

Mission of the Catholic Intelligentsia in Central Europe

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Catholics have a heavy responsibility in the contemporary world. To contribute effectively to public discourse, which today is not infrequently dealing with central issues regarding human survival, they need to know not only the Gospel but also to be able to read the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 4). When thinking about the role of Catholic universities in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) it is very important to take an analytical and theoretical look at these contemporary societies and, according to that, to build up a picture of the challenges to the Catholic intelligentsia of this region. This is one of the eminent tasks and special characteristics of a Catholic university, as *Ex corde Ecclesiae* has pointed out: “a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research” (ECE, 13). Pope Francis formulated in his address the special mission of Catholic universities reflecting the CST as they prepare the new generation who are “proponents of the common good, creative and responsible leaders in social and civil life, with a proper vision of the person and the world”¹.

In this chapter, we start by clarifying what we mean by the CEE region and the different approaches to defining it. In a second step, we examine the societal, religious and denominational characteristics of the region with some theoretical remarks about the diverse approaches to the entire region as such and about the often uncritical use of the term „secularisation”. Then we will look at the most important regional preconceptions and “prejudices” regarding religion and the church, providing us with the discursive background for the mission of the Catholic intelligentsia. Thirdly, rounding off our discussion, we consider the main temptations and the main possibilities for an active and adequate presence of the catholic intelligentsia. The Catholic universities represent an important institutional framework within which Catholic scholars can grow to

¹ Pope to catholic universities. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-11/pope-francis-catholic-universities-purify-all-knowledge.html>

maturity, but they may also become distracted by too great an interest in gaining and keeping power. Focusing on the Catholic intelligentsia² allows us to keep our attention on the key actors within the Catholic university, as well as looking beyond them³, and can help us see both the opportunities and the dangers that they face as institutions straddling the “gap”, if we can use that term, between the Church and the wider society.

Characterising the CEE region

If we are seeking a theory of religion which has to cover the special cultural region called Central and Eastern Europe we first have to clarify what we think the CEE is as such. This is anything but simple. As a special region, the CEE is defined in very different ways. We will briefly refer to some important approaches to the CEE because our choice of a theory that is capable of explaining the role of religion in this special region depends on what we think about the CEE itself. It is important to keep in mind that, even if we refer to the CEE, or anywhere else for that matter, as if it were merely geographical, behind all geographical notations one or more theoretical opinions are always to be found. The very first task of the scholar of religion who is interested in regional processes is to reflect on the theoretical discourse regarding the region and to decide to use one or other conceptual framework for thinking about it. We will argue here that we need to see religion in the CEE region as a part of the transition process that this region has experienced.

Usually after the political turning point around 1990, the CEE region was mostly denoted from a political point of view, connected to the former Soviet Union. In public discourse, all the societies that were formerly part of the so-called “Eastern bloc” were often designated by the term „post”: the terms post-communist, post-socialist or post-totalitarian, among others, were used. The geographical notion of the “East” had political motives behind it. This political logic continues today, but now it is the European Union that is the starting point, and the societies of the CEE are usually denoted in relation to

² With the term „intelligentsia” I would like to mention in the one side one particular social class and on the other side I try to underline the relationship with the slavic term *inteligencja* (Polish), *intelligence* (Czech) or *інтелігенція* (Ukrainian).

³ The relation between the catholic intelligentsia and catholic university is complex. The catholic intelligentsia in Central and Eastern Europe was educated at state universities and supported by different semi-legal or even illegal fort-building programs. The 10-30 years of activity of the Catholic Universities in these countries serve as an additional institutional focus in the formation of today's catholic intelligentsia; she could be seen as a privileged place among all higher education institutes in building and formation catholic intelligentsia. (Thank you for this clarification on Silvia Miles, Zagreb.)

the EU: new member states, states already in the negotiation process, or those that are far from it, for example. The core element in both these types of denomination is the logic of „transition”, of the “from – to”: from the totalitarian Soviet Union to a free and pluralistic political order, or from an insecure economic system to the well ordered EU, or something similar. We will return to these very important notions of „transition” in a moment, but for now let us consider another, more historical, approach to the CEE region.

Scholars of sociology or religion often make the mistake of trying to understand this cultural region starting from 1950 and the Communist occupation, or from 1990 and the so-called change of the system. If we set this kind of starting point, we accept willy-nilly the political approach elaborated after World War II by representatives of the three world hegemonies, the UK, the USA and the Soviet Union agreed at the Yalta Conference (February 4–11, 1945). However, cultures and societies follow a profoundly different rhythm from the political one. Political processes are counted in days, months and years, but cultures count in centuries. To gain a deep understanding of our region, we should start in the Middle Ages, perhaps even going back to Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). The farther we go back in the history of Europe, the more it will be clear just how high the impact of hegemonies during the last 8-10 centuries has been on the societies in the CEE. West-Roman, East-Slavic and South-Ottoman hegemonies have determined the borders, languages, customs and freedoms of our societies for centuries. On average, the majority of the current states in this region have only had 50-60 years of sovereignty over the past several centuries. Therefore it is not surprising that a deep historical desire to be a sovereign state broke out across this region after the change, and that this desire holds strong even when faced by the advantages of being part of the EU.

The outstanding importance of the historical dimension in interpreting contemporary societal and religious processes in the CEE region has been underlined by several survey findings as well.⁴ On the basis of findings from these international surveys we can observe large differences between the societies of the CEE, even if they all suffered occupation and oppression for a long time by the same Communist power (Tomka 2011).

⁴ The author participated in both waves of the Aufbruch survey, in 1997 and 2007. Aufbruch (New Departures) is an international research project on religion and the churches in the CEE, led by Paul M. Zulehner, Miklós Tomka and other scholars from Central and Eastern Europe. The first and second waves of the international surveys were conducted in 1997 and 2007. The third survey was scheduled for 2017. (<http://zulehner.org/site/forschung/osteuropa>)

A deeper look into the findings reveals that the societies of the Eastern bloc had very different attitudes towards their national and the international Communist regimes (Demerath III et al. 2003; Ramet 1998). The differences during and after the totalitarian model of power can be understood only if we focus on an historical explanation.

