From the Director

The Religious Roots of American Public Education

Book Review
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The Bulletin is a journal, published three times a year by the Congregational Library, covering the history and significance of the Congregational tradition. To respond to articles in this issue, email us at circ@congregationallibrary.org.

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The Congregational Library strives to enliven a tradition of care for the world’s future by preserving and interpreting the stories of the past and to serve anyone desiring to learn more about one of the nation’s oldest and most influential religious traditions and has been since its founding in 1853. The Library is located just down from the Massachusetts State House in Congregational House at 14 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts.
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You are holding in your hands yet another way we at the Congregational Library hope to make the past relevant to the present. Gene Zubovich’s article on racial reconciliation in the years before the Civil Rights movement explores a relatively unknown but terrifically important era in our history. It demonstrates that Congregationalists understood early on that their faith commitments required efforts to change racial attitudes from the ground up and the top down. Zubovich tells an inspiring and thought-provoking story.

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Cary Hewitt
Between Thanksgiving and Christmas I spent a month researching in the Congregational Library and the Boston Athenaeum. My daily walk from the South Station to Beacon Street took me through the Boston Common. As I exited the park, walking up the steps towards the Massachusetts State House, a conspicuous statue stood on the other side of the street: Horace Mann, perched on a pedestal, extended his hand to me. The inscription below him read: “Father of the American Public School System.”

Since this statue was first erected 150 years ago, Horace Mann has dominated discussions of American education. While historians in the first half of the twentieth century praised his work, more recently he has come under attack. A first group of critics emphasized how the school system that Mann championed more often enabled elites to exert social control than opened the path to liberation for the working class. More recently, Mann has been censured both for promoting and for failing to promote religion. While some have assailed Mann for his role in secularizing American schools, others have emphasized Mann’s anti-Catholicism and located him within a trajectory of an emerging American “secularism” that is essentially Protestant.

But the origins of the school system with which Mann is so frequently associated are much more complicated than these criticisms would suggest. My dissertation looks beyond the beckoning hand of Horace Mann to focus on an international network of reformers who articulated a vision of professional, systematized schools in the 1830s. In so doing it uncovers the contributions of numerous other figures, most of whom were clergymen and several of whom were Congregationalists. These reformers demonstrate that religious considerations did more to warm the American public to the emerging school system than simply stoke the fires of anti-Catholicism. To be sure, anti-Catholic rhetoric featured prominently in the work of some figures associated with public schools, including Congregationalists Lyman Beecher (see especially his famous *A Plea for the West*) and Horace Bushnell (notably in his tract *Barbarism the First Danger*). But much more important for catalyzing public schooling was the work of people such as Calvin Stowe, a Congregationalist seminary professor whose report on education in Prussia was printed across the country.

The Congregational Library was particularly helpful as I researched this group of reformers. Its collection of books and pamphlets gave me access to important works by several key players in the reform network that I am uncovering—including Lowell Mason, Thomas Gallaudet, and Calvin Stowe. I was also able to explore the Library’s numerous holdings associated with the American Institute of Instruction, a group whose activism in the early 1830s helped to pave the way for the school board that Horace Mann led later in the decade. These materials, and others, are helping me piece together the narrative driving my dissertation, tentatively titled “The Common School Awakening: Education, Religion, and Reform in Transatlantic Perspective, 1800-1848.”

By David Komline
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The religious roots of American public education: new research and a new perspective

By David Komline
In the 1960s a “New Breed” of Protestant leaders marched in Civil Rights demonstrations and organized the poor in urban ghettos. Numerous Protestant denominations and organizations lent their leaders, resources, and moral support to the cause. This progressive activism, which is now celebrated as a central part of liberal Protestant identity was by no means preordained. Rather, the activism of the 1960s is surprising given that the Congregationalists were largely composed of white, wealthy, Republican, and socially conservative churchgoers.

