

# Religion and the Paradox of Racial Inequality Attitudes

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*There appears to be an interesting paradox in American attitudes toward racial inequality: while Americans almost universally see inequality as a social evil, they also consistently oppose government programs to remedy it. This discrepancy appears to result from accounts for the causes of inequality: if inequality is caused by individual failures, rather than structural conditions, then government solutions to racial inequality are unlikely. We examine the role of religion in the formation of attitudes concerning racial inequality for both blacks and whites. Using logistic regression on data from the 1996 General Social Survey, we find that the inclusion of African Americans and multiple religious traditions further complicates the story behind contemporary debates over attitudes pertaining to racial inequality.*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have noted an apparent paradox surrounding racial inequality: while white Americans believe inequality is a bad thing, they consistently oppose government programs to solve it (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Kluegel 1990; Sears et al. 2000). The reason for these beliefs seems to be in underlying beliefs about the causes of inequality. White Americans do not believe that inequality is a structural problem, thus negating the need for a structural (or government policy) solution. Instead, the explanation for inequality lies within the individual—whites appear to believe that individual blacks have made and continue to make bad choices, leading to unequal outcomes.

In this article we seek to contribute to understanding religion's role in the formation of racial attitudes. Although much has been written about the formation of racial attitudes, this literature largely ignores the role of religion (see, e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 1998; Omi and Winant 1994; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tuch and Martin 1997; Sniderman, Tetlock, and Carmines 1993; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000). Recent research by Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999) and Emerson and Smith (2000) are important exceptions. Their work has shown that white conservative Protestants are more likely to hold individualistic explanations for racial inequality than other Americans. We extend the examination of the impact of religious belief and practice on attitudes about racial inequality to include other religious traditions (mainline Protestantism, black Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism) to test whether there is something distinctive in the white conservative Protestant "toolkit" (Swidler 1986) that is lacking in the religious toolkits of other traditions. Further, we examine the impact of religion on the inequality explanations offered by African Americans, be they in traditionally black denominations or in predominantly white religious traditions.

## CAUSES OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

In an attempt to determine what Americans view as the cause of racial inequality, the General Social Survey has asked a battery of four questions since 1972.<sup>1</sup> The questions begin:

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On the average African-Americans/Blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are . . .

- A) Mainly due to discrimination?
- B) Because most African-Americans/Blacks have less in-born ability to learn?
- C) Because most African-Americans/Blacks don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?
- D) Because most African-Americans/Blacks just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty?

Respondents must answer “yes” or “no” to each of the four options. Of the four, two tap into individual causes of inequality: in-born disability (B) and lack of motivation or will (D). Option (B), less in-born ability, appears to tap into a form of biological racism that is no longer acceptable in American public life (Bobo et al. 1997; Sears et al. 2000) and, as such, affirmative answers to this question have consistently declined over time (Kluegel 1990). Following Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999), we drop this question from our analysis.

The other two explanations, discrimination (A) and lack of access to educational opportunities (C), are structural explanations for inequality. The affirmation of these factors as causes of racial inequality implies the need for changes in government policy to remedy it. Table 1 lists the answers to each of the three questions for the 1996 GSS.

Blacks and whites respond to these questions in dramatically different ways. There is at least a 10 percentage point differential between black and white Americans on these racial inequality explanations. White Americans are more likely to deny structural causes of inequality and affirm the individualist responses, whereas black Americans tend to affirm structurally-oriented responses and deny the individualist explanation.<sup>2</sup>

Religion also affects attitudes and opinions. Black Protestants, more than any other religious tradition (and even the nonaffiliated), responded in the affirmative to “discrimination” as an explanation for racial inequality. Jews were most likely to respond “yes” to “lack of educational access” as a racial inequality explanation. Evangelical Protestants were most likely to respond in the affirmative to “lack of motivation” as a racial inequality explanation. Responses vary by religious traditions by as much as 35 percentage points on the racial inequality explanations.