The necessary relativisation of the impact of Communism on the societies of CEE could even take us as far as predicting the end of the CEE concept as we know it. If all international research demonstrates the lack of homogeneity across the region – from both historical and statistical points of view – we should stop speaking about the former Eastern bloc societies as if they constituted a region of Europe. Such a term, focused as it is on the impact that politics has had on the region, can make it impossible to concentrate on processes like transformations within the countries of this region. To carry on using the CEE model in the face of such results seems only to perpetuate a former political dichotomy in Europe.

Having reached this quite provocative thesis, we should ask ourselves another question: despite all that we have said, are there still not some other common characteristics among these societies which makes it possible after all, or indeed necessary, to treat them as a unique cultural region, or, speaking methodologically, as a separate research unit? It is here that we should return to the notion of „transition” that we mentioned above. One of the main characteristics of this region is the experience of forced transition, including its consequences, and in this sense, religion in the region should be understood and explained as one dimension of transition (Bremer 2008).

Transition is a very general and very often researched topic not only in social sciences but overall in physics, chemistry, medical science etc. In sociology transition as a special issue has a long scholarly tradition and it is perhaps arguable that observation of societal transitions has led some of the most famous scholars, from Marx and Weber to Habermas and Berger, to elaborate their special theoretical approaches. Here, however, our aim is not to follow the sociological history of thought regarding transition, but to specify the idea of „transition” as it concerns the CEE.

If we focus on the most important political elements of society in the CEE region, we observe that an enormous transition has occurred: from a totalitarian regime to a democratic system; from a one party system to a multi party system; from a planned

economy to a market economy; from censored public discourse to free public discourse; from persecution of religion to freedom of religion, and so on. We should emphasise that what we are talking about here are structural transitions; they may not always involve deep transitions in meaning or in the culture of the people. Still, as regards their structures of democracy, the transition process in the CEE region seems to be on the one side more or less complete (Ramet 1998).

On the other side in the recent years the region faced some experiences which have high impact on society and on the understanding of the functions and mission of the churches and especially of the Christian intelligentsia. In the Ukraine the revolution of Maidan (2014) showed how important churches' activity and statements can be in the turbulent time. From 2015 up the refugee crisis presented the churches with questions of loyalty parallel to the refugees and to their country's government. And not at least the crisis of sexual abuses creates a new discourse situation not only regarding the priest but the more regarding the entire credibility of churches and of Christianity as such. All these events intensified the special effects of the unfinished transition and highlighted the main characteristics of the region CEE.

Geopolitically the European Union plays a leading role in the CEE states, and they in their turn are well positioned in relation to the EU. There are at least three different status-categories: member states, candidate states and non-member states. The political discourse in public is often predominantly determined by relations between the states and the EU, and between pro-EU and anti-EU interest groups inside these societies. The fundamental logic of transition, from outside the EU to inside it, is very important, although there are more than a few voices and movements aiming to relativise the role of the EU for the CEE region.

While we focus on the CEE as a region in transition, it would be wrong to forget the role of transition in other regions of Europe, or, indeed, across the whole world. At the same time, at least in relation to the rest of Europe, the states and societies in the CEE are more unstable, in large part due to their permanent historical "inbetween" position. It is a commonplace among scholars of religion that religion can play an important role in transition periods, crises and transformations. But for me it is more important to note that the transformation itself can be interpreted as a religious or ritual process. I argue

for the understanding elaborated by Victor Turner (Turner 1995) and, following him, by Catherine Bell (Bell 1992).⁵

Secularisation and after

An ongoing discussion of secularisation is both the professional duty of sociologists and, perhaps even more, a vital discourse within and for contemporary secular society. Some years ago Charles Taylor published his volume „A Secular Age” and since that time he has been dancing a permanent intellectual tango with his distinguished colleague José Casanova. The main aim of both scholars – Taylor and Casanova – is to clarify the ballasted notion of „secularisation” and to distinguish between the secular as such, the theory of secularisation, and the ideology of secularism (Taylor 2007; Taylor et al. 2012; Casanova 2011).

Following the paradigm of secularisation, religiosity should decrease in parallel with the growth of modernity. In theory, the more modern a particular society is, the lower will be its level of personal religiosity. However, our empirical investigations into religiosity have not identified a clearcut relationship between modernity and religiosity, nor even one homogeneous characteristic of that relationship (Martin 1978; Berger 2008).

In the surveys regarding religiosity personal religiosity is usually measured through variables like: believing in God, spending time on religious practices, and one’s self-definition as a religious person. These and other similar variables are then synthesised into an index of private religiosity. In contemporary European surveys, using such measures one can observe a permanent decrease of religiosity in Western Europe, while in some Eastern European societies there has been a permanent increase over the last 20 years. In Western Europe, God is no longer the Christian God, who entered into human history through the incarnation, died and rose again. God is intercultural and pluralistic: sometimes there is the God of Hinduism, at other times, the gods of esoteric traditions or the postmodern technical, lyrical or rhetorical gods and goddesses. Worship is more and more free from the Judeo-Christian tradition and is often a kind of meditation or yoga or simple listening to the undefined inner voices. Attendance at

⁵ On the interpretation of transition in the CEE see my book, *Vallásnézet* (The Religious Point of View) Máté-Tóth András, *Vallásnézet: A kelet-közép-európai átmenet vallástudományi értelmezése* (Cluj Napoca / Kolozsvár: Korunk, 2014)

various Christian liturgical events is rare or very rare, but some large religious mass events are followed by millions of people, whether or not they belong to any Christian tradition. This kind of transformation in religiosity and the religious worldview seems to be not unlike that in some CEE societies (Tomka 2009).

Statistically, between 1990 and 2017, the societies where our case study universities from the CEE are to be found (plus the Czech Republic, since it shows very interesting different trends from the others) show varying trends regarding the different dimensions of religiosity. Just a small selection of data is sufficient to demonstrate how uneven the processes of religious change are across the CEE.⁶ Firstly, let us look at the number of Catholics in these countries, meaning people who identified themselves as members of the Catholic confession. Between 1990 and 2017 there is a clear decline only in the Czech Republic, while in Slovakia there is a 6% increase in 2001 and in 2011 data go back to the level of 1991. Poland and Ukraine show a more or less stable number of Catholics, although Poland shows a decline of 10%. In Hungary the census data demonstrate in the year 2001 a definitive decline in comparison with the previous census -15% what can be interpreted as the result of a very hot political debate about the tax-concessions and churches. The next period survey data show the same level of Catholics as in 2001.

