

## MESSIANIC MYTHS AND MOVEMENTS

### THE ROLE OF MYTHS

Those religious doctrines which used to foretell the dawning on earth of an age of perfect happiness are called "millennial;" they oppose the existing society, which is considered as unjust and oppressive, and proclaim its impending downfall. These doctrines are called "messianic" whenever the inauguration of this perfect world is dependent upon the arrival of a "son of God," a divine messenger, or a mythical hero: in fact, of a "messiah."<sup>1</sup> The messiah is he who announces and inaugurates on earth a "Kingdom of Heaven."

The messianic doctrine can remain a mere faith; it is equi-

<sup>1</sup> Millennial movements can be led by a group of elders or by leaders elected from among the faithful, and are not then messianic; a movement is only messianic if it is led by a sacred leader, a messenger from the beyond. It is necessary to establish this definition so as not to stumble upon the analytic problems found by other researchers, such as Guariglia (*Guglielmo Guariglia, Prophetismus und Heilserwartungs-Bewegungen als völkerkundliches und religionsgeschichtliches Problem*, Wien, Horn, 1959) and others: A.J.F. Köbben, "Prophetic Movements as an Expression of Social Protest," *International Archives of Ethnography*, vol. XLIV, n. 1, Leiden, 1960; Sylvia Thrupp, *Millennial Dreams in Action*, The Hague, Mouton, 1962, etc.

Translated by Rosanna Rowland

valent to the vague realization of socio-economic and political conflicts within society. The existence of the messianic creed does not suffice in itself to give birth to a group or active community united around a "divine messenger," the aim of whose behavior is the creation of a new world, despite the prime importance of the role played by the mythical and religious themes. It sets a period of Expectation going no further than the stage of promise and wish. These two facts—messianic belief and messianic cult—are both different; the first can exist without the second, but the second must always be set in motion by the first. The community is always organized around the inspiration of the myth, but the myth may exist for a long period without engendering any movement.

The Portuguese variant of messianism, "Sebastianism," is an excellent example of this. The symptoms of the decline of the Portuguese Empire were already more than visible when, on the death of the young king, D. Sebastiao, in 1578, Portugal fell under the yoke of Spain. Legend took over: he was not dead but a prisoner of the Moors who had taken him away to a desert island from which he was to return to liberate his people. Once Portugal had become independent in 1640, the Sebastianist myth did not completely disappear. The larger part of the Empire was lost and the Portuguese nation was only to play a secondary role; the myth allowed a belief in the return of glorious times, and King D. Sebastiao thus became the national "messiah." The entire country awaited his return, but no messianic cult arose. The belief went through periods of abeyance, but was reborn with fresh vigour each time the independence of Portugal appeared to be threatened or social conditions became too difficult. Even the Napoleonic invasion, well into the XIXth Century, unleashed among the people an intense longing for the return of the Vanished Prince; but, contrary to popular expectations, there was no reincarnation.<sup>2</sup>

But if Sebastianism did not give rise to the formation of messianic cults, other, similar, legends were more productive in Europe. In 1224 the death of Baldwin IX during the IV Crusade, of which he was the leader, brought Flanders and Hainault

<sup>2</sup> João Lucio de Azevedo, *A Evolução do Sebastianismo*, Lisbon, Livraria Classica, 1947.

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under French domination. A messianic legend formed around the vanished sovereign—he was doing penance in a distant land and would return to free his people. One day he was recognized beneath the features of a white-haired hermit; the latter, aided by the nobility, the clergy and the people, regrouped the kingdom and led the fight against France, but was defeated and took flight. Similarly in the 13th century, Frederick Barbarossa became the hero of a messianic legend, and several lesser saviors attempted to pass themselves off for him, with the aim of reconstituting the Holy Roman Empire. We should also remember that the messianic legend that formed around Charlemagne did not, however, lead to the appearance of active communities.

A problem thus presents itself: how, in what social circumstances, does the messianic myth become active?

#### “PARIAH PEOPLES” AND “PARIAH CLASSES”

The messianic movement seems to arise each time a community feels afflicted and oppressed. However, affliction and oppression are sufficiently widespread throughout the world, and messianic movements are not correspondingly common. Is it possible to determine the conditions that favor their appearance?

