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CHAPTER 4

The Biblical Code of Utopia

José Eduardo Reis

In an ongoing Portuguese radio programme "The Diaphanous Veil" with the subtitle "For a Thematic History of European Music," the musicologist, composer and Portuguese conductor Pedro Amaral analyses the evolution of different forms of Christian liturgical music ranging from the Notre Dame mass composed by Guillaume de Machaut in the fourteenth-century to the twentieth-century composers of Requiems such as Stravinsky and Lopes Graça, in order to establish a coherent and historically elucidative thread of musical thinking within the context of European culture. According to the exquisite musicological knowledge of Amaral, the only musical genre that allows one to discern a stable thematic continuity in its formal, protean variations is precisely the one that is used as an accompaniment to the Christian liturgy. Thus, if at the historical level one may identify a trans-temporal genre among Western European erudite musical forms, based on an elementary grammar made up of a ritualised sequence of prayers (appeal, praise, thanksgiving), almost exclusively inspired in the Catholic faith and in the Jewish-Christian canonical scriptures, then at the level of the history of utopian thinking in the Western world, one may also identify a founding code made up of a relatively stable series of biblical texts of an ideal content, i.e., transcending and exceeding the known limits of reality. Both at the musicological level, by means of which one may find a recurring theme in the history of European music concerning the ritualised ceremonial of Jewish-Christian religious spirit, and at the level of the history of utopian ideas, permeated by the revisiting of a set of biblical themes, we arrive both at the heuristic value of the axiom (here paraphrased from T.S. Eliot) that no culture appears without a religion, and with the thesis (put forward by Northrop Frye) that the Bible can be seen as constituting the main code underpinning Western literature. Assuming the definition of code, put forward by the Portuguese literary theorist Aguiar e Silva, as "the finite set of rules that allow the ordering and combining of distinct units within the framework of a given semiotic system in order to generate meaningful processes that are materialised within texts" (76, my translation) and acknowledging that such a code may be characterised as being "transcendent both at the ontological and chronological level in relation to the texts that it allows to be produced and receive, [by] the recursive formula of its rules, i.e., by the possibility to apply these rules to an indefinite number of texts" (78), one may metonymically regard the Bible – metonymically be-

cause the Bible comprises a finite series of texts, chapters and verses that make up an operative system that idealises the human ontological-spiritual condition – as the generative code corresponding to the utopian way of ideologically and textually representing the world in the context of western civilisation. I am therefore using the concept of code in the sense that it refers to the workings of a semiotic linguistic system of literary content, since it is within this system that the above-mentioned processes of meaning are generated in texts of an idealising content. The complex textual heterogeneity of the code to which I am alluding, being a repository of revealed and transcendental truth for those who believe in the spiritual content of the Bible, is central to my argument and to the selection of those biblical passages, chapters and verses that operate as thematic sources for both literary recreation and doctrinal inspiration associated with the tradition of western utopian thinking. I must therefore state that this paper does not really proceed from my biblical knowledge, which is not extensive, but from the personal interrogations that emerged as a result of a comparative study I have made on the reception of different modes of western utopian thinking in the Portuguese and English literary cultures. This perplexity increased as I began to understand that two of the chief semantic models of ideological and literary utopianism, nostalgic regression and prophetic foresight, are largely elaborated, in their varied, recursive, explicit and deflected historic and cultural formulas, from a matrix of ideas that is engendered by a biblical key. Notwithstanding the fact that, as one knows, utopia is not the exclusive outcome of a univocal genealogy or cultural tradition, but, according to Frank and Fritzie Manuel, it is a “hybrid plant, born of the crossing of Judeo-Christian belief in another, paradisiacal otherworldly and the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth” (15). What I would like to put forward here is therefore some of the types of semiotic and narrative idealising effects generated by this biblical belief, by this formula of hopeful thought in “another, paradisiacal world.” But before doing so, I think I should make a brief reference to the utopian-Christian religion dyad.

Two basic positions, up to a point antagonistic, can be pointed to regarding the articulation between Christian and utopian idealism, assuming that the latter term holds, i.e., as indicating the transformative and overwhelming aspiration to go beyond the limitations and constraints of the material circumstances of life. These antagonistic positions become clear, on the one hand, in the light of the doctrinal items of Christian dogma which regards with suspicion the affinities between the full freedom of Utopia and the heresy of Pelagianism – i.e. the doctrine proclaimed by the Irish monk Pelagius (born 354 A.D.) who considered man not only free of any original metaphysical stigma but also as an autonomous being responsible before God for his / her own salvation. Contrary to this view, the affinity between the beliefs of the Christianity and the positive content of the Utopia ideal manifests itself by way of discreet symbolic human imagery in several ways, for example through:

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- i. the syncretic affinities that religion and Utopia ostensibly share in creating horizons of ultra-historic expectation that inspire their corresponding ways of thinking and acting (i.e. their phenomenology);
- ii. the axiological affinities between the Christian faith in transcendence and the rational will to overcome the empirical limitations of the historical world;
- iii. a common purpose of attaining spiritual and moral perfection;
- iv. the dynamic equivalence that can be stated between the hope of eternal salvation and the hope of existential earthly liberation.