	1991	2001	2011	2017 ⁷
Czech	39	27	10	21
Hungary	68	52	37	56
Poland	94	90	87	87
Slovakia	60	69	62	-
Ukraine	9	11	-	10

Catholics 5 CEE societies

Something similar can be observed with regard to those who do not belong to any confession. In the Czech Republic, this group has increased by 9%, while Poland with 3,3%; in Hungary this group is growing slightly, while in Slovakia it is after decreasing

⁶ Tables constructed by using data from National census, and Pew Forum survey 2017 Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁷ Data from Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe" <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

between 1999-2008, but come back to the same level as in 1999. We should note that those who do not belong to any religious confession should not be confused with atheists.

	1999	2008	2017
Czech	64,5	69,4	73,6
Hungary	42,1	46,5	53,2
Poland	4,6	4,5	7,9
Slovakia	23,1	19,7	24,4

Nones in 5 the Visegrad Countries

(EVS survey data: do you belong to a religious denomination (Q13) NO %)

Personal religiosity is often measured by faith in God and by the frequency with which people pray. In the CEE countries, the features of this personal religious dimension are also colourful and intriguing.

	Believe in God			Pray every day		
	1997	2008	2017	1997	2008	2017
Czech	31	30	39	9	10	11
Hungary	58	67	71	27	19	19
Poland	95	95	93	52	43	45
Slovakia	64	74	77	25	36	29
Ukraine	65	85	86	19	29	29

Believing in God and praying every day in 5 CEE societies

(Data from Aufbruch survey, and for 2017 EVS and Pew Forum)

Unlike the societal dimensions of religiosity, we find the personal dimension of faith in God to be increasing or stable in all the countries we are studying as well for the Czech Republic. We should remember again that here we are talking about a general idea of God, not necessarily the Christian one. When it comes to daily prayer, in the Czech Republic those who pray daily have actually increased by 2% between 1997 and 2017, and decreased % in Slovakia Ukraine, while the numbers in the Ukraine, Poland and Hungary are even.

Since Catholic universities are strongly related to the Catholic Church as an institution, it is important to show some data about the acceptance of the Church as such. We may hypothesise that the acceptance of the institution of the Catholic university will in some way be correlated with the acceptance of the Catholic Church. It is important at this point

to recall a relevant difference between Western and Eastern Europe. While trust in Western Europe in big societal institutions, such as banks, is at the same kind of low levels which parallel the levels of trust in the Church, in Eastern Europe there is no similar parallelism between levels of trust in religious and civic institutions. Churches are regularly trusted more than other big institutions (see Zulehner et al 2008, 119-223). Therefore, in analysing the mutual interaction between trust in the church and church institutions in relation to trust in civic or state institutions we need to be sensitive to these regional differences. Newest data show an unquestionable decline of the confidence in the church. In Czech Republic and Hungary the low level of trust is lower with 3-4%. But in the other three societies, Poland, Slovakia and the Ukraine 9-14% people have trust in the church.

	1997	2008	2019
Czech	31	21	17
Hungary	56	43	40
Poland	84	64	55
Slovakia	50	62	49
Ukraine	67	79	70

Trust in the church

(Data 1997 and 2007 from Aufbruch, 2019 from EVS 2019, for Ukraine 2020.)

Churchgoing at least once a month is more or less stable in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, even if at very different levels. Surprisingly, in Poland monthly churchgoers fell by 12%, while, unsurprisingly, this figure increased by 7% in Ukraine. We see a decrease in trust in the church as an institution in the Czech Republic, in Hungary and in Poland, while in Slovakia and Ukraine, trust levels are on the rise. This data presents how different these societies are regarding the various dimensions of religiosity, notwithstanding the fact that they all share a common past of Communism and the subsequent experience of the breakdown of that antireligious and materialistic system.

	1997	2008	2017
Czech	12	10	9,5
Hungary	20	16	18
Poland	84	72	66
Slovakia	41	40	41

Church going at least once a month in the Visegrad countries

(Data for 1997 and 2008 from Aufbruch and for 2017 from EVS.)

Some authors and some Church representatives contest the existence of secularisation in these countries with the fact of the public presence of religion (Herbert - Fras 2009). Although there is no question that, at least since 9/11/2001, religion has been very strongly present in the public sphere, that religion is not automatically the same as the religion we find in the private sphere. It is now more appropriate to speak about different dimensions of religion. One of the many dimensions is the political, another is the symbolic, and yet another is the ethical or spiritual. Behind the general notion of 'religion' there are various different public and private phenomena, which do not always work in parallel. The fact that religion plays a role in politics or law or that the churches have a pronounced presence in public debates does not necessarily entail an increase in church attendance or that of private ritual activity (Pollack et al. 2012). In our next step, however, I would like to concentrate on the public dimensions of religion, first of all on religion as a media event (de Vries et al. 2001; Niewiadomski 1995).

Religion is present in all types and forms of media, from offline newspapers to television news and the internet. Regarding this presence we ought to differentiate between religion in the media, the religion of the media, and, media as religion. In the first case, journalists report on different religious activities. The focus or highlights of such stories are always defined by the particular editors in accord with a particular programme or schedule. In recent decades there have been, first of all, religious conflicts in the news, and, secondly, religious mass happenings.⁸

What may be more interesting, however, is the situation where the media produces religion, that is, when the media plays the same role as religion, taking on its fundamental functions such as splitting time and place into profane and sacred, or giving extraordinary or normative importance to particular words, persons or events. The media is regularly doing this kind of thing. Broadcasts and performances create a virtual reality which becomes very important for the orientation of persons and communities. This may make it the real religion of today, such that we can sometimes have the impression that the religion of Abraham, Paul and Mohammed is measured by this media-religion, rather than the other way around.