The term “messianic movement” shows that it belongs to the category of “social dynamics”—the sociological label covering the totality of active functions and transformations to be found within society. As a solution to resolve a conflict that has become intolerable, that is to say a crisis, messianic movements can in principle correspond with either one or the other of the two forms of social dynamics. The myths and messianic movements of the Middle Ages, already described above, generally issued from the loss of sovereignty suffered by national groups. These movements take the form of “national liberation movements” and attempt to counteract the laceration that follows the conquest of one group by another.

But other crises can also give birth to the same kind of movements—those resulting from socio-economic change, society going through a transformation to emerge in a different state. At the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance, important changes in certain regions of Europe shook

the ancient feudal structure and gradually created a new one. The old dividing line between the social strata had been noble/pelebeian; it was becoming increasingly rich/poor. When this change came about slowly, the reciprocal adaptation of the changing social strata was possible. When the transition was brutal, those strata of society that had suddenly become demoted, displaced and disorientated, would react and attempt to find a new and more satisfactory equilibrium. The reaction could then take the form of a messianic movement.

The messiah would organise a community whose basic principle was the condemnation of the rich and the acquisition of power by the poor. In his works on the social foundations of religions, Max Weber studied this type of reaction; he showed that in addition to a reaction by a "pariah people," (the case of the conquest of one nation by another), the messianic movement could also be a reaction by a "pariah class." The lower strata of a society would try to parry social injustice by organizing themselves around a leader of communities whose internal hierarchy was the mirror-image of the prevailing social ladder, and which would therefore place in its upper ranks those who lived on the lowest rungs of the social ladder.<sup>3</sup> What Max Weber allowed theoretically actually took place in Flanders, Bohemia, and Germany; the most important of this type of movement was, without doubt, the one that grew around Thomas Münzer.

Max Weber did not, however, attempt to define in what socio-economic contingencies such movements might be born. With the growth of towns towards the late Middle Ages, with the beginnings of urban life, commerce, and the urban working-class, divisions were created within the emerging society. Tradition and lineage had been the determining criteria of individual social status; the noble, whatever his fortune, was above the villein. With the advent of wealth as the principal factor of individual social classification, other social classes were introduced between the two great old divisions. This held equally for the town and country, although the transformation was swifter in the towns and more pronounced. Thus an "upper nobility" was more and more set against the "minor nobility" by its

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *Economia y Sociedad*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Economica, Vol. 2, p. 179.

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wealth. The latter, unable to maintain its rank, in fact become inferior to the great enriched merchants. The "high clergy" led a princely existence, separated by a great social and economic gap from the priests and monks. Amongst the members of the commonalty, the rich middle-class patricians led a life that was completely different from that of the artisans and peasants.

The Church, however, that guided the moral and emotional life of the whole society, continued to extol the contempt for goods and earthly riches, and poverty and chastity as the primary virtues. Society was in flux and ferment; the rural exodus to the towns was bringing peasants who came to swell the ranks of misery. Messianic movements are born in this atmosphere of instability and uncertainty, and set the lower against the powerful; they wished to return to the age of the first Christian communities, whose members were divided neither by birth nor by fortune, but only by the qualities springing from their virtues and their faith.

The Industrial Revolution, which struck Western Europe from the 18th century onwards, brought in its train important social upheavals with manifold changes in the social strata. Messianic movements then arose, of which the Shakers' community, studied by Henri Desroche, is the best example. Ann Lee, a Manchester worker, the daughter of peasants ruined by industrialization, had a revelation in 1770 which showed her the true meaning of religion and life. She took over the leadership of the small religious group of old Quakers to which she belonged, and departed for America where she was to found a new society of a godly nature. The adepts of Mother Ann were the workers of Manchester, the first town in Europe to become industrialized; they were therefore those who had to take the shock of the transformation under way. The transformation was extremely rapid, the socio-economic change being effected in about fifteen years.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous other messianic groups continued to arise in England and, later in the United States, when industrialization reached that country also. Their major demand was the abolition

<sup>4</sup> Henri Desroche, *Les Shakers Américains: d'un Néo-Christianisme à un Présocialisme?*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1955, and "Micromillénarismes et communatarisme utopique en Amérique du Nord, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, n. 4, Paris, 1957.

of the new socio-economic relationships and hierarchies. Like the medieval movements, they sought to subvert the new establishment and substitute it with another, for which they sought a model from the past: their attempt to overthrow society was guided by the ideal image of the early Christian communities. Revolutionaries in their demands and practice, they were nevertheless inspired by tradition when it concerned building a new society.