In order to make the activism of the 1960s a little less mysterious, this article looks at a small group of activists who came together in 1934 to form the Council for Social Action (CSA). These men and women were influential beyond their numbers, moving the Congregationalists politically leftward during the 1940s and 1950s. They served as Congregationalism’s think tank and, later, as its political arm. By exploring the work of these Congregationalist activists in race relations from the CSA’s founding in 1934 through the 1950s I seek to bridge the historical divide between the Social Gospel of the turn of the century and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Created at the height of the Great Depression in 1934 to coordinate Congregationalist involvement in social problems, the CSA built upon some of the early successes of the Social Gospel movement. In fact, the namesake of the CSA—the idea of “social action”—had been used by prominent Social Gospel leaders in the early years of the twentieth century to emphasize that Christianity needed to be expressed in social relationships. During the 1930s, though, “social action” took on a more

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political inflection among CSA founders, who used the phrase to express a need for progressive activism against economic injustice.

It is perhaps not surprising that with this political mandate of “social action,” the CSA faced opposition from the very beginning. This was especially the case since the group was formed during the same conference that denounced the “profit motive” as incompatible with Christian ethics. A committee of “businessmen” attacked the CSA as a socialist organization. Despite the controversy the CSA was not as radical as conservative attacks made it out to be. Even though some members, like John C. Bennett and Buell G. Gallagher, had been part of the Fellowship of Christian Socialists, the major leaders of the 1930s were older Social Gospellers, such as Dr. Arthur E. Holt, who served as chairman until his death in 1942. Holt came of age at the turn of the twentieth century and received a doctorate in theology in 1904. His thesis tried to answer the question, “What can Jesus give a man in the ethical sphere?” He found that there were no clear rules in the world (or in the Bible), and good will, like that shown by the Good Samaritan, was the only assurance of living an ethically good life. Social science, Holt argued, gives people information that helps them to act out their good will in a constructive way, especially if they stay neutral, not identifying too strongly with any one institution or group of people. Lastly, Holt echoed Jane Addams in urging people to take Christian ethics outside the church and into the world.

At its inception the CSA followed Holt’s direction by acting like a fact-finding organization, gathering information on the vital social problems of the day. Most churchgoers, Holt believed, were people of good will; all they needed was good information. During the 1930s, as the CSA was preoccupied with the impending war, its first fact-finding mission was to survey the clergy on their opinions about growing tensions in Europe and Asia. The survey found that most clergymen were opposed to war. The CSA also paid attention to the labor problems of the 1930s, lending support to some of President Roosevelt’s New Deal measures. But when it came to race relations there was little action. At a January 1939 meeting between members of the CSA and three Congressmen, most of the discussion centered on the coming war in Europe. When the issue of a Federal anti-lynching bill came up at the end of the meeting, it was nearly unanimous that the South had been doing a good job on the issue and it was best to keep the Federal Government out of it. The one voice speaking in support of the bill did so cautiously, making sure to note that she thought the bill was “drastic in many ways” but that it was only the severity of lynching that called for such drastic action.

The CSA's tepid response to the plight of African Americans and other racial minorities during the 1930s stands in stark contrast to the activism of the CSA in the 1940s. This is best dramatized by the CSA’s endorsement of the landmark 1947 civil rights report, To Secure These Rights. The report endorsed the federal anti-lynching legislation that the CSA had earlier viewed with skepticism, but this now seemed less controversial compared with the report’s other recommendations, which included desegregation of the military, the end of poll taxes, the end of segregation in Washington, D.C., and the creation of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). This shift in attitudes toward civil rights occurred as a result of the political climate during the WWII era. Beyond the CSA, labor leader A. Phillip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement had pressured Roosevelt in the early 1940s to create a temporary FEPC in order to grant equal access to non-whites in defense industry jobs. Also in this period, the black press and the NAACP had dramatized the contradiction between segregation in the United States and a war being fought on anti-racist grounds. Furthermore, Americans had acclimated to a more interventionist Federal government during WWII, which cleared the way for the CSA to articulate a federally-enforced civil rights agenda.