⁸ E.g. World Youth Day, pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, public celebrations of Eucharist in case of Popes pastoral visits or in national shrines like Częstochowa (Poland) or Csíksomlyó (Romania)

Before we condemn the media in the name of the true religion, however, we should keep in mind that in every period of history both people in general and church representatives in particular have attributed special importance to everyday objects and experiences. Religion becomes religion always through continuous interpretation and reinterpretation. When today the media is the sixth world religion, a really global one, Christianity is invited to enter into an ecumenical dialogue with that religion, as it does with Hinduism or Mormonism, and not to condemn it, as all other religions were condemned before the Second Vatican Council.

According to our overarching theoretical framework, secularisation and some public dimensions of religion are very much present in the media, but some dimensions of the media can be interpreted as a new religion, with special communions, sacralities, holidays and spiritualities. One final remark, almost as a footnote: when the secularisation thesis proposes that the more modern a society is, the less publicly present religion is, if we consider the media to be a religion, then the case is diametrically the opposite. The more modern a society is, the more public is its media religion.

Contemporary religion in the CEE Region

Comparing different societies is a very specific academic activity and is not at all easy. Here we try, on the one hand, to explain a few relevant and important characteristics from the 5 societies in the CEE under examination, highlighting the very great differences between countries that share many characteristics of their 20th century history. On the other hand, we also aim to emphasise a few factors that have a particular impact on social life and which also have significant effects on the contemporary political, religious and church situation.

The societies we examine here are very different in terms of their size, their traditional forms of state sovereignty and their denominational variation. We may use these three historical and societal variables to help us compare them briefly. There is one small country regarding territory and the number of inhabitants: Slovakia, with its 50,000 km² and 5.4 million inhabitants. There are two middle-size countries, Czech Republic and Hungary, with their 79,000 km² and 93.000 km² respectively, and around 10 million in population. The last two countries are significantly bigger than the others in the sample.

Poland is more than 310.000 km² and has 38.5 million people, while the biggest, Ukraine, covers over 600.000 km² and is home to 45 million inhabitants.

As regards the combination of different denominations, Poland, Croatia and Ukraine (75%) are almost homogeneous, with the first two being largely Catholic and the second largely orthodox. Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic show two very different dishomogeneous denominational landscapes. Hungary and Slovakia are two-thirds Catholic, with significant Protestant minorities. In the Czech Republic, the biggest „denomination” is that of the non-affiliated and nonbelievers (around 80%). On the basis of a demonimational approach, our sample shows that across the region there are basically three types of society. One is religiously homogeneous, the second is mixed, and the third is primarily non-religious. This kind of typology disregards the colourful plurality of different religions and smaller demonimations in all these societies, but we have not done this by accident, and neither does it invalidate this simple analysis. The main cultural and political tendencies are determined by the main characteristics and therefore we should focus on them.

The last factor which merits special attention is the tradition of state sovereignty in each country. One of the most important characteristics of the whole CEE region is the multiplicity of different states and the enormous historical fluidity between their borders and of the form of their sovereignty. Some states have experienced long periods of autonomy, while others have only been able to achieve independence in recent history. Public opinion and public discourse as a whole are strongly influenced and defined by this component of historical identity. The longer the tradition of sovereignty in a particular society, the less need there is for nationalistic foundations to be emphasised for the contemporary justification of state autonomy and interests.

The abovementioned factors influence public opinion and discourse in mutual interaction with each other. In societies with more a homogeneous denominational structure and a long tradition of state sovereignty, we tend to find that societal identity is more solid than in societies with a dishomogeneous denominational structure and shorter historical periods of autonomy. The mutual interaction of these briefly elaborated influential factors defines to a significant extent the social context of the (Christian) intelligentsia and the Catholic universities in these countries. An intensive, analytical and critical reflexion on that context is one of the most important challenges

for the Catholic Church and of her higher education system. Pope Francis in his first encyclical *Lumen fidei* highlighted the deep interplay of faith and reason which should be kept in mind by reflecting on the different contexts of Catholic universities in the CEE region: „The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.” (LF, 35) And this is the special Christian and Catholic approach to the different public understandings of religion and church.

Current preconceptions about religion

Preconceptions are important in the orientation of large societal or regional groups in relation to smaller groups with special characteristics, even to the level of a particular family. In general, preconceptions, especially when referred to as “prejudices”, are often interpreted as destructive forces in thinking and communication. But following Gadamer (*Truth and Method*), Habermas (*Knowledge and Human Interests*) or Berger and Luckmann (*The Social Construction of Reality*) it is necessary to highlight the constructive role of preconceptions, that matrix of taken-for-grantednesses, and the importance of a common routine for a particular society. Between society and its preconceptions, or prejudices or stereotypes, there is a mutual interconnection. On the one hand, preconceptions are important for the unity and homogeneity of a society, while on the other, preconceptions and stereotypes can only change through a transition process within society itself.

In what follows, we try to list in bold and simple terms⁹ some of the common preconceptions regarding religion, and Christianity in particular, which are to be found in the CEE. These kinds of preconceptions do not only exist in this cultural region, but they are rather characteristic of it. They show something about mainstream thinking in the region regarding religion and therefore they should both be taken seriously in interpreting the intellectual content of society and be viewed as a mirror for the Church

⁹ This is not the place to go into the long history of preconceptions in the context of continental philosophical thinking. (Allport 1966; Nisbet 1983).

and the Christian intelligentsia, although sometimes it is a mirror that distorts its image. In every preconception there is a small piece of truth, so here we try to identify in every one of them this small piece, as well as showing a more appropriate, correct and distinctive way of understanding religion. It is appropriate to cite once again Pope Francis' encyclical: „Yet the experience of love shows us that a common vision is possible, for through love we learn how to see reality through the eyes of others, not as something which impoverishes but instead enriches our vision.” (LF, 47) After the long period of persecution and oppression, we can gain very important insights for scholars in Catholic universities from understanding and interpreting preconceptions that are useful to the faith. For the special CEE region, the study of prejudices leads us to important insights regarding the transition in general and about developments towards a new, no longer totalitarian society and culture. Learning about the diversity of religions in the world and about the dimensions of religion and religiosity can help to break down religious prejudice, and fewer negative prejudices regarding religion can contribute to the development of a tolerant, harmonious and respectful multicultural society.