It is rather curious to meet with a comparable movement in a German colony in southern Brazil in the 19th century. For a fairly long period, from 1824 onwards,<sup>5</sup> the Brazilian government distributed to European settlers full ownership of still undeveloped territories; for this attempt at population were chosen huge, deserted tracts in the South of the country, for the temperate climate of these regions allowed the settlers to continue the same kind of cultivation to which they were accustomed. There, their life was rather hard in the beginning; abandoned in distant areas, with no means of communication, without help or assistance of any sort, they more or less survived. Anabaptists, Methodists, Catholics, no matter what their religion, they had neither priests nor pastors to lead their sects. They did not mix with the sparse native population, but married among themselves and tried to retain their customs. A few years after their arrival they had grouped themselves into large family units with a strong internal cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

Then, with time, came abundance, the growth of "German" towns, the replacement of the old subsistence agriculture by commercial agriculture. Some settlers became rich, while others continued to eke out a meagre existence; the rich left to live in the towns, occupying senior positions in the administration there. Their socio-economic climb separated them from the family groups to which they had belonged, and breached the unity forged through poverty and life's daily hardships.

The leader of the Muckers' movement, which arose in 1872,

<sup>5</sup> This policy of colonization, inaugurated by the government immediately after the independence of the country (1822) was also aimed at preventing the empty territories from being invaded by the neighboring Spaniards.

<sup>6</sup> These settlers were sent into still unpopulated regions, which made their association with the people of the country difficult; in addition, the German colonists were strongly prejudiced against the nationals, who were very cross-bred.

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was a woman, Jacobina Maurer, who claimed to be a reincarnation of Christ. She was a third generation settler, her grandfather having arrived in Brazil in 1824. In her sermons she spoke of impending catastrophes which would, however, spare her adepts; the latter had nothing to fear from the future disasters since they were already living according to the laws of the Old Testament—they were poor and virtuous. But the rich were damned, and every manner of misfortune lay in wait for them. Besides her sermons, Jacobina's letters written to her successful relatives amply demonstrate the "poor versus rich" character assumed by the movement. Unable to re-establish the old, egalitarian, family-dominated society, unwilling to accept the new society stratified by wealth—and thus ungodly—the female Christ founded a new one, organised by those who were, according to the Bible, the elect of God—the poor and humble.<sup>7</sup>

The rapid onset of a new social stratification, with the establishment of highly coercive master-servant relationships, thus seems to constitute an ideal atmosphere for the birth of messianic movements. In the case of "national liberation movements," it was a matter of foreign domination turning a previously independent group or society into a subject group; the oldest known example of this can be found in the People of Israel under Babylonian domination. This case represents a "pariah people" situation. The transition from a society structured by family groups to one structured according to economic distinctions is equally conducive to messianic movements, provided that the transition be rapid.

### THE "COLONIAL SITUATION"

There is one socio-economic situation in which master-servant relationships are particularly difficult to bear: this is the colonial situation, and it has not failed either to give rise to messianic movements.

During the first century of the Portuguese colonization of

<sup>7</sup> The Muckers' movement came to a bloody end. See my *O Messianismo No Brasil e No Mundo*, S. Paolo, Ed. Dominus, 1965; *Réforme et Révolution dans les Sociétés Traditionnelles*, Paris, Anthropos, 1968; *Images Messianiques du Brésil*, Cuernavaca, Sondeos, 1973.