Regarding the former position, it is not surprising that the dogma of the Roman and other Christian churches inspired by the New Testament are *a priori* suspicious of the possibility of confronting the world of the “here and now” as the expected scenario for the second coming of Christ, as the only place available for the construction of better, utopian social realities. It is even less surprising that they are suspicious of the possibility of the consummation or complete fulfilment of man, since ideal social projects or human *élans* that extol the virtues or proclaim the possibility of the attainment of some absolute (social or individual) good in the conditions provided by contemporary material life, collide with the metaphysical principle of original sin and the resultant doctrine that this is a world that has deviated from God’s grace and that man, either alone or in mystic communion with the very essence of nature, will never manage to overcome or redeem his inevitable ontological fall. If in the light of these doctrinal assumptions, Utopia can be defined, in Thomas Molner’s words, as an “eternal heresy,” on the other hand, in its imaginary-symbolic dimension, and therefore free of its potential and imminent politico-rationalist connotations, Utopia, in the positive, teleological sense of the word, signifying the ontological condition of perfection as it comes to be represented by the future ideal city, converges, or is even coincident with the core of the biblical and Christian message. This at least is the view put forward by Sandro Spinsanti in the Catholic-oriented Dictionary of Spirituality (*Dicionário*). Spinsanti not only lists what he states to be “the utopian themes of the Christian message” – the biblical images of the announced perfect city, New Jerusalem, the radicalisation of evangelical morals inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, the collective worship, the hope of final salvation – but he also reflects in great detail on the function of Utopia in Christian spiritual life.

This ambiguous, if not paradoxical, intersection of utopianism with religion is, indeed, recognised by Ernst Bloch, who saw the universal emergence and historical development of religion as fundamentally an anthropological antidote to the most powerful of anti-utopias, death. Despite the Marxist assumptions with which Bloch shapes his *Principle of Hope*, he states in its fifth and final part – which consists of a critical inventory of the utopian potential expounded by doctrinal as-

pects of the leading belief systems – that religions “having often provided improper empty promises for the will to a better world, ... they were for a long time also its most decorated room, its entire structure” (1181-1182).

Sharing Bloch's point of view, the Portuguese scholar Manuel Antunes also recognises a possible affinity between ideal utopian and religious thought when, in his synthetic historical-cultural approach to the subject of Utopia, he argues that one of his “typological models” is the religious one, to be seen alongside other models determined by other contents and principles such as the mythical, rational, political, ethical-philosophical, prospective, retrospective, positive and negative (403-406).

But let us return to the Bible, to that “iconographic atlas,” to that “treasure chest of symbols,” to that “immense dictionary” in the epigrammatic characterisations of Paul Claudel, quoted by the Portuguese poet and essayist José Tolentino Mendonça in his introduction to the re-edition of the pioneering and almost complete translation of the book of books into Portuguese by the Portuguese protestant priest João Ferreira Annes d'Almeida in the second half of the seventeenth century (*Bíblia* 17). If, in the Bible, as Tolentino Mendonça states, we can find “tragedies, comedies, epics, autobiographies, love songs, tales of shipwreck, historiographical indices, folklore plays, inventories, travel books, blessings, curses, calendars, aphorisms ... in a profusion of infinite repetition” (*Bíblia Ilustrada: Jeremias* 17), if in its immense variety of textual possibilities we find “a full stock of characters, a theatre of the natural and the supernatural, a fascinating language laboratory” (*Bíblia Ilustrada: Jeremias* 17), it should come as no surprise that in this polyphonic textual architecture we find verses, chapters, or even proto-utopian or utopian-like books that make up a defined set of narrative units of meaning, that have been repeatedly appropriated, explicitly or in a refractory mode, by western utopian ideas and literature. Several scholars have recognised the importance and the functionality that both the description in *Genesis* (2, 8-15) of the divine creation of an earthly paradise and the accounts of the prophetic, messianic and millenarianist content of the Old and New Testaments had on the articulation between the theme and the feeling of nostalgia for the earthly paradise (on the one hand) and the expectation that (on the other) at some future stage in the history of mankind, earthly happiness and justice would reign supreme. The French historian Jean Delumeau, for instance, dedicated two extensive monographs, *Une Histoire du Paradis* and *Mille Ans de Bonheur*, to the study of the historical-cultural implications of the permanence of these biblical myths (Delumeau, *Histoire*).