But just as importantly, there were major shifts within the CSA that propelled the organization to embrace civil rights in the 1940s. Firstly, the legislative department within the CSA became more robust and autonomous in 1943 by taking advantage of a vague clause in the organization’s 1934 charter that allowed for “occasional” intervention in social problems. By the end of the 1940s, the CSA had a Washington office with a registered lobbyist, and the organization was directly involved in hundreds of pieces of legislation. This changed the orientation of the CSA from the fact-finding organization that Arthur Holt envisioned to one with a broad political agenda more attuned to the need for political pressure and conflict. Secondly, the membership of the CSA expanded during the WWII years, bringing in younger leaders who were more at ease taking controversial positions.

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### By the End of the 1940s, the CSA Had a Washington Office with a Registered Lobbyist, and the Organization Was Directly Involved in Hundreds of Pieces of Legislation.
There was also a subtle but critical shift in the sensibility of the members of the CSA. The organization’s leaders became increasingly critical of the churches themselves, along with their segregated hospitals and universities, and less confident that churches were going to lead the way. Without ever saying so, CSA leaders began treating Congregational churches as a missions field, believing local congregations were as much in need of Christ’s example in race relations as was the secular world.

The major breakthrough in race relations in the 1940s happened under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches, when it renounced segregation as a sin in 1946. The CSA had been involved in crafting this desegregation statement and the Congregationalists were the first denomination to ratify it, pledging to work for “a non-segregated church in a non-segregated society.” Moreover, at the urging of Buell Gallagher and Galen Weaver, the CSA convinced the Congregationalists to declare an emphasis on race relations during the years 1946-1948, providing staff and funding for a joint operation between the CSA and the American Missionary Association (which was then celebrating its 100th anniversary).

Though the Federal Council’s renunciation of segregation in 1946 was the critical moment in the 1940s, the CSA had been working on race relations earlier in the decade. The CSA, for example, helped fund Unitarian efforts to rescue Jews from Nazi Germany. The organization also worked together with the historic peace churches (the Quakers, Brethren, and others) to protest Japanese Internment. When their efforts failed to stop the evacuation of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast, the CSA strategized to combat racism and to keep anti-Japanese legislation from spreading. They won a major victory by stopping a Colorado law that would have banned Japanese ownership of land.

From 1942 onward every biennial meeting of the Congregationalists would pass some statement on race relation, usually at the urging of the CSA, whereas from 1932 until 1942 the Congregationalists were silent on the issue. In 1942 the Congregationalists sent foreign missionaries to work among Japanese-American internees and they sent leaders to areas with black-white tension. At the 1944 biennium the Congregationalists called for a permanent FEPC and for the end of poll taxes. As importantly, the 1944 declaration called on the churches to participate in race relations programs developed by the CSA and other groups, and noted the prevalence of anti-Semitism among some Christian communities. Proclamations like these paved the way for Congregationalism’s endorsement of the 1947 President’s Civil Rights report.

But after the 1946 declaration that labeled segregation a “sin” and the 1946-48 emphasis on race relations, the CSA moved even further in the direction of anti-racist activism. Congregationalism consisted of mostly unofficially segregated churches and a national bureaucracy that segregated all black churches into one conference while subdividing white churches into conferences based on geography. Galen Weaver, who lobbied for a strong race relations program, was hired to coordinate the two-year emphasis on race relations, and would stay on through the 1950s as the Congregational expert in race relations. Weaver, the white pastor who worked most of his life at a multi-racial congregation in Hawaii, was chosen to lead the effort to integrate Congregational churches because...
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of his experience at the local level. Weaver received unprecedented funding (about $30,000) and formulated a program based on sending impartial mediators and social science experts to help transform local churches into racially inclusive institutions. The program was consistent with Arthur Holt’s ideas but with one important difference: for Holt the Christian spirit needed to flow out of the churches and into the world, whereas for Weaver the churches themselves needed to become more Christian.

Weaver and the CSA were on the cutting edge of social science when they adopted the “sensitivity training” method. Although ubiquitous today, the method was created by German-Jewish émigré and social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the mid-1940s, arising out of his work with the American Jewish Congress. Fisk University Sociologist and Congregationalist Charles S. Johnson was on Lewin’s board of advisors and likely recommended that Weaver and other Congregationalists attend the workshops at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine.