Brazil, movements of this type made their appearance in response to the transformations experienced by the Indian tribes, previously independent and now made slave-labor. During the XVII century these movements became localized in two favorite areas: in the North-East of Brazil, where sugar-cane plantations were being developed, and in the Mission Territory, in Paraguay. Only much later does one find them elsewhere. In this way, the Indians were responding to two kinds of slavery: that of the Portuguese settlers who needed workers on their large estates, and that of the Jesuits who deported and regrouped the Indians in villages for the purposes of conversion, thus destroying the tribal socio-economic structure. Not all the tribes, however, committed themselves to messianic movements: these are found exclusively amongst those Indians whose myths proclaimed the return of a hero of the tribe or culture. The latter was a divine messenger who had come at the dawn of time to bring the Indians important elements of their culture; he had then departed, but with the promise to return. Thus the master-servant situation was not the sole condition for the birth of the movements: a specific, native, mythical base was also necessary.<sup>8</sup>

The messianic movements of the Mission Territory were far outnumbered by those of North-East Brazil. The severity of Jesuit catechising sparked off reactions among the catechumens as well as among those tribes not yet directly in the power of the priests; they assumed a syncretic aspect: the "leaders" were reincarnated tribal divinities, who yet, at the same time, organized the building of churches, preached, and baptized the neophytes. Native and Catholic ritual and belief were intermingled. The "messiahs" announced the return of Ancestral Times in their sermons: Jesuits, Spanish and Portuguese, would fall victim to catastrophes marking the end of this world and the beginning of the new.<sup>9</sup>

This kind of movement disappeared from the Territory as soon as the Jesuit missions were destroyed by the Brazilian

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Métraux, "Les hommes-dieux chez les Chiriguano et dans l'Amérique du Sud," *Revista del Instituto de Etnología de la Universidad Nacional de Tucuman*, Tome II, Argentina, 1931, and "Les messies de l'Amérique du Sud," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, n. 4, Paris, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Métraux, *La Religion des Tupinambà*, Paris, Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1928, and works mentioned in note 8.



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half-breeds, the "paulistas," who come in search of Indian slaves. In the sugar-plantation area, the disappearance of messianic movements coincided with the annihilation of the Indians, from diseases brought by the whites and by the flight of the aboriginals remaining in the remote forests. The Portuguese settlers were thus obliged to call upon African manpower. In the XVIII and at the beginning of the XIX centuries, other movements arose among the Chiriguano, the primitive Guarani living in the foothills of the Bolivian Andes. They corresponded to the catechizing activities of the Franciscan missionaries; these movements seem to disappear completely after 1892. Towards the middle of the XIX Century, movements again arose in Brazil, in Amazonia, when the region was exploited for its rubber. They still reappear occasionally, as soon as any new attempt is made to penetrate these regions.

In America, in the XIX Century, similar movements were set off among the Indians by the exodus to the West.<sup>10</sup> In Africa, the oldest movement seems to have arisen in the Congo in the 18th century;<sup>11</sup> but it was only a century later that they really gained impetus, parallel to the settlement of whites and the increase in missionary activities.

In South Africa, the first sects arise as early as 1890, although there had been previous contact with the whites. This contact, however, took a new turn with the permanent settling of colonials, bringing in its wake the confiscation of tribal homelands, compulsory unpaid labor by the natives, and a rigorous racial segregation. The messianic-oriented Zionist Churches spread rapidly as soon as they are established; their doctrine, their teachings, their ritual, stem from both a native heritage and a Christian contribution.<sup>12</sup> The "messiah" would be a black Christ bringing salvation to his people; but the structure of the messianic group was a fairly accurate replica of the Bantu tribe.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> Wilson D. Wallis, *Messiahs, Christian and Pagan*, Boston, The Gorham Press, 1918.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Doutreloux, *Introduction à la Culture Congo*, Tervuren, 1963.

<sup>12</sup> The Ethiopian Churches, which arose at the same time, form a contrast to the Zionist Churches; the first are bureaucratic, the second are messianic. Maurice Leenhardt, *Le Mouvement Ethiopien au Sud de l'Afrique, de 1896 à 1899*, Cahors, 1902.

<sup>13</sup> Jacqueline Roumeguère Eberhardt, "Messianisme en Afrique du Sud," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, n. 4, Paris, 1957.

great Ba-Kongo messiah Simeon Kimbangou, who appeared in the Congo around 1921, resembles the black Christs of South Africa: his "new message," the group organized by him, contains Christian as well as aboriginal elements.<sup>14</sup> These messiahs prophesied the rise of a new society in which the whites would be the servants of the blacks. From the Biblical texts the new Christs preferred to choose those dealing with the captivity of the Jews, the Apparition of the Messiah, and the liberation of the People of Israel.