The former, the belief in a pristine place of happiness and perfection, which has indelibly marked western thinking, comes from, as Mircea Eliade has demonstrated, a universal mental archetype modelled, within the context of Western

pects of the leading belief systems – that religions “having often provided improper empty promises for the will to a better world, ... they were for a long time also its most decorated room, its entire structure” (1181-1182).

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civilization, on Jewish religious beliefs. Today we know that its canonical written transcription, inserted in the Torah, is an amalgam of several versions, one or more of them being written in the ninth or eighth century B.C. by Jewish priests. The belief in the existence of the biblical earthly paradise was so appealing to the Christian mentality that it was only in the eighteenth century that it definitely faded, when the first geological, biological and palaeontological studies proved that the earth had not been created six thousand years previously as biblical chronology stated and that the physical constitution of the human being was the outcome of the successive metamorphoses of a pre-existing animal nature.¹ As can be verified in the cartography of the time, the “idol” of paradise dwelt in European mentality throughout the Middle Ages: it was a common, widespread belief that the garden of delights had not been submerged by the Great Flood and that it was to be found somewhere in the far east.² Thus for about three thousand years first Jews and then Christians accepted the historic fact that this place of good fortune had been created and named Eden by God. It is described in the fourteenth century Portuguese text, *Horto do Esposo* (“The Garden of Retreat”) as follows:

The earthly paradise is a delightful garden in which there are all types of beautiful trees that yield fruit. And in it is the sustenance of life, it is never cold nor hot and the air is always temperate, and in one half of it there is a fountain that waters the whole orchard, and this fountain is divided into four parts which compose four rivers ... Our Lord God made this place in the east with his own hands as a gift, i.e. with pleasure, and He made this place the highest in the world, where the air is very delicate and very mild and very resplendent. It always contains many colourful plants, it is sweet-scented and bright and is so beautiful and pleasant that it transcends all understanding of sensitive creatures. (14-16)

In his short but illuminating essay *Varieties of Literary Utopias*, Frye, to whom we owe the title of this paper, sets out to distinguish and conceptually determine, from a curious biblical illation, among other categories, not only the pastoral literary convention of the Garden of Eden but also the utopian literary convention. His argument implicitly stresses the idea that these two distinct conventions, representing differing trends in the history of literature, have their original enunciation in two discreet Jewish-Christian myths. According to Frye, this distinction between the two literary conventions can, in a context of biblical origins, be traced back to the strife between Cain and Abel. “Abel is a shepherd and Cain a farmer whose descendants build cities and develop the arts. The murder of Abel appears to symbolise the blotting out of an idealized pastoral society by a more complex civilisation” (Frye 41). Frye also points out the importance that the pastoral genre attained in the Renaissance, precisely at the same time at which the literary genre of Utopia is rediscovered and begins to flourish. The latter is associated, among other factors, with the centripetal movement of the growth of new urban centres and the parallel revival of the cosmopolitan spirit.

The utopia is a city and it expresses rather the human ascendancy over nature, the domination of the environment by abstract and conceptual mental patterns. In the pastoral, man is at peace with nature, which implies that is also at peace with his own nature, the rational and the natural being associated.

If, therefore, at the ideological level, references can be found in western civilisation's literary culture to a sustained belief in the real existence of an earthly paradise – a belief that, for example, led Christopher Columbus to accept biblical verses at face value and to include a Jewish interpreter among his crew on his first voyage westward to reach the Far East, so that he could establish contact in Aramaic with the virtual citizens of Eden – then the biblical code of the Garden of Eden, as Frye demonstrates, can be considered thematically present in the definition and reproduction of the pastoral convention of the earthly paradise, despite the fact that the original and later development of this convention were determined by classical Greco-Latin literary forms.