Weaver’s main weapon in combating segregation was the roundtable. These six-hour sessions were held in 67 cities, with 521 churches and 2,111 individuals participating from 1946 through 1948. They brought together twenty to thirty representatives from local churches to hear presentations by anthropologists, who would lay out the “scientific viewpoint” on race. The anthropologists likely reiterated what Ruth Benedict had been emphasizing during the 1940s: that race is a muddled concept, that people have much more in common than in contrast, and that physical features do not reflect anything about culture or intellect. A minister or theologian, often Weaver himself, would follow by giving an account of the Christian viewpoint on race, quoting scripture and citing history, and eventually arriving at the recently-adopted statement that called segregation a sin. Then a structured discussion would take place with participants expressing their views on race, perhaps describing some conflicts they witnessed. The CSA would occasionally use roll-playing. All the while, the anthropologists and theologians would gently correct any misinformation the participants believed and push them toward more liberal views on segregation.

Weaver also experimented with less scientific efforts. He visited Christian colleges run by Congregationalists and counseled them on procedures to reduce racial inequality. He found that most, but not all, admitted students without overt discrimination. However, aside from the most menial jobs, few African Americans were employed by Congregationalist colleges, publishing organizations, charitable institutions, and hospitals. The CSA’s other efforts included cooperation with the “Vermont Plan,” which sent black kids from Harlem to stay with white families in Vermont. Another initiative sent two Southern women—one black and one white—to churches in order to encourage dialogue between black and white ministers. All this was in addition to countless radio programs, pamphlets, speeches, and films stressing that race prejudice and segregation were contrary to Christian teachings.

It is difficult to judge how effective these tactics were. It is clear that Congregationalist churches did not become appreciably less segregated over the course of the 1940s and 1950s but this does not preclude more subtle changes. However, it is clear that CSA activists were themselves increasingly frustrated by their inability to change segregated patterns. They noted repeatedly that churches would send their most liberal members to the roundtables, meaning those who opposed segregation simply did not show up. In fact, all these programs were voluntary, the CSA noted, and many churches simply did not take part. In a 1956 report, published two years after Brown v. Board, the Congregationalists quietly acknowledged that “our deeds do not fully match our words” in that “boards, conferences and conventions, seminaries, colleges, institutional homes, and local congregations” still follow discriminatory practices.
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Weaver and the CSA were on the cutting edge of social science when they adopted the “sensitivity training” method. Although ubiquitous today, the method was created by German-Jewish émigré and social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the mid-1940s, arising out of his work with the American Jewish Congress. Fisk University Sociologist and Congregationalist Charles S. Johnson was on Lewin’s board of advisors and likely recommended that Weaver and other Congregationalists attend the workshops at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine.

Weaver’s main weapon in combating segregation was the roundtable. These six-hour sessions were held in 67 cities, with 521 churches and 2,111 individuals participating from 1946 through 1948. They brought together twenty to thirty representatives from local churches to hear presentations by anthropologists, who would lay out the “scientific viewpoint” on race. The anthropologists likely reiterated what Ruth Benedict had been emphasizing during the 1940s: that race is a muddled concept, that people have much more in common than in contrast, and that physical features do not reflect anything about culture or intellect. A minister or theologian, often Weaver himself, would follow by giving an account of the Christian viewpoint on race, quoting scripture and citing history, and eventually arriving at the recently-adopted statement that called segregation a sin. Then a structured discussion would take place with participants expressing their views on race, perhaps describing some conflicts they witnessed. The CSA would occasionally use role-playing. All the while, the anthropologists and theologians would gently correct any misinformation the participants believed and push them toward more liberal views on segregation.