At roughly the same time, Oceania, and more particularly Melanesia, also proved to be a fertile ground for the growth of messianic movements, the first of which seems to date from 1867. Whether the tribes of these regions were egalitarian, that is to say without important internal stratification, or whether they were, on the contrary, highly structured into stratified and hereditary levels from supreme chief to serf, messianic movements developed there from the time that contact with the whites became closer, master-servant relationships more accentuated, and above all when forced labor on the plantations was imposed. The kernel of the messianic faith was the hope that one day a great cargo would arrive, bringing back the ancestors with the riches of the whites; on that day a total social upheaval would take place and the whites would become the slaves of the natives. The annunciation of the imminent arrival of the cargo was always made by a "divine messenger" who would reveal the rules and behavior which, if adhered to, would expedite the arrival of the extraordinary boat. Such movements can still be found today on some of the islands of Oceania.<sup>15</sup>

In short, whatever the native population, the most traumatic thing was the transition from a position of national self-sufficiency and independence to that of a stratum in a complex capitalistic society, bringing in its wake subjugation and enforced

<sup>14</sup> Georges Balandier, *Sociologie de l'Afrique Noire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Guiart, "Cargo Cults and Political Evolution in Melanesia," *Mankind*, vol. 4, n. 6, May 1951; and "Institutions religieuses traditionnelles et messianismes modernes à Fidji," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, n. 5, Paris, 1958; see also K. Burrige, Mambu, *A Melanesian Millenium*, London, Methuen and Co., 1960; Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia*, London, McGibbon & Kee, 1957; Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, University of Manchester, 1964.

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acculturation. The change was imposed upon the indigenous peoples from the outside; they suddenly saw themselves robbed of the ability to direct their own destinies, and they had to conform to, and accept, alien standards to the creation of which they had contributed nothing. This process of fashioning a new, highly stratified, society from ethnic relationships constitutes the essential factor in a "colonial situation."<sup>16</sup> To some extent it resembles the loss of independence already remarked in Europe. In the case of the whites and indigenous peoples, however, one very important aspect results in a quite specific difference: each of the two societies has its culture, their economic systems are opposed to one another, and then suddenly they become a single composite society. For the vanquished society the loss of autonomy is thus aggravated by a cultural confusion, bringing with it shifts in behavior, and anomy. The messianic movements were therefore reactions to two processes of transformation at the same time.

Nevertheless, the most important aspect of the crisis was not the cultural change, but rather the very fact that all the movements mentioned fixed as their conscious aim the overturning of the new social hierarchy in favor of a differently stratified society from which the natives would be the beneficiaries: a society in which they would occupy the upper ranks. This represents a "third society," which is no longer exactly the traditional one, to which it is no longer possible to revert, but which is neither the society imposed by the whites. The aim of this new society is to force the whites down to the lower social levels and to give the natives the dominant position. One thus finds movements subversive of the established order passing beneath the guise of religious movements: the whites have always been aware of the danger that this represented for them. The majority of these movements are therefore the objects of frequently bloody repression.

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISRUPTION AND ANOMY

The movements that we have described up to now are characterized by their subversive demands and the attempt to establish a new society by overthrowing the ruling order. They are thus

<sup>16</sup> Balandier, *op. cit.*.

“revolutionary” in the sense that Eric Hobsbawm gives this word: the essential character of the revolution is the total rejection of the existing social system which it wishes to destroy to replace it by a more satisfactory one.<sup>17</sup> The change is more or less consciously desired by the individuals, who set to work to effect it; the demands contained in the messiahs’ sermons constitute the aims contemplated by men in their revolutionary activity. But are messianic movements always revolutionary, do they always wish to overthrow society and its hierarchies? Can they not limit themselves to its amelioration without utterly overthrowing it in addition?