**TABLE 1**  
**RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS PERCENT DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES TO RACIAL INEQUALITY EXPLANATIONS. GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY 1996**

	All <sup>1</sup>	Whites	Blacks	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other	Nonaffiliated
<i>Discrimination</i>										
Yes	39.0	34.6	64.2	31.9	34.3	62.4	33.1	40.0	50.0	50.5
No	61.0	65.4	35.8	68.1	65.7	37.6	66.9	60.0	50.0	49.5
<i>Lack of Education</i>										
Yes	45.9	44.5	53.5	35.6	49.3	46.7	46.5	66.7	51.5	51.4
No	54.1	55.5	46.5	64.4	50.7	53.3	53.5	33.3	48.5	48.6
<i>Lack of Motivation</i>										
Yes	50.4	52.1	41.2	61.4	52.3	42.2	52.4	25.5	36.5	39.8
No	49.6	47.9	58.8	38.6	47.7	57.8	47.6	74.5	63.5	60.2
N <sup>2</sup>	1733	1,471	260	430	344	173	399	50	96	201

<sup>1</sup>This study includes only all surveyed adult Americans who reported “black” or “white” on the race question and were asked the racial inequality questions.

<sup>2</sup>Sample sizes are conservative reports due to minor fluctuations across questions.

### THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

The issue before us is to examine the influence of religious affiliation and practice on views concerning the causes of racial inequality. Although there is a social justice strand among evangelical Protestants, we expect to find, as Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999) have, that this group is more individualistic than other segments of society and other religious traditions. We expect mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish respondents to be more structural in their explanations of inequality. Historically, mainline Protestantism has maintained a progressive theology marked by the social gospel movement of the late-19th century and has been known as the most active predominantly white Christian tradition in the civil rights era (Thuesen 2002; Regnerus and Smith 1998). Catholicism is marked by a progressive social teaching (Ricard 1991), and an "ethic" that Tropman argues makes those formed by it "more hospitable to welfare state structures" (1985:19, 1995). As a result, it has been seen as allied with "progressive movements in the areas of civil rights, labor relations and social welfare" (Kohut et al. 2000:42). Finally, Judaism's presence in American society as an oppressed minority coupled with its historic, if now strained, "alliance" with the African-American community (Phillips 1991; Kaufman 1988; see also Adams and Bracey 1999) also suggests that Jews will hold more progressive and structural explanations of unequal social conditions.

Turning our attention to African-American religious traditions, we have different expectations about the role of religion. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) portrays a religious tradition that differs significantly from white denominations. The black church is less individualistic and more communitarian in its ethos, and from her work we would expect members of black religious groups to provide more structural explanations of inequality in their responses. Turning to blacks who are members of white religious traditions, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) argues that the influence of black religion extends to blacks in white denominations and that blacks resist the individualist tendencies of their white counterparts. Cavendish, Welch, and Legee (1998) and Cavendish (2000) argue that black Catholics are distinct from white Catholics in important ways and that elements of the "Black Sacred Cosmos" are found among blacks even in the predominantly white Catholic tradition.

Turning from religious affiliation to religious practice, we anticipate that those most socialized in a particular religious tradition will most exemplify its characteristics. Previous studies have shown the impact of church attendance on community voluntarism (Hodginkson, Weitzman, and Kirsch 1990; Wuthnow 1991; Cnaan, Kasternakis, and Wineberg 1993), voting behavior (Green et al. 1996; Legee and Kellstedt 1993), civic participation (Regnerus and Smith 1998), and as a form of social capital (Putnam 1995; Greeley 1997). We expect to find a significant impact on racial inequality attitudes from church attendance.