Weaver also experimented with less scientific efforts. He visited Christian colleges run by Congregationalists and counseled them on procedures to reduce racial inequality. He found that most, but not all, admitted students without overt discrimination. However, aside from the most menial jobs, few African Americans were employed by Congregationalist colleges, publishing organizations, charitable institutions, and hospitals. The CSA’s other efforts included cooperation with the “Vermont Plan,” which sent black kids from Harlem to stay with white families in Vermont. Another initiative sent two Southern women—one black and one white—to churches in order to encourage dialogue between black and white ministers. All this was in addition to countless radio programs, pamphlets, speeches, and films stressing that race prejudice and segregation were contrary to Christian teachings.

It is difficult to judge how effective these tactics were. It is clear that Congregationalist churches did not become appreciably less segregated over the course of the 1940s and 1950s but this does not preclude more subtle changes. However, it is clear that CSA activists were themselves increasingly frustrated by their inability to change segregated patterns. They noted repeatedly that churches would send their most liberal members to the roundtables, meaning those who opposed segregation simply did not show up. In fact, all these programs were voluntary, the CSA noted, and many churches simply did not take part. In a 1956 report, published two years after Brown v. Board, the Congregationalists quietly acknowledged that “our deeds do not fully match our words” in that “boards, conferences and conventions, seminaries, colleges, institutional homes, and local congregations” still follow discriminatory practices.

There are several ironies in the actions of the CSA. The CSA became more cautious during the early 1940s, after the radical 1930s, did the effort at desegregation. The CSA’s political program was more visibly successful. They had submitted “friends of the court” briefs on behalf of the major civil rights cases of the era, including Shelley v. Kramer and Brown v. Board. They sent lobbyists to work on virtually every important piece of legislation regarding race relations from 1943 onward. They also used the “roundtable” method less often as a tool for changing hearts and minds, and increasingly more often as a means of mobilizing people for political action. They held roundtables in the late 1940s in Washington State to rally Christian support on behalf of FEPC legislation. As time went on they began cooperating more and more with a number of secular organizations and urged their local chapters to do the same, like when they pushed the New York branch of the CSA to join the Committee Against Discrimination in Housing and the City Council on Civil Rights for political action. They held roundtables focused on the economic views of the CSA and never tired of calling the CSA “socialist” or “pink.”

This activism aggravated conservative Congregationalists, who revived their campaign to oust the CSA in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Conservatives focused on the economic views of the CSA and never tired of calling the CSA “socialist” or “pink.” The CSA became more cautious during the early 1950s, particularly in regard to its lobbying efforts, as a result of an investigation launched against it by the denomination. But a commission led by CSA-cofounder Buell Gallagher vindicated the organization against charges of communist sympathy in 1953 and the following year the Brown v. Board decision breathed new life into the effort at desegregation.

There are several ironies in the actions of the CSA on race relations in the 1940s and 1950s. Only during the 1940s, after the radical 1930s, did the organization try to do something about segregation. When they did finally confront segregation in the churches, the cutting-edge methods for dealing with race relations turned out, in retrospect, to be ineffective. Additionally, the reason the CSA and the Congregationalist leaders were so far ahead of other denominations in their attitude toward segregation was precisely because they had so little power over the local churches. For the more conservative Congregationalists it was easier to simply ignore anti-racist activists.

The story of the CSA desegregation efforts in the 1940s and 1950s is only a failure if we take church integration as the barometer. If we look just below the surface we can see the CSA serving as a link between the old Social Gospel movement and what theologian Harvey Cox called the “New Breed” of church leaders in the 1960s. This New Breed, Cox wrote, wanted “to move the churches away from a social-service view of urban problems toward a political one.” This group was on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement and worked in cities with poor blacks, Latinos, and whites, organizing them into political unions. Cox also noted that these activists were more likely to come from groups like the CSA, which were more independent from the conservative laity than were ministers.

The CSA aided in the development of the New Breed by encouraging participation in politics, by cooperating with secular organizations, and by growing disillusioned with the local churches. And the CSA was not alone. The Federal (later National) Council of Churches, the YM and YWCA, the World Council of Churches, student groups, and other Christian organizations moved in the same direction. Like them, the CSA was the heir of the Social Gospel movement, which they endured in the 1940s and 1950s with a greater attention to politics and a more critical spirit toward the local churches. The CSA became less concerned with the church as an institution and increasingly concerned with the poor and disenfranchised.