This doubt has been prompted by the analysis of the rural messianic movements found in Brazil, for there we have not discovered this appeal to subversion of the established order, so characteristic of the movements listed up to now. In what socio-economic circumstances did the Brazilian movements emerge? The scene of the best known of these movements was the arid north-east region: around 1867, Antonio Conselheiro (Anthony the Counsellor), a “beato,” that is to say, a layman pledged to the service of God,<sup>18</sup> travelled through the whole of that region called “The Polygon of Drought” preaching, directing Novenas, and building chapels, etc.<sup>19</sup> With his adepts he founded a first “holy city” in 1877, and lived there for 12 years; he was supported and protected by local and regional political leaders, some of whom firmly believed in his extraordinary powers. On the other hand he was useful to them, for he brought order back to areas torn by conflict and struggles of every kind, and imposed on the inhabitants mores and habits that conformed with traditional morality.

But the proclamation of the Republic, which supervened in 1889, brought about the fall of the leaders that he knew, who

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> The number of priests was always small in the Brazilian countryside; the laity spontaneously took their place.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Conselheiro’s movement is described in one of the great classics of Brazilian literature (Euclides Cunha, *Os Sertões*, Sao Paulo, Livr. Francisco Alves, 13th ed., 1936). In studying the documents, however, it was evident that the author had taken great liberties with reality. See my *O Messianismo No Brasil e No Mundo; Réforme et Révolution dans les Sociétés Traditionnelles; Images Messianiques du Brésil*.

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were replaced by others with different ideas. Sensing the approach of difficult times, the "messiah" abandoned his town; still followed by his adepts, he left to settle in a distant and isolated region, where he founded his second "holy city," Canudos. There, life was organised along the same pattern: with his "apostles" and "ministers" the "Messiah" shared in the tasks of daily life and in all the activities necessary for the smooth running of the community. The new hierarchy that he created did not, however, totally take the place of the hierarchy of the surrounding society which was in some manner preserved within the messianic group. The richest inhabitants retained prestige and privileges; it was among them that Antonio Conselheiro very often chose his "apostles" and "ministers." As before, he counted political leaders among his adepts, but these did not always come to live in the "holy city."

In his sermons Antonio Conselheiro censured all those, both high and low, who did not live according to the divine laws, who permitted themselves to commit all kinds of transgressions; one finds there no condemnation of the rich and powerful, he does not attack private property, but says that the time is near when the poor shall be rich, and the rich still richer... The foundation of a town in the depths of the countryside, the rush of the faithful coming to live around their spiritual guide, the expanse of plantations and the herds of livestock to feed them, brought plenty to these deserted regions but also entailed the envy and discontent of the local leaders for whom Antonio Conselheiro was becoming a strongly based competitor. He had to be destroyed, and this gave rise to a long "holy war" that ended with the complete destruction of Canudos, the "Messiah," and his adepts.

The grafting of messiahs and messianic movements onto the normal socio-political infrastructure that one notices so clearly in the movement of Antonio Conselheiro, is a constant of the rural Brazilian movements whose messiahs maintained excellent relations with certain political chiefs, and thus became the enemies of their opponents. Among the great messianic figures of the country can be mentioned, in the North-east: Antonio Conselheiro, Father Cicero; in the South: the two monks<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> These were not true monks, but "beatos;" the term "monk" is its equivalent in the South of the country.

Joao Maria and José Maria. They were all accepted and protected as long as friendly political leaders were in power and persecuted and opposed when their political enemies were in the ascendent.<sup>21</sup> The introduction of the messianic movements into the heart of the regional political system, the messiah's acceptance of the authority of local political leaders, again prove that they are neither subversive nor revolutionary.

The aim of the rural Brazilian messiahs is to bring the rule of law to country areas convulsed by the struggles between great rival political factions. The rather vague local structures easily break down, and violence is one of the most obvious characteristics of individual and collective behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Through their activity, the messiahs become agents of pacification and reorganisation, and, through this, agents of continuity in the social system, since they re-establish order within it. On the other hand, none of the messiahs preached the transformation or overthrow of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and they were able to retain fairly satisfactory relations with a good number of priests. For its own part, the Church tolerated them as long as it saw in them no menace to its authority: in surroundings bereft of priests, where Catholic practice was barely maintained, the messiahs became useful instruments of religious reawakening and social control. Certain priests, even, believed that in the messiah they saw a man directly inspired by God.