### DATA AND METHODS

Data for this analysis come from the General Social Survey 1996. Our dependent variables are three survey questions that suggest three possible explanations for the differences in socioeconomic parity between blacks and whites. Each question contained three answer choices ("Yes," "No," "Don't Know"), which we dichotomized (1 = "Yes," 0 = "No") for use in logistic regression analysis ("Don't Know" responses were excluded).<sup>3</sup> We included background characteristics, which were dichotomized in the following manner: gender (0 = female, 1 = male), race (0 = white, 1 = black), southern residence (0 = nonsouth, 1 = south), and southern residence at age 16 (0 = nonsouth at age 16, 1 = south at age 16). Continuous background variables were: age (ranging from 18 to 89 years), education (measured in years ranging from 0 to 20), and income (12 categories ranging from 1 = less than \$1,000 to 12 = \$25,000 or more). Kluegel (1990) has found that political orientation exerts a significant impact on racial inequality attitudes, and thus we included this variable, measured on a seven-point scale (ranging from 1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative).<sup>4</sup>

Our religious tradition measure (defined by denominational affiliation) employs the scheme developed by Steensland et al. (2000). This approach allows for comparisons of independent effects of race and religion, especially among black Americans. Each nominal label highlights the theological and historical aspects that presently distinguish the various major strands of traditions in the United States: black Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and other (encompassing a variety of faith traditions). In all analyses the excluded category for this measure is the “nonaffiliated.” Religiosity is measured by church attendance, the only available measure for this concept in GSS 1996. It is measured on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 8 (more than once a week).

**RESULTS**

Table 2 displays the odds ratios of several independent variables that were predicted to have some impact on racial inequality explanations. Models 1, 3, and 5 include religious traditions,

**TABLE 2**  
**ESTIMATED ODDS RATIOS FOR INFLUENCES ON RACIAL INEQUALITY**  
**EXPLANATIONS. GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY 1996**

Independent Variables	Discrimination		Lack of Educational Opportunities		Lack of Motivation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Religious Traditions<sup>1</sup></i>						
Evangelical	0.685	0.662	0.766	0.828	1.737**	1.711*
Mainline	0.543**	0.544**	0.940	0.975	1.320	1.297
Black Protestant	0.613	0.649	0.381**	0.424**	1.333	1.272
Catholic	0.526***	0.515**	0.850	0.902	1.452	1.408
Jewish	0.500	0.528	1.023	1.029	0.530	0.542
Other	1.264	1.243	0.854	0.905	0.951	0.958
<i>Religiosity</i>						
Church attendance		1.029		0.996		0.989
<i>Political Orientation</i>						
Political view <sup>2</sup>	0.757***	0.759***	0.812***	0.809***	1.161***	1.168***
<i>Background</i>						
Age	1.016***	1.016***	1.014***	1.014***	1.011**	1.013***
Male	0.651***	0.642***	0.762*	0.757*	1.121	1.093
Black	4.148***	3.963***	2.877***	2.861***	0.636	0.629
South	0.691*	0.677*	0.627**	0.631**	2.253***	2.370***
South at age 16	0.946	0.910	0.982	0.977	0.554***	0.550***
Education	1.025	1.022	1.149***	1.148***	0.823***	0.816***
Family income	0.956	0.948*	0.975	0.976	1.003	1.014
Constant (b)	0.631	0.720	-1.181**	-1.206**	1.071*	1.029*
Chi-square	190.324***	187.611***	135.877***	128.689***	188.710***	194.070***
-2 log likelihood	1749.795	1694.824	1912.769	1861.759	1816.892	1756.070
N	1,454	1,412	1,486	1,444	1,447	1,407

<sup>1</sup>Excluded comparison group for religious traditions is the nonaffiliated.

<sup>2</sup>Scale for political review reflects a scale from political liberalism at the lower end and political conservatism at the higher end.

\* = 0.05; \*\* = 0.01; \*\*\* = 0.001.

political orientation, demographic, and other background characteristics for each of the three dependent measures. Models 2, 4, and 6 add the religiosity measure of church attendance to the regression results.<sup>5</sup>

Across all models, age increases the likelihood of responding “yes” to all three explanations, both structural and individualist. No other independent measure produced this consistent pattern. Focusing first on the structural explanation results (Models 1 through 4) we note that being black increases the likelihood of responding in the affirmative as much as four times more than being white. Increased levels of education significantly increase the likelihood that one will select “yes” to the “lack of educational opportunities” explanation. Conversely, being male and having southern residence consistently decrease the likelihood of choosing “yes” to the structural inequality explanations among the background characteristics.