Current Preconceptions and Prejudices in the CEE related to Religion

According to current, mainstream thinking, religion is something very private. If religion only belongs to the very private sphere of the person, however, it has no public role and can have no impact on political decisions. Religion cannot therefore be regulated by law and it should be of no interest to those in public life. Religious motivations and the life and organisation of religious communities are based exclusively on private decisions and feelings, and therefore their public activities are part of civil society in general and should be regulated and financed by their members or followers alone.

How should we evaluate this preconception? What is the “small piece of truth” that it contains? Religion, or more precisely religiosity, is private insofar as it involves discovering the inner dimension of the human person, and setting that dimension at the centre of our understanding of humankind. Since the Renaissance, religion has become more and more associated with feelings, with private sense experience and inner interests. In the thinking of Schleiermacher, for instance, religion is not less important because it is settled in the spirit of man, but even more important, because religion represents not only the facade of the society but the very centre of the person.

What about some of the limitations of this preconception? The idea that religion is a private matter has a certain importance, but if religion should only be understood as a private matter, this would represent a form of narrow thinking, not only about religion but also about the human being as such too. This is so because it is more than clear that it is impossible to think about the human person as an absolutely independent individual. Each person is embedded in society, in a particular culture, and what we observe as the inner dimension of the person is also a result of cultural and societal impacts. In the CEE it is very common to hear people speak of religion as only a private matter, not least because for a long time people experienced the absence of religion from the public sphere. In this part of Europe, religion was pushed out of public life with extreme violence and persecution by totalitarian Communist regimes. In the Western part of Europe, other factors have resulted in the privatisation of religion. In the West, religion lost her presence in the public sphere, whereas in the East this presence was actively taken away from her.

According to contemporary public discourse, religion belongs to the past, to history, and only has historical relevance for today's society. It is important, therefore, to learn about the history of religion in public or state schools, because it is a part of culture and of the history of the nation, and to restore historical church buildings and support museums with artefacts of religion, because they are all part of a particular former culture. In relation to current tasks and duties, however, religion no longer has any relevance. Politicians and public figures who use arguments taken from the "religious past" are viewed as conservative and regressive; arguments in the public sphere have to be "actual" and "rational". Religion belongs to the past, and if we want to build up a modern society we should turn away from that past and towards the present and the future.

It is certainly not difficult to have enough evidence for the presence and importance of religion in history. Of course, in former periods, religion clearly did have a different cultural position and political influence compared to today. But it is not at all evident that we can draw such a clear line between the past and the present and, moreover, according to what logic and what power we could do this. The idea that religion is encapsulated in the past is not part of a wrong approach to religion, but of confusion in our thinking about time and history.

This preconception continues by seeing the religious worldview and the scientific one as diametrically opposite. Religion is a mixture of myths and rituals, and, as such, it should be afraid of science with its logical and evidence-based proofs. Religion is based on mystical history and sacred texts that are proposed by an authority, and any knowledge which would differ from that derived from religious truth would be suspect, declared as an enemy, and therefore subject to persecution. According to this preconception, it was not only in the “dark” middle ages, but also in the 19th century that religion resisted against the light of knowledge.

We may reflect on this by starting with the thought that religion is not a science but a worldview, one that is rich in tradition and that seeks and gives meaning to life. In the aforementioned periods of European history a sort of different ideological war took place during which representatives of religion crossed the border of their religious competence and argued with a religious logic in the field of science. But at the same time, scholars and followers of the emerging natural sciences also crossed over the border of their competence, promoting solutions for the whole of life, exactly as an alternative to religious truth and sacral teaching. The very conflict line at that time between religion and science moved not between religion and science as such, but rather between two kinds of total, or even totalitarian, competence.

Returning to our preconception, we may also note that, according to it, religious systems are largely totalitarian and every religious leader claims blind obedience. The faithful have only one way to achieve religious goodness, that is, through absolute and undoubting loyalty to the religious hierarchy. Therefore religions are incompatible with democratic systems and, even more than this, they are dangerous to democratic decisionmaking processes. In the extreme case, religion can lead to violence towards innocent peoples and is able to create fanatics of the faithful to the point of self-sacrifice. In secular societies the state has responsibility to regulate religions and religious organisations and to control unacceptable religious activities.

In the ancient history of the Abrahamic religions, fanaticism, blood feuds, the human sacrifice of enemies and heretics, both men and women, are all to be found, as they are also found in the religions of Asia. At present, media providers focus more often than not on unacceptable religious activities rather than their opposite. However, religions are intrinsically able to be strong motivators beyond the egoistic interests of private persons

and groups, making their history also very rich in non-violent, other-regarding activities too. Perhaps for the present time it may be more correct to speak about the utilisation of religion in a constructive or destructive manner. Thinkers and teachers in every religion can still call the attention of others to their very centre of peacefulness and to the healing power of religion. Fanatical activities can be classified today more as negative extremes of religion.

Our preconception continues by viewing religions as rather exclusive in general; they proclaim their own truth and are against every alternative promise of salvation. Both in history and at present, religions are in permanent conflict with each other, and while the tools of conflict in a culture may change, the conflict between the religions is always there. As a consequence of the lack of peace between religions, and the lack of freedom they provide, states and societies have increasingly avoided forms of collaboration with religions, which are still unable to dialogue, and instead took the road towards secularization, building up a wall of separation between the state and religion. Modern constitutions maintain the independence of the state from every religion and, in the optimal kind of regulation, do not support religious activities and institutions.

Our evaluation of this preconception may begin by noting that religions provide overall worldviews and that every religion has her particular teaching and ritual practices according to her historical context. Correct observations drawn from the history of different religious traditions show, however, the deep mutual interaction and interconnection between religions at the time of their foundation and early development. It is misleading to overemphasise the institutional side of religions at the expense of their cultural dimensions. There are rather different types of religious attitudes to other religions, ranging from the exclusive, across the inclusive, through to pluralistic forms.