Again in the 1960s and 1970s conservative laity began efforts aimed at disempowering groups like the CSA. At the same time, Evangelical organizations rose to national prominence as they fought the more liberal denominations for leadership of American Protestantism. That Evangelicals are more prominent today should not obscure the CSA’s successful effort in moving Congregationalism—and Americans generally—in a more pluralistic direction. The affirmation of racial and cultural pluralism by even the more conservative Protestant denominations today is part of the legacy of the CSA and groups like it. In the long run, the CSA was part of a broader effort to make Protestantism more inclusive, even if it meant leaving some local churches and laity behind.

A PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, Gene Zubovich is completing his dissertation, titled “The Global Gospel: American Protestants and the Challenge of World Leadership, 1942-1950”. Supervised by David A. Hollinger, he looks broadly at ecumenical Protestant social thought during the 1940s. The 2011-2012 Boston Athenæum-Congregational Library Fellow Zubovich is a native of San Francisco and spent some time as a US Park Ranger.
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I spent this past weekend in New Orleans, at the meeting of the American Historical Association and the American Society of Church History. When I left my house in Boston, in the wee hours of Thursday morning, the temperature was a balmy 1 degrees. I got to New Orleans later that day and heard nonstop complaints about how cold it was—in the 40s. I passed people on the street dressed for a winter apocalypse, in fur-lined parkas, knit caps, and mittens, while I strolled around with my coat unzipped looking utterly out of place.

Any gathering of historians by the thousands is worth many, many wry observations and as time permits I’ll have more to say about what I learned down in New Orleans, but for the immediate purposes of this blog, I want to write about the book I read on the plane going down to New Orleans.

Sarah Osborn’s World, written by University of Chicago historian Catherine Brekus, is the story of a remarkable eighteenth-century woman. Osborn lived most of her life in relative obscurity in Newport, Rhode Island, battling poverty, illness, and personal loss. She was not a politician or a “man of letters”, and we would know nothing of her life except for one thing: she wrote voluminously. Sarah Osborn left behind a personal memoir, a lengthy diary in many volumes (most but not all of which has survived), and many personal letters, all of which Brekus has transcribed and carefully pieced together into a richly-detailed, beautifully written, and in many ways haunting account.

It is not an easy one to understand. To those of us who have grown up in a world emphasizing self-esteem and personal freedom, Sarah Osborn’s personal faith is simply baffling. God is at the center of her life in every respect, which means that she accepts the untimely death of her first husband and her son, as well as suffering caused by rheumatoid arthritis and financial catastrophe as God’s will for her. This is not, Brekus explains, because Sarah Osborn was weak or unbalanced or needed a good feminist talking-to; it was because in the world that she inhabited, the alternative would have been impossible to bear. Better to accept a God who brings suffering as well as favor than to live in a world without order or meaning. Better to allow for a few moral loose ends than to lose God’s powerful and compassionate companionship. You or I may not see the alternatives this starkly—our world today provides us with a lot more cushioning from disaster than Sarah’s did—but if we simply dismiss her as a religious fanatic we are the poorer for it.

The story goes far beyond one individual life, however. Sarah Osborn’s World is one of the best books about the American evangelical tradition that I have read. It brings home the spiritual passion in this movement’s formative stages, and its transformative appeal to all kinds of different people, most of whom left almost no historical records—the women who met for prayer under Sarah Osborn’s leadership and the African Americans (slave and free) who crowded into her parlor for Bible study and prayer.

Many readers will find Sarah Osborn’s world absolutely foreign, maybe even off-putting. Her piety was stark and demanding and she was blind to many of the social evils of her day, including for a time slavery. Few of us would want her for a best friend, let alone a prayer partner. But in other ways, Sarah Osborn’s relationship with God is utterly familiar. It resonates in churches today, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted, and sometimes calling us to take the hard road with gratitude and grace. This is what history does, of course, introducing us to other lives and other worlds, and helping us to see our own with a deeper and more compassionate understanding.
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