If we turn to the results for religious tradition, church attendance, and political orientation in the first four models we note other striking findings. Mainline Protestants and Catholics are significantly less likely than the nonaffiliated to affirm “discrimination” as an explanation for racial inequality (Models 1 and 2). Black Protestants, on the other hand, are less likely than the nonaffiliated to affirm the “lack of educational opportunities” explanation (Models 3 and 4). Surprisingly, church attendance has no effect on the decision to affirm or reject the structural inequality explanations (Models 2 and 4). Political orientation consistently decreases the likelihood that one will affirm the structural inequality explanations (Models 1 to 4).

Turning to the individualist explanation, we find that age and southern residence are the only background characteristics that increase the likelihood that a respondent will affirm the individualist explanation (Models 5 and 6). Race does not have a statistically significant impact on this question. Southern residence at age 16 significantly decreases the likelihood that one will affirm this explanation; the same holds true for increased levels of education.

Focusing next on the religion and political orientation measures, we again find notable patterns. First, evangelical Protestantism is the only religious affiliation that significantly differs from the nonaffiliated and increases the likelihood that one will affirm “lack of motivation” as a racial inequality explanation. Additionally, church attendance has no significant influence on this dependent measure, while political orientation increases the likelihood that a respondent will affirm this inequality explanation. This measure and southern residence are the only two variables to remain consistent factors across all models and reverse direction depending on the nature of the inequality explanation (i.e., affirm individualistic explanations, reject structural ones).

In light of the dynamics across the entire sample, we considered the relative impact that race, political orientation, and religiosity play *within* predominantly white religious traditions. We selected the evangelical and mainline Protestant as well as Catholic religious traditions to examine whether these measures affect the responses to the inequality explanations. We ran separate logistic regressions for each of these three religious traditions on each of the three inequality explanations. Looking first at the odds ratios for the discrimination explanation, we find that being black within all three predominantly white religious traditions significantly increases the likelihood that one affirmed this inequality explanation. Church attendance had no significant influence within any of the religious traditions. Conservative political orientation decreases the likelihood that evangelical Protestants and Catholics affirm discrimination as an explanation for inequality.

A few differences appear in the second structural inequality explanation, “lack of educational opportunities.” Being black within mainline Protestantism and Catholicism increased the likelihood that one affirmed this explanation. Black evangelical Protestants follow the same directional pattern but are significantly different than their white counterparts. Church attendance continues to have no significant effect on responses to the inequality questions, while political view consistently decreases the likelihood that evangelical, mainline, and Catholic respondents will affirm this explanation.

Finally, odds ratio results for the “lack of motivation” explanation yielded some surprising results. African-American Catholics were the only religious adherents who differed significantly

**TABLE 3**  
**ESTIMATED ODDS RATIOS FOR INFLUENCES ON RACIAL INEQUALITY EXPLANATION WITHIN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE**  
**RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS—GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY 1996**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables								
	Discrimination			Lack of Educational Opportunities			Lack of Motivation		
	Evangelical	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline	Catholic
<i>Religiosity</i>									
Church attendance	1.096	1.023	0.985	1.032	0.983	0.999	0.935	0.973	1.072
<i>Political Orientation</i>									
Political view <sup>1</sup>	0.653***	0.846	0.820*	0.823*	0.802*	0.762**	1.308**	1.275*	1.177
<i>Background</i>									
Age	1.012	1.023**	1.009	1.025***	1.012	1.008	1.007	1.014	1.016*
Male	0.829	0.454**	0.654	0.808	0.607	1.063	1.294	1.157	0.739
Black	3.720*	3.664*	5.841**	2.595	3.805*	3.542*	0.975	0.438	0.221*
South	0.355**	0.366*	1.511	0.451*	0.547	1.055	2.451*	3.541**	1.455
South at age 16	1.045	1.150	0.645	1.158	1.277	0.562	0.557	0.503	0.796
Education	1.037	1.111*	0.960	1.160**	1.258***	1.065	0.819***	0.774***	0.824***
Family income	0.951	0.918	0.902	1.003	0.934	1.004	1.044	1.035	1.110
Constant	0.742	-1.236	1.460	-2.507**	-1.797	-0.318	1.108	1.325	0.046
Chi-square	50.235***	38.784***	27.083***	33.840***	39.025***	19.349*	35.035***	46.436***	41.447***
Log likelihood	399.264	315.280	416.306	455.876	357.442	477.537	448.867	338.954	439.571
N	358	276	356	371	286	360	361	278	347