Prejudices related to Christianity

Regarding Christianity, which is the main religion in the CEE, the most evident preconception is that religion is equivalent to the biggest Christian institution in the particular society in question. In countries with a predominant Orthodox church, religion is identified with the national Orthodox church; in countries that are mostly Catholic, it is the Catholic church, while in the countries characterized by the Protestant tradition, the main national Protestant church, Calvinist or Lutheran, would be seen as the religion of the country. The idea that religion as an idea could cover more than one

religious tradition is hardly present in public discourse. The central importance of the mainline church is evident in thinking and in policy-making too.

For a long time in the whole of Europe, and evidently in her eastern part as well, Christianity has had a cultural and religious impact that asserted itself through a giant institution, the Church, and through her multiple subinstitutions e.g. schools, hospitals, trades unions, and even Christian political parties and movements. After the political turn in the CEE, the churches and ecclesiastical institutions were revitalised or re-positioned, leading to a generally held public perception that everything to do with Christianity is something institutional. Christian ideas were not discussed, but Church institutions were; faith was not a major issue, but competence and the influence of Church institutions were. Perhaps one of the most important tasks of the Catholic intelligentsia of the region is, or is still, to bring the ideas and perspectives of the wider Christian tradition into public discourse, and to maintain a critical public stance regarding any current issue that touches humanity, solidarity or other value questions.

This strongly institutionalized feature of Christianity has the consequence that religion is considered mainly in terms of church / state relations and of how the Church deals with political power. Big churches are always on the side of conservative parties, while small ones tend more towards liberal parties. The churches have significant political power, and Christianity often seems to be the basis of nationalist sentiment and reminiscence.

Because of its very radical takeover in the 1950s, the new Communist regime demonized any idea or institution that had shaped the most important pillars of the previous society, not least the Christian churches. After 1990, the new democratically-oriented regimes were interested in rebuilding the former institutions that had held capital importance in those previous societies in order to demonstrate some kind of continuity with them. As in the period before World War II, when the Christian churches were mostly on the conservative side of society, after the democratic change in 1990 they again moved into the same political and cultural area.

As we already mentioned, the preconception we are describing holds that religions, especially the Christian one, are self-contained and exclusive. They demand full power of disposal over religious and ethical issues. They are not willing to share religious

propositions and responsibility with other religions, and their main position is that every other religion only has the right to exist if it is similar to the Christian viewpoint.

Religious teaching and educational institutions are there to achieve the formation of loyal men and women, loyal to church doctrine and loyal to state power, in a society that still thinks itself to be part of Christendom. Opposed to such men and women is the autonomous and self-governed person who is able to prevail against the instructions of authority. Christian education does not produce democrats but servants.

Theology is not a science, but only a study of the basic principles of a religion and only a permanent repetition of the old metaphysical and moral doctrines embedded in the actual rhetoric of our times. The most fundamental difference between theology and science is that theology works on the foundation of divine revelation, which cannot change and should be accepted as an unmovable basic premise. Therefore theological teaching institutions and colleges cannot be a part of universities.

In the contemporary societies of the region we observe this kind of prejudice. It is only partly a consequence of the antireligious and antichurch minded propaganda that influenced every level of school up to university. It can mislead the churches and the Christian intelligentsia into practicing a strong and one-sided apology. But it would be more appropriate to understand and evaluate these problems and to take them as a starting point for open discussion. For these cases as well the path breaking statement of *Gaudium et Spes* related to atheism is important: “Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion.” (GS, 19)

Prejudices and stabilisation

Preconceptions and prejudices are often described as destructive approaches to an unknown and untested reality, but they can equally well be considered as important parts of the construction of common sense, something that is actually enormously important in societies undergoing deep transition and the free rebuilding of normal life. This has been especially so in the societies of the CEE after the high level of ideological indoctrination they have suffered. Religion, and Christianity in particular, are able to

deal with prejudices because they were only discussed in a minimal way in the preceding period of history, thereby to some degree they remain open for new or renewed public interpretation. In discussing religion, and Christianity in particular, the common discourse can become more informed and balanced. Critical thinking and using preconceptions are not exclusive alternatives but work together in free public discourse.

A religious mindset is both a provider and a supporter of preconceptions and prejudices, and, at the same time, a force against them. Allport, one of the pioneers of the scientific study of prejudices (1954), argued that the Judeo-Christian ethic is in conflict with the expression of prejudice. The experience of prejudice among those who are religious leads to feelings of guilt, and the suppression of prejudice – “practicing nondiscrimination” – is a virtue that religious Jews and Christians can admire (Crandall - Eshleman 2003).

Challenges for the Christian intelligentsia

In this final section we focus on the special intellectual situation and opportunities of the Catholic intelligentsia in the CEE region. The Catholic universities are key places where the intelligentsia can develop and work; they provide an important institutional structure that, if it focuses on ideas and is open to listening and learning, can counteract the more general experience in the CEE of church institutions that are largely concerned with their power. Scholars of the universities, however, are not an exclusive group, even if they form an important part of the whole group of Catholic scholars in these particular societies. The staff of the catholic university shares the situation of the intelligentsia in general as regards the temptations and challenges they experience. The mutual interaction between society, university and church is reflected in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*: “A Catholic university, as any university, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the Church, and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.” (ECE, 32) The triangle society-university-church represents the field within which catholic scholars are able to work. In this field they are invited to come to a decision to renew their faith, their scholarly community and their church.

Main temptations

In the contemporary period, which I like to call the “second wave” of transformation¹⁰, Catholics, as well as the whole of Catholicism in the CEE region as tradition and institution, are seeking for an appropriate position in society. All the taken-for-grantedness from the former periods of socialism or Christendom, or of the time between World Wars I and II, is deeply questioned. In public discussion today, Christianity needs to rise to the fundamental challenge to reassert herself through refreshing her original traditions and finding updated ways of communicating that are appropriate in a plural society. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* speaks of the tension between tradition and modern times: “Traditional cultures are to be defended in their identity, helping them to receive modern values without sacrificing their own heritage, which is a wealth for the whole of the human family” (ECE, 45). Christianity is afflicted in many ways by the tremendous set of changes and activities that are part of this experience of transition. But the main temptation we face in this regard is to settle down in the refuge of security and not to go out into the wasteland, to the place of meeting with the living God. In other words, the more the contemporary church is willing to accept self-criticism, the more she is able to be free for renewing her discourse with God and with contemporary society. All kinds of conventionalism block not only any successful missionary activity but also the development of a healthy identity within the church. Speaking concisely: we do not need a reprinted mentality, but rather a renewed spirituality – tradition, and not traditionalism. In the following paragraphs, I would like to be more concrete and to explain my point through some illustrations concentrated mainly on the Christian intelligentsia.