As mentioned earlier, another great, and perhaps even more impressive, utopian imaginary *schema* of predominantly biblical origin is that embedded in the concept of future time. It is a schema that occurs in both the New and Old Testaments, associated with the ideas of material freedom and spiritual salvation. It takes several forms that, in general terms, have their origins: firstly, in the expectation of the fulfilment of the divine promise announced by the patriarchs Abraham (Gen. 12.7) and Moses (Deut. 1.4) that God's chosen people would be granted a land "where milk and honey run" (Num. 13.27); second, in the prophecy of both that not only would the Jewish nation be liberated from the yoke of its enemies, but that at some point in future time a kingdom of abundance and justice would be founded, governed by a divine envoy, the Messiah; and finally, in the apocalyptic millenarianist hope that the Christian saints, organised in their respective churches, whether triumphant Catholic or nationalistic Protestant, would deliver salvation to those who truly followed God's word. It is an imaginary *schema*, therefore, that had its beginnings in the vivid expression of the collective aspirations of a people (the Jews) to settle in a better place (Canaan), away from the miserable wilderness in which they lived, i.e. in seeing the future fulfilment of hope kindled in a covenant established with God. This impetus of a people that, on affirming the freedom of its identity and its territorial autonomy, planned to live in another place at an ideal future time, and, what is more, was confident that it had been chosen by God and was fulfilling therefore a providential, divine will, led Bloch to consider that

No other religion has passed through so many layers of sublimation, of utopianization of its god as that of Moses... The God of Moses is the promise of Canaan otherwise it is no God... The impulse of Moses holds the entire Old Testament together, including Messianism, which appears late or rather is pronounced. This too, indeed precisely this, is latent in glad tidings whose proclaimer brings himself and his people into it, with exodus and promise of the land, land of the promise. (1234-1235)

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The coming of the Messiah, which "appears late or rather is [only] pronounced" – about six centuries after the Exodus with the so-called Exile or deportation to Babylon of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah (606 – 586 B.C.) as a result of the Syrian invasion and the capture of Jerusalem – is basically a device centred on the hope that a future time of prosperity will come to pass, when, under the aegis of an envoy of God, the tribulations of the Jewish people would come to an end, and the divine plan to save them (and with them, the whole of humanity) would be fulfilled. The history of the chosen people thus merges with a transcendental mission, that of carrying out Jehovah's will of communicating to all Gentiles that he was, indeed, the true God. As a consequence of this charismatic responsibility, it is also a history that became morally interpreted by the prophets of Israel, who analysed and justified the tragic experiences of the nation – interpreted as expiatory and necessary acts inflicted by God on His chosen children, as a condition for the recovery of the promised land of milk and honey. The creed of the chosen nation, which is taken to its extremes in Jewish apocalyptic literature, gives way, with the advent of Christianity, to the creed of the (chosen) community of the just, the proselytising martyrs, while at the same time the mythical figure of the Messiah naturally becomes identified with Christ. The same *schema* that the Hebrews used to justify their reverses and the political oppression to which they were subjected, in which misfortune functions as an expiatory stage that precedes the coming of a new era, was adopted by the first Christians, who were able to reconcile themselves to the persecution they suffered under the laws of imperial Rome because they saw it as a necessary state and stage of sacrifice, similar to that of the redeemer of humanity himself, preparatory to the imminent founding of the Messianic kingdom that Christ would govern. He Himself prophesied His second coming, as can be read in verses 27-28 of chapter 16 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew: "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with His angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there are some standing here who shall not taste of death till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16, 27-28). These prophetic words of Christ predicting the founding of a kingdom governed by Himself would be followed by the apocalyptic vision of St. John's Gospel, which refers to the founding and governing of a messianic kingdom by Christ who, in the company of the Christian martyrs, would reign for a thousand years until the Final Judgement. Verses 4-6 of chapter XX of the Revelation, alluding to the specific duration of this kingdom, gave rise to the most fanatical, illusory and opportunistic interpretations that generated expectations regarding the descent of the Celestial Jerusalem.

What I would stress here is that this type of prophetic-apocalyptic-messianic-millenarianist thought, denouncing present evil and announcing future good, has encouraged a wide range of utopian projects for the transformation and perfecting of the politico-social circumstances that have come into being throughout the history of the western world. Portuguese literary culture in particular has pursued

this hermeneutic scheme in critical historical times through idiosyncratic and genealogically differentiated formulae, ranging from historiographical discourse (e.g. Fernão Lopes, a fifteenth-century Portuguese chronicler, and the theme of the second coming of Christ in the Chronicle of King João I), through doctrinal and holy discourse (e.g. Vieira, a seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit, and his vision of the fifth monarchy in his *History of the Future*, a vision also propounded, according to Professor João Marques, by other preachers at time of the restoration of independence from Castilian political hegemony in 1640), to the poetic mode of thinking (in Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*, written in the wake of the crisis of the Portugal's First Republic in the early twentieth century and in the context of the plight of the dictatorship), and to philosophical reflections with pedagogical intentions (mostly in writings of an exegetic content on the destiny of the Portuguese nation by the twentieth-century Oporto philosopher Agostinho da Silva).