<sup>1</sup>Scale for political review reflects a scale from political liberalism at the lower end and political conservatism at the higher end.

\* = 0.05; \*\* = 0.01; \*\*\* = 0.001.

from their co-believers in rejecting this explanation. Church attendance remained a noninfluential factor in these results and conservative political orientation now increased the likelihood that evangelical and mainline Protestants would affirm this individualist explanation.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings concerning the impact of religion on attitudes toward racial inequality are significant. Religion, primarily as measured by affiliation, affects beliefs about inequality and exerts an independent effect on answers to each of the three questions. Interestingly, where religion is significant, its effect is either to deny a structural cause—mainliners and Catholics deny discrimination and black Protestants deny lack of educational opportunities—or to affirm the individualist explanation—evangelicals affirm lack of motivation. Although this conforms to our expectations about evangelicals, the religious traditions we expected to be more structural were not in fact so.

Political orientation has the most consistent effect on inequality attitudes. It is always significant and always in the anticipated direction. Political conservatism makes respondents more likely to deny structural causes for racial inequality and affirm an individual cause. Race remains important as well, and being black has a significant effect (with high odds ratios) on affirming both structural causes of inequality, though it is not a significant predictor of denying the individual cause.

The contrasting effects of race and religion on the education question (Table 2, Model 4) are particularly interesting. Being black makes one much *more* likely to affirm this (structural) cause of racial inequality while being a black Protestant makes one much *less* likely to affirm this response. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) argue that there are two, often competing, discourses within the black church, a “survival strategy,” which points to the necessity of individual action to overcome poverty, and a “liberation strategy,” which argues for the necessity of collective action and community economic independence (1990:240–44). We suspect that our finding is the result of this competing dialectic as well as the black church’s focus on education and historic ties to black colleges and universities (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

When we turn to race and examine its role within religious traditions, our findings suggest several points.<sup>6</sup> African Americans who are members of white religious traditions are consistently more likely than their co-religionists to affirm structural causes of racial inequality. Race is always significant on the discrimination question and is significant for black mainline Protestants and Catholics on the issue of educational opportunities. On the individualist explanation, only black Catholics were significantly less likely than their white co-religionists to affirm lack of motivation.

Our findings on the impact of race within the evangelical Protestant tradition corroborate the findings of Emerson and Smith (2000). They conducted extensive interviews with black and white evangelicals and found that while their theology tends toward individualist explanations for life outcomes, black evangelicals’ racial experiences clearly allow for the possibility for structural explanations such as discrimination. Our findings that black Catholics are always distinct from white Catholics on this issue corroborate the findings by Cavendish, Welch, and Leege (1998) and Cavendish (2000) on the differences between black and white Catholics on other matters of faith and practice. Together, these findings suggest that if there is a universal cultural toolkit being taught by these three white religious traditions, it is not consistently affecting African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Emerson and Smith (2000) appear to be correct in their assertion that religion as structured in America does little to alter racial subgroups and may in fact enforce racial divides.