First main temptation: Towards being a Government Clerk (чиновник)

There are very different ways to think about and to manage the unity of institutions and the ideal to which people in them aspire. Unity in a society, like the church, especially in times of deep transition, seems to depend on members with almost total and uncritical loyalty, called in Russian чиновник (government clerk). The main expectation of such a figure is complete trust in the institution above all, and in its leadership. Government clerks are diametrically opposed to mature people who take responsibility for themselves

¹⁰ With the term „first wave”, I understand the time directly after the Fall of the Berlin wall, with its great enthusiasm and its dreams of freedom, meanwhile with the term „second wave”, I wish to indicate the time of delusion and turbulence in day-to-day democracy.

and have a capacity for active and innovative collaboration. For what *Ex corde ecclesiae* tries to encourage Catholic universities to do regarding problems in society is also valid with regard to problems facing the church too: “If need be, a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.” (ECE, 32) This kind of mentality, however, is dangerous for institutions which, in recent history, saw internal criticism as undermining the Church's unity and her societal position. The tragedy of the government clerk lies in his view of power and the way he conceives his identity, according to which the meaning of his life is found in total and unwavering obedience to the supposed power. Church schools, universities and parishes all are tempted to call forth a “government clerk mentality” by enforcing the teaching about the importance of the Church for Christian life. Both the unity of the institutional system and the unity of spirituality are important, but they only work when well balanced.

Behind of the government clerk mentality we can find important elements from the heritage of Communism – or, to speak more broadly – of the heritage of totalitarianism. The main logic of the totalitarian worldview is the interpretation of reality in simple black and white terms, and in terms of hierarchies. According to such a philosophy, only the central authority is capable of, and has the legitimacy for, stating what is true and good and what is false and bad. Everything is clear and uncomplicated. The whole society has to follow the targets given by the hegemon, and to be successful and brave you should only follow guidelines and demonstrate undeniable loyalty. The whole system excludes questions regarding truth and the decisions of authorities. Unity means uniformity; obedience is blind; the people immature. Totalitarianism is a permanent temptation for religion in engaging, seeking and demonstrating revealed truth. To believe in absolute truth is to be tempted to organise strong societies - first of all in periods of nationwide transformation. No totalitarian hegemony has accepted the freedom of academic research. If to “scrutinize reality” (ECE, 15) belongs to the core identity of the Catholic university, then it is her structural role to work against every kind of totalitarian temptation, including those that are political, nationalist or religious.

Second main temptation: Towards being a Janissary

The more people are sure of the truth of their own religion, and the more they trust her institutions, the bigger is the temptation to them of becoming a janissary. This kind of

soldier was well educated, not only in warfare but also in religion, morality and politics as well. In the 18th century, the janissary social class was one of the most important human resources in the Ottoman Empire for achieving its aims. They were able to control internal freedom, to defend the empire from outside enemies and to conduct war in South and Central Europe. However, when the Sultan did not demonstrate enough respect for the janissary class, they would rise up against him. The janissary identity is characterized by higher levels of qualification, a strong sense of purpose and a permanent readiness for warfare. These properties are of course not only valid in Islam but in all kinds of religion and other worldviews or ideologies. Churches in the CEE are tempted to dream about a strong and wide class of intellectual janissaries, since the non-religious part of contemporary society is often construed as an enemy and as a foreign territory which should be occupied by mission. According to the view of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the church and the university are not ghettos against the rest of society. This document has an explicitly dialogical character: “the dialogue with culture that makes the faith better understood” (ECE, 49) – means the same as what Vatican II meant with the term „signs of the times”. The dialogue with contemporary culture, without any holding back, serves not only the broadening of secular knowledge but also a better understanding of the deposit of faith.

A final temptation: to hold on to concessions

Churches in the CEE region obtained many concessions after the collapse of the totalitarian regimes e.g. in regard to duty and tax concessions.¹¹ Because religious institutions, mainly the big Christian churches, had been persecuted and their property nationalised, the new democratic governments wanted to make material compensation. But the compensation pertained not only to the sphere of buildings and support from the state budget, but also to the sphere of law and quality control. Church-owned educational institutions have received concessions regarding the fulfilment of general quality standards, for instance. The temptation to hold to this concessionary status, accorded during the first wave of transformation, and still to be favoured by the state administration, which is always hungry for the votes of the faithful, is very strong.

¹¹ The law governing tax concessions for churches in Hungary, for instance, is representative of many similar laws in the CEE region. (Schanda 2013; 2014).

It is important in the post-Communist societies to underline the equal rights of the Catholic university with other universities and academic institutions. Catholic universities are universities in the full sense of the word, therefore they should be seen as equal with other universities in the same society: „Catholic Universities join other private and public institutions in serving the public interest through higher education and research; they are one among the variety of different types of institution that are necessary for the free expression of cultural diversity, and they are committed to the promotion of solidarity and its meaning in society and in the world. Therefore they have the full right to expect that civil society and public authorities will recognize and defend their institutional autonomy and academic freedom; moreover, they have the right to the financial support that is necessary for their continued existence and development.” (ECE, 37) But to be really universities, in the full sense of the word, Catholic universities should, without further concessions, fulfil all the requirements which are expected of all other types of universities.

Main missions

Creating an Autonomous Christian intelligentsia

For a long time during the totalitarian period the so-called *intelligentsia* defined itself in relation to state power and was defined by the Communist hegemony. This way of defining identity can be observed in any kind of totalitarian politics and in every period of history. All people in society are employed and controlled by the state, so every intellectual reflection and source is interpreted according to a close ideological reference system. There is no identity, no philosophy, no literature and no music outside of the system, and no religion as well. The more that the Christian intelligentsia is able to live and work against totalitarian ideology and systems, the more it will be capable of demonstrating God as Saviour from the systems of sin, and God as Holy Spirit, Inspirer of freedom and research. Even the Christian intelligentsia lives in the frames of contemporary society and is strongly influenced by the spirit of the time, even if the main resource for its identity and reflective activity is a deep faith in God, who created the universe as a gift to man and through which man may discover the Creator himself.