Commenting on how the content of some Hebrew prophets' messages went beyond the thaumaturgical and magical tone of the predictions of the first prophets mentioned in the Bible, the Portuguese poet and priest Mendonça detects signs of an awareness of man's social and ethical fate in such forays into the future. He writes that "the solutions that [the prophets] propose, lead to a kind of renewed social contract: the practice of justice, the corresponding solidarity that overcomes the distinction between classes and peoples, an intransigent investment in the construction of a peace that is simultaneously both political and poetical. The written word became a utopian vehicle" (*Bíblia* 5, my translation).

This utopian vehicle, often associated with an eschatological vision of the founding of a harmonious kingdom on earth through a providential act of divine will that would be revealed in stages until the end of time – as exemplified in the theology of the twelfth-century Calabrian monk Joachim of Fiore, who provided a most amazing prophetic speculation based on a complex, numerological biblical exegesis – was a vision that began to lose its appeal from the Enlightenment age onwards. It gave way to a more secular notion of progress, a notion that became a force in the evolution of the utopian literary genre, which thenceforth began to be shaped with the determining coordinates of future non-time, *ucronia*, rather than through the coordinates of present non-place. Yet, this conceptual change focusing on time rather than place did not imply the elimination of the original optimistic nature of More's term *utopia*, as generally signifying a different and better society than exists in the historical present. This same generic meaning is somehow reproduced in the following words of D. António Ferreira Gomes, the twentieth century Portuguese bishop, who was forced into exile in Rome due to his open criticism of the Salazar dictatorship: in 1952, he reflected on the dilemma, today more urgent than ever, between economism and humanism, stating that "instead of a society in which a separation exists between social classes only on the basis of wealth ... we can idealise one in which value and service are the criterion of dis-

this hermeneutic scheme in critical historical times through idiosyncratic and genealogically differentiated formulae, ranging from historiographical discourse (e.g. Fernão Lopes, a fifteenth-century Portuguese chronicler, and the theme of the second coming of Christ in the Chronicle of King João I), through doctrinal and holy discourse (e.g. Vieira, a seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit, and his vision of the fifth monarchy in his *History of the Future*, a vision also propounded, according to Professor João Marques, by other preachers at time of the restoration of independence from Castilian political hegemony in 1640), to the poetic mode of thinking (in Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*, written in the wake of the crisis of the Portugal's First Republic in the early twentieth century and in the context of the plight of the dictatorship), and to philosophical reflections with pedagogical intentions (mostly in writings of an exegetic content on the destiny of the Portuguese nation by the twentieth-century Oporto philosopher Agostinho da Silva).

Commenting on how the content of some Hebrew prophets' messages went beyond the thaumaturgical and magical tone of the predictions of the first prophets mentioned in the Bible, the Portuguese poet and priest Mendonça detects signs of an awareness of man's social and ethical fate in such forays into the future. He writes that "the solutions that [the prophets] propose, lead to a kind of renewed social contract: the practice of justice, the corresponding solidarity that overcomes the distinction between classes and peoples, an intransigent investment in the construction of a peace that is simultaneously both political and poetical. The written word became a utopian vehicle" (*Bíblia* 5, my translation).

This utopian vehicle, often associated with an eschatological vision of the founding of a harmonious kingdom on earth through a providential act of divine will that would be revealed in stages until the end of time – as exemplified in the theology of the twelfth-century Calabrian monk Joachim of Fiore, who provided a most amazing prophetic speculation based on a complex, numerological biblical exegesis – was a vision that began to lose its appeal from the Enlightenment age onwards. It gave way to a more secular notion of progress, a notion that became a force in the evolution of the utopian literary genre, which thenceforth began to be shaped with the determining coordinates of future non-time, *ucronia*, rather than through the coordinates of present non-place. Yet, this conceptual change focusing on time rather than place did not imply the elimination of the original optimistic nature of More's term *utopia*, as generally signifying a different and better society than exists in the historical present. This same generic meaning is somehow reproduced in the following words of D. António Ferreira Gomes, the twentieth-century Portuguese bishop, who was forced into exile in Rome due to his open criticism of the Salazar dictatorship: in 1952, he reflected on the dilemma, today more urgent than ever, between economism and humanism, stating that "instead of a society in which a separation exists between social classes only on the basis of wealth ... we can idealise one in which value and service are the criterion of dis-

tinction, and in which human fraternity provides the cement, not between the great and the good, but between good, simple people" (Gomes).

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