CHAPTER 3

The Missionary Roots of Rural Messianic Movements: Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries

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Rural Messianic Movements in Brazil

Starting in the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the middle of the twentieth century, religious movements sprang up throughout the sertão, the semi-arid northeast region of the country. These “rural messianic movements”, featuring penitential and apocalyptic elements, were spread widely by wandering preachers – the “beatos” and “conselheros” – who heralded the coming of the end of the world and hence the need for salvation. Thus, through religion, peasants voiced their willingness to destroy an unjust world and rebuild it in a different manner. The social utopia of the sertão, thus, referred to an eschatological future and the transformation of power relations, embodied at the time in “holy villages” where followers lived according to their religious and social ideals of brotherhood under the guidance of one or more messianic leaders. These communities, often shaped by the Sebastianist prophecy, were frequently viewed as a threat to the establishment and attacked by the army.

The historiography of these movements has followed nation-building in Brazil, and the peasant utopias acquired visibility exactly at the moment of their repression. In times of great change in Brazilian society and politics, the state engaged in crushing the “deviant behavior” of a significant part of the population, while building the myth of national unity: independence in the case of the communities of Serra do Rodeador (1817–20) and Pedra Bonita (1836–38), the Republic at the time of Canudos (1893–97), and the “New State” in the case of Caldeirão (1936) and Pau de Colher (1938). Due to the Canudos campaign, this “fierce religion” abandoned the caatinga¹ to fill the pages of the newspapers and fuel the debate amongst the intellectual elite on the subject of the place of masses in the public life of the country. The increased visibility of populations mostly ignored until then brought about the need to acknowledge their difference – their “otherness” – and to understand it “scientifically”. With

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¹ Type of desert vegetation common in northeastern Brazil.
the publication of Os Sertões, by Euclides da Cunha, the movement of the Conselheiristas provided the pattern for later studies on all socio-religious movements of northeastern Brazil and the country as a whole. This is why for a long time these movements were "explained" from a biological and environmental perspective, as was typical of the initial phase of social sciences in Brazil.

In addition to medicine, physical anthropology, and human geography, other sciences were deployed to analyze the phenomenon, trying to explain it "scientifically", like sociology and anthropology, more or less influenced by Marxist or Durkheimian theories. The movements could thus be categorized as pre-political forms of social struggle, or the result of anomie in "rural" societies, and so on. Apparently, the religious, the symbolic, did not have the same status as the political, the social, and the economic with regard to explanations. From the clinical to the sociological approach, from the authoritarian to the liberal-paternalist, until the Marxist, the terminology as well as the resulting explanations only defined the "other" as barbarian and incomprehensible, sertanejo and underdeveloped, unable to adopt the language of reason and bound to “alienated” expressions that were not acknowledged as a proper system for interpreting the world. Starting in the 1970s and 80s, the interest in folk Catholicism awakened among anthropologists and sociologists of religion – politically engaged in the fight for democratization – led them to criticize the conclusions of previous works and changed the direction of studies to focus instead on understanding social issues from the point of view of the actors. This pointed out the need for a closer study of “Catolicismo popular” in its expressive and symbolic aspects, with the aim of understanding peasant

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3 Followers of Antônio Vicente Mendes Maciel, commonly known as Antônio Conselheiro (1828–1897), who led the Revolta de Canudos.
4 Still in 1963, for example, Waldemar Valente, Misticismo e Região. Aspectos do Sebastianismo nordestino (Recife: ASA Pernambuco, 1986 [1963]) ascribed the psychological inclination to mysticism to the prevalence of the “schizothymic type”. In his famous essay from 1946, Josué de Castro linked the phenomenon of “fanaticism” to the lack of B complex affecting the biochemistry of the brain and inducing "serious nervous disorders". Josué de Castro, Geografia da fome (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1967 [1946]).
5 This line of thought, inaugurated by Eric Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Manchester: 1959), was resumed in Brazil by Rui Facó, Cangaceiros e Fanáticos (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1965).
6 Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, O Messianismo no Brasil e no Mundo (São Paulo: Dominus Editora, 1965).