#### SOCIAL CRISES AND THE BIRTH OF THE MOVEMENTS

We have just seen, through the analysis of the rural Brazilian movements, that they are not necessarily linked to troubles brought in the wake of social transformation; they can find a seedbed in instability, tensions, or internal conflicts, provided that the crisis be sufficiently deep, and that the groups feel threatened by anomy. This fact is confirmed by the contemporary

<sup>21</sup> Struggles between groups for local and regional power are a constant of Brazilian life. They sometimes last for generations, bringing a reign of uncertainty, instability and poverty, creating excellent conditions for the advent of messiahs. See my *O Mandonismo Local na Vida Política do Brasil*, S. Paulo, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Sylvia Carvalho Franco, *Os Homens Livres na Civilização do Café*, S. Paulo, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, 1971.

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studies of messianic movements among the Guaranì.

Living on the border between Brazil and Paraguay, in still scarcely developed areas, the Guaranì today present the unusual characteristic of actually joining messianic movements and taking their inspiration from specific myths. We have already described here the aboriginal messianic movements, but their religion and practice were syncretic, combining Christian and Indian elements. The present-day Guaranì who leave everything and depart for the "Land of Innocence", which is to say, in search of the ancestral paradise, do so under the influence of their native myths. The "leader" is the reincarnation of the civilizing hero, he is not a Christ; the dance is the primordial rite which allows the Indians to arrive alive in the "Land of Innocence;" he who undertakes the direction of the exodus is never either over-civilized or a half-caste, but an Indian whose beliefs are intact in all their purity. The adepts also live in the ancient manner, their life-style having undergone very few changes. This faithfulness to the mores and customs is necessary if they are to hear the words of the "leader," if they are to make the decision to seek out the ancestral paradise.

There are links, however, between the varying degrees of internal change within the group and the likelihood of its departure. A study of several groups living in the region demonstrates the fact that the tribes which do not leave are those whose acculturation is already very advanced, or else those who are leading an existence still very close to the traditional life style; the only ones to depart are those whose tribal organisation has suffered from their proximity to the whites.<sup>23</sup> One must note quite particularly that the Guaranì tribes involved in these movements do not maintain relationships with the "whites," (or, in the event, with the Brazilian peasants living in their neighborhood, who are more or less Indian and African cross-breeds) of the master-servant type. In fact, the peasants do not constitute a dominant class in their relationships with the Indians; they live in domestic economies, their working unit is the family, they cultivate small fields for their subsistence, and sell the meagre surplus at the nearest market. Thus in

<sup>23</sup> Egon Schaden, *Aspectos Fundamentais da Cultura Guaranì*, S. Paulo, 1954.

their low economic level, in their method of cultivating the land, in their rudimentary way of life, and in their ignorance, they resemble the Indians. When these peasants maintain good neighborly relations with their local Indians (which is not rare), manifested by mutual visits, by invitations to one another's festivals, and by intermarriage, the acquaintance with new customs undermines the tribal organization from within and endangers its survival. These, then, are the Indians who no longer leave. They explain that none of them is worthy of reaching the "Land of Innocence," because they are too quarrelsome and wicked. Thus the notion of sin, which is quite alien to the Guaraní mentality, is already present, and helps them explain why they cannot depart, even though they wish to in their hearts.

There are some Indians, however, who have succeeded in keeping completely apart from the Brazilian peasants and who have still not felt any serious threat from the processes of acculturation; they retain their tribal structure and their customs intact, and neither do they leave. They can constantly speak of the forthcoming end of the world, but this is a part of their actual beliefs. In fact the Guaraní have a mythology abounding in cosmic catastrophes and the successive re-births of the world, but the still entirely indigenous tribes show no intention of discovering the road leading to the "Land of Innocence." The groups who leave in search of the ancestral paradise are those whose tribal life begins to be endangered by disorganization; they are haunted by anomy, but can still reconstruct the traditional structure around the "pagé."<sup>24</sup> The organization of the exodus and the journey, which demands a severe discipline on the part of the group-members and a total obedience to the "pagé," become important factors of religious and social reorganization. It is not surprising therefore that these movements follow the aboriginal myths step by step: it was Alfred Métraux who said that the myths were for the "pagés" what a play is to actors.<sup>25</sup> The Guaraní exodus for the "Land of Innocence" does not serve then to create a solution to a whites

<sup>24</sup> "Page:" religious leader of the Guaraní.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Métraux, "Les hommes-dieux chez les Chiriguano et dans l'Amérique du Sud," *Revista del Instituto de Etnología de la Universidad Nacional de Tucuman*, Tomo II, Argentina, 1931, p. 68.