Political orientation remains a strong predictor of inequality explanations within religious traditions as well. Being politically conservative, where significant, consistently leads to the affirmation of the individualist cause of inequality and the denial of the structural causes. Political orientation exerts a significant impact on the discrimination explanation for evangelicals and Catholics, on the education explanation for all three traditions, and on the motivation explanation

for evangelicals and mainliners. Interestingly, while race exerts the most consistent effect within the Catholic tradition, political orientation exerts the most consistent effect on evangelicals.

Church attendance is strangely not significant in the models we ran. This is surprising given the power this variable so often exerts on a range of other issues. Its lack of significance here surprised us because if religious beliefs are forming attitudes toward racial inequality, then we expect those who are the most formed by a tradition to best exhibit it. That they are not is a puzzle that merits attention. One approach is to better operationalize religiosity. Church attendance, the only religiosity variable included in this particular GSS survey, is far from the only measure of how one is formed by a tradition. Other measures might include participation in church activities outside of attendance (committees, service, etc.), membership in a congregation, and financial contributions to the church/synagogue. We envision a scale from nominal to devout (with one or two intermediate categories) that might better reflect the influence of a religious tradition on an individual.

### CONCLUSIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We have attempted to understand the role of religion in the formation of attitudes about the causes of racial inequality and to determine whether the findings by Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999) could be extended beyond white conservative Protestants to other religious traditions. We have found that religion does, in fact, play a role in the formation of inequality attitudes and that religious tradition has a unique effect on each of our dependent variables. As we expected, evangelical Protestants are more individualistic in their interpretations of inequality than the nonaffiliated. Yet Catholics, mainline Protestants, and black Protestants, whom we expected to be more structural in their attitudes, were not so. Those most structural in their beliefs about the causes of racial inequality are African Americans, no matter their religious affiliation. That blacks in traditionally white denominations are more structural and less individualistic than their white co-religionists suggests that religion does little to draw blacks and whites together in their thinking about racial inequality. In short, our findings suggest that a religious cultural toolkit may not be a sufficient explanation for the combined effects of religious tradition, political orientation, and racial experience.

Much work on the relationship between religion and racial attitudes remains to be done. We hope that future research efforts will help resolve the puzzle concerning some measures of religiosity's lack of significance in the questions we address. In addition, we expect future research to consider the construction of what we might term an "American individualist toolkit" that assesses the impact of individualism on racial attitudes. Perhaps what drives racial attitudes is a form of individualism based on the pursuit of the American dream and a belief that those who have failed to prosper have done so based on their own personal deficiencies. We look forward to the construction of such a toolkit and to tests that indicate how it interacts with religious and racial identities.

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### NOTES

1. GSS Question 266, RACDIF1, RACDIF2, RACDIF3, RACDIF4.
2. These responses are not contingent on other responses in the survey; all sampled individuals were asked for their responses on each of the racial inequality explanations.



3. The “Don’t Know” responses constituted no more than 6 percent of the overall sample for any of the three dependent measures. In earlier analyses we merged these responses with the negative responses into a category we labeled “not yes.” Although regression results were similar, the yes/no dichotomy is easier to interpret. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
4. In earlier tests we also included political party affiliation but results were not significant in any model. Separate tables are available on request.
5. Nested models that introduced each of the three major component sets of independent variables were conducted in earlier versions of this article. Results available on request.
6. Given that our study was to untangle the effects of race and religion on racial inequality attitudes, we considered yet another possibility to avoid the low sample size problem we encountered in our supplementary examination using only whites or only blacks. We merged evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic religious traditions as a “predominantly white Christian traditions” variable, where all other groups were merged with nonaffiliates. Given that there were only eight black religious “others” and one black Jewish respondent, we felt that these additions to the nonaffiliate group would be acceptable. Our analyses were nonsignificant. In the 12 logistic regressions (four per dependent variable), only one model was significant based on chi-square statistics. We attribute this lack of significance as again due to low sample size where the nonaffiliate group numbered fewer than 30. Results available on request.
7. It is also possible that racial segregation may be present between congregations within these religious traditions, a condition that cannot be accounted for with the available data.

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