesus. Our discipleship, even when aimed at transforming systems of injustice in the world, must be premised on our own transformation, brought about through ongoing conversion to the love of God in Christ, the needs of the world, and love's imperatives.

The Pilgrimage also frames our ecumenical relationships as disciples together, companions of Christ. Becoming companions of Christ—and of each other—means

meeting God on our journey wherever people suffer injustice, violence, and war. To experience God's presence with the most vulnerable, the wounded, and the marginalized is a transformative experience. Alive in the Spirit, Christians discover their deepest power and energy for the transformation of an unjust world, joining with other faith communities and all people of good will as companions on the way.

That said, it remains true that the churches are deeply challenged, and not merely by demographics. We have only to recall the complex situations of churches in war zones, or the lingering repercussions of the clergy sexual abuse scandals, or the ongoing and divisive issues of gender and sexuality in the churches to realize that *our credibility as churches with each other, and our advocacy as a moral compass to the world, hang on honest commitment to reform*. As churches and councils, we must create safe spaces to speak sincerely and without judgment about these matters. How do we facilitate these difficult conversations without sparking further division?

Most importantly, what churches can offer people is hope. Christianity matters to our imperilled world because we are a people of hope. Amidst struggle, sufferings and strife, we live in resurrection hope: In the anticipation that all will be well. That justice will come. That love will prevail. That peace will come. That we will be one in Christ in unity. Hope is an eschatological gift for the future; but with the resurrection of Jesus, hope breaks into the present. Therefore, we keep hoping, though not through passive resignation, leaving it all to God. Genuine hope means working with God as instruments to bring in God's kingdom of justice, righteousness, love and peace. Hope does not disappoint us for God pours out his Spirit into our hearts.

Churches transforming the world

So, as we navigate the landscape we have described as the context for mission today, we ask finally: *Do Christians have a voice and message in today's world?*

Our theological and spiritual vision of Christian discipleship, communion with God and each other, and the dawn of God's reign can be compelling for Christians and their churches, I believe. But what about the rest of the world? What about all those of other faiths, or perhaps of no faith at all? After all, part of the point of Christian mission is to witness to others, and transforming the world seems impossible without enlisting the aid of allies and all persons of good will. What do we have to say, and how do we say it?

Our pluralistic reality raises all kinds of questions and problems. But can we simply agree that, of course, as Christians we seek the common good? That as believers we affirm the common humanity of everyone? That as concerned citizens we long for and work for true justice and real peace for all? And All means All?

On this basis, and on the basis of a long history of ecumenical Christians working side by side with and in secular organizations, civil society, and international organizations, we can readily "translate" our foundational religious ideals into values that can be affirmed by all. Justice, peace, reconciliation are not the exclusive property of Christians. Human dignity and human rights are deeply embedded in the modern international consensus. The kingdom values of healing, fairness for the poor, and respect for creation are all readily adapted by persons of other or even no faith. Our commitment to the God of Life only reinforces our commitment to abundant life everywhere, embracing it ourselves, enhancing it in others. So, we enter the wider arena, for action and advocacy, on this basis, ready to partner with others who affirm those deepest life values.

Nor must we water down our values or remain silent about our religious faith, sparked by the love of God we find in Jesus Christ. After all, our faith is what fuels our commitment, informs our values, and inspires our hopes for the future. Christians' message and voice in the public arena and the wider world, while nurtured at home, can be powerful and compelling to others outside the flock. Engaging God's mission in the world requires that we do mission with others, with all those who seek justice, peace, unity and reconciliation, even if they are not Christian. This is not something some Christians would like to hear but reality of the world and the call to transforming the world requires that we see the work of God in others. The Church is not called to be an exclusive social club or a holy huddle but serving God's mission and purpose in the world, renewing, transforming, healing and reconciling a world broken by sin and suffering.

Further, Christians globally united bring a strong voice and powerful witness to the world, especially when united with others of different faiths in action and advocacy. I think the multireligious witness at the Paris COP meeting in 2015 and 2023, and at many such meetings, is a compelling example.

Our unity is also a witness to the world. Christian unity is needed to witness to and transform the world as we address conflicts, divisions, brokenness and pain. Christian disunity is nothing but a feeble, weak and contradictory message to a fragmented world. Christian unity matters in the quest for justice, reconciliation, and peace in the world. It is God's call to us today. Mission unity paves the way for unity in mission in the world today.

Yet perhaps most powerful is when Christians model those values themselves. In the unity they achieve by overcoming historic differences. In frankly facing and addressing the injustices in which Christianity itself has been implicated. In the witness they offer as communities of resistance and solidarity. In their embrace of a culture of love and self-giving and their renunciation of a toxic culture of greed and violence. In standing up for human dignity and equality in their own ranks as well as in the broader society. In refusing to surrender hope ourselves, despite setbacks and reversals. Christians can be the "creative minority," as Toynbee called them, whose lives witness to an alternative vision and practice for civilization, anchored in love, reaching out with hope.

This is to especially assert our vision of Mission from the margins. God's new creation is not delivered by the powerful but borne by the excluded and marginalised. For the WCC in mission this means attending especially to excluded and marginalised communities, especially Indigenous peoples and peoples with disabilities. I want to highlight to you the importance of the discussions you are having as a church and as a state with the Sámi people. This is your own pilgrimage of Justice, reconciliation and unity as you meet in Sámi communities to hear and reflect on the wounds which need to be healed. As you face the intergenerational traumas and injustices of Sámi you are mapping out together a powerful model of transforming discipleship, which repents, repairs and restores. The ecumenical movement is modelling this in other contexts, especially with other Indigenous people and African descendent communities.

These communities show the world not just where the new creation is already breaking out, but for whom. This is why God's counter creation is new, because it is for those who subvert rather than conform to the norms of empire.

Will Christian discipleship and witness be enough to show us God's new creation coming? How will the world be "saved"? Our world is already safe, held in God's redeeming love, and its transformation breaks out in each step we take to rise up against the marginalisation and exploitation of God's world and peoples. Our pilgrimage is not only a journey to the ends of the earth, but to the margins where a new world begins. However, if it is to be so, then we must travel in a new direction, in a humble spirit, embodying a metanoia which itself signifies a changed life and world breaking forth.

Are these things enough to rescue humanity and save the planet? Perhaps not. But we must not forget that it is the moral commitment, creativity, and courage, expressed in action and advocacy, that eventually breaks intransigent powers to offer a new way and a new day.

In that Spirit, let us remind one another of our liberation in Christ, our transformative hope, and its potential to redeem the world. We aim at nothing less for, as Jesus himself said, "With God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). Living into that hope, let that promise find fulfilment in us as we witness in changing landscapes to how God makes all things new! (Rev 21:5).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry Pillay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'J' and 'P'.

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
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