Faithful, intelligent people are important not only in totalitarian systems, to demonstrate the eternal freedom and autonomy of God, but they also have a necessary

mission in our post-metaphysical and postsecularised time, characterized as it is by the search for solid identity and a credible moral canon.¹²

Upholding Christian civic courage

One of the most important aspects of the inheritance left behind by the totalitarian system in the former Communist countries of the CEE is civic courage, the art of living in the time of oppression and death. I refer here to a particular book, a very important theological witness of Oto Mádr, a Czech Catholic theologian, which was first published in a samizdat form: *How the Church does not Die* (Mádr 1986).¹³ Mádr was not alone; a lot of other theologians of the so-called “second world” elaborated and systematized their common experience of survival (*ars non moriendi*) and saw in it a strong argument for the active existence of God, for his truth, for what is the foundation of church unity and of the community of mercy. Practical inventiveness in both society and church had no interest in abstract philosophical and theological questions at all, and no possibility for a public discussion about them. Today, in the time of democratic freedom and intensive public discourse, the same courage is needed in the intellectual arena. The Christian intelligentsia has the task of thinking more originally about truth and about living together in post-totalitarian societies. By “thinking more originally”, I mean reflecting on our own historical and cultural circumstances and developing theories about them. It is not enough to know and to use theoretical frameworks from Western Europe and from the USA, because they were developed in very different social and cultural contexts.

Building Trust in Institutions

Individualism, not only in Western European societies but everywhere, approaches institutions with deep scepticism. In societies with long democratic traditions, however, individualism is more protected by institutions; in societies with a developing democratic culture, however, individualism tends to be shaped more by a sense of war against institutions. During a long period of time, totalitarian institutions, led by a central hegemony, occupied every free domain in society and restricted any possibility

¹² E.g. Habermas book about the history of knowledge and faith: *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, (Suhrkamp 2019). The author highlights that for a stable living together in the globalized world: we should not avoid the philosophical and ethical visions from the significant religious traditions only because they come from religious sources.

¹³For a study of the theology of Mádr and of other Czech theologians of that time see the analysis of Elena Glushko (Glushko 2011, 5–26).

for self-definition or alternative identities and worldviews. After the collapse of Communism, societies experiencing new freedoms built up democratic structures and institutions by importing predominantly Western European and North American traditions. Nevertheless, the former attitude of fundamental scepticism on the side of the people towards institutions, and the former tendency of institutions to use their power to try to determine identity are still present and influential. In such a context the Catholic intelligentsia has a clear opportunity to elaborate different positions regarding democratic institutions based on the social teaching of the Catholic Church. According to that teaching, subsidiarity means placing limited trust in institutions, and each person has a limited level of responsibility for public life. Both institutions and individuals are invited to work together for the common good, each of them with their own particular capacities.

After the political change in the CEE around 1990, many new institutions were set up and all the old ones were renewed. In the first wave of the new democratic era, people had trust in these institutions, including the churches, the army, the banks, and so on. However, lack of trust soon started to emerge against institutions, because people began to see corruption, egocentric politics and the material interests of the churches taking precedence. Continual revelations of misbehaviour led the public to begin to disavow every public and official institution. Thereafter “alternative institutions”, (e.g. alternative medicine, alternative banks, all of which ignore classical and as well contemporary scientifically-grounded and tested knowledge) with “damask rose promises” but without real authenticity and controllability profited from this general situation of lack of trust. Everything which was marked as „alternative” seemed better and evoked trust across broad classes of society. Instead, the Christian intelligentsia should form its approach to institutions on the basis of the social teaching of the Church. According to that, “critical confidence” is an appropriate attitude, aiming at the common good and including the willingness and ability to give a clear critique of “institutional pirates” and their esoteric and alternative rhetoric.

The main challenge for Catholic universities in the complex societal context of distrust and groundless trust can be formulated as trust-building in the academic sphere. For building and rebuilding trust, high quality knowledge, teaching and research are taken for granted. According to the Church’s magisterium, the institutions of the Church should be marked by a culture of openness, dialogue, subsidiarity and lived spirituality.

In the post-communist context of democracy, Catholic universities should adopt an attitude of collaboration with the entire academic sphere, as part of the academic world, avoiding the position of being like a fortress set up against a Communist, atheist or otherwise hostile society.

Witnessing to a lifegiving tradition

In this last short paragraph, we try to summarize our central thesis regarding the main tasks of the Christian intelligentsia in the post-secular CEE. We have seen that the most important characteristics of the region are to be found in the experience of transition, of a deep transformation, where traditions of state autonomy, denominational structure and common preconceptions and prejudices regarding religion and church play the most important governing role. In this societal context, the Catholic intelligentsia has the important challenge to remember the importance of God in Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. In a time of fundamental transitions, it is particularly necessary to remember the fundamental dimensions and values of humanity. The Christian option for remembering contains within it an enormous temptation in our cultural region of confusing traditionalism with tradition, of taking the recollection of times past as historically given facts which provide an obligatory way of thinking, instead of remembering the provocative and deliberative tradition of the Gospel and the historical seeking for truth of the Catholic Church. Highly educated Catholics have the capacity to analyse the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of Catholic teaching. Catholics, while interpreting the challenges of transformation, should not understand truth only as in terms of dogma, but also as something which is to be discovered in dialogue with the social context and through lively communication within the church. A quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Catholics should have a more critical distance from the time of persecution and should no longer search for their identity exclusively in the historical position of victims.¹⁴ The main Christian message regarding forgiveness and salvation offers a potent source for healing historical wounds (Máté-Tóth, 2019) and injuries and for demonstrating hope for the whole of society.

¹⁴ In saying this, I do not want to neglect the importance of coping with the past. On that point, in the case of Hungary, we may mention two representative works from Zsuzsanna Bögre, a sociologist at the Péter Pázmány Catholic University (Bögre 2010; 2012).

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