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versus natives situation: this problem is not even posed. Its aim is to answer the internal tribal disorganization. According to Alfred Métraux, similar movements would have existed among certain Brazilian and South-American tribes before the colonization, when any crisis whatsoever badly unsettled their social structure. The internal tribal crisis could therefore be produced by contact with the whites, but this contact was only an additional factor to a list of possible ones that were able to create tribal dislocation and initiate exoduses to the ancestral paradise (such as cosmic catastrophes, murderous conflicts with other tribes, etc).

### THE TYPOLOGY OF CRISES

We are thus confronted with a second type of socio-economic crisis giving rise to messianic reactions: the situation of the quasi-anomy of a group or society outside any master-servant pattern. The deep-seated decay of social bonds without their substitution by others, which constitutes the essence of anomy, and the disorientation provoked among individuals by this decay, can become quite serious. They no longer feel the constraints of the old, traditional discipline, but neither do they know of any new disciplines. Then the messianic movements attempt to counteract this type of crisis by recalling society to its traditional form.

Messianic movements are unleashed by two different types of crisis, and the demands they express also grow into something different—the different directions of the movements are linked to the difference in crisis. The establishment of a master-servant situation between social groups, whether it stems from an internal economic distinction or from external conquest, is at the root of revolutionary messianic reactions whose goal is the overthrow of the established order and its substitution by a new order brought by the messiah. The internal dislocation of a group or society, leading it to the brink of anomy, can also give birth to identical reactions, save that the goal is now the reformation of institutions and the reorganization of society, in re-establishing it to its previous state of harmony.

The origin of messianic movements thus implies two types of

social dynamics which give results of a similar aspect but of a very different content: the dynamics of social change, which gives birth to revolutionary messianisms, and the dynamics of socio-economic functioning, producing reformist messianisms. In both cases one is always dealing with socio-economic and political reactions beneath a religious guise. But here the resemblance appears to end. The active social processes that drive individuals to such reactions are different, and one might also wonder whether the type of society itself, in which the crises reappear, might not be dissimilar, for we have traced messianic movements in Western societies as well as among peoples regarded as "primitive."<sup>26</sup>

Now these two societies are very different in structure and dynamics. The organizing factor in occidental society is economic; according to their wealth, income, and property, individuals are distributed throughout the mass of society, and are located on higher or lower rungs of the social ladder: the classes form large pyramidal entities which include numerous individuals of fairly similar economic status. In primitive societies the social substructure is numerically weak; tribal communities form small sociocultural units, which are distinct from the point of view of economics and politics as well as from that of values and behavioral patterns. They are always made up of an agglomeration of "extended families" or lineages which surround the individual. In addition tribal societies and Western societies also manifest differences in their cultural organization. Occidental society is characterised by the interdependence of highly specialised socio-cultural sectors, giving rise to various social and professional groups. In their turn, primitive societies have closely merged socio-cultural sectors, which are bound up with one another; this basic intermingling of activities lies at the root of the unity of the structure. In occidental societies, on the other hand, the socio-cultural sectors are neatly separated from one another but interdependent, and this interdependence forms the foundations of the social cohesion.

Nevertheless, messianic movements appear specifically in

<sup>26</sup> Messianic movements have also been present in Russia and the countries of Asia; unfortunately, when studying these events, we have not found documents sufficiently detailed from the sociological point of view to allow an analysis within the perspective chosen here.

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societies that are based on lineage. When found in Western societies, they appeared to arise only when the “genetic crisis” had been caused by the transition from one type of society to another: such as movements of the “pariah class” and “colonial situation” types. These are revolutionary movements. What can one say, however, about the “national liberation movements” in the Middle Ages, and the rural movements of Brazil, which are born in Western societies and which are not the result of the change from one kind of society to another? But here also we are confronted by societies based on lineage, composed of rather closely juxtaposed units, and in which family groups play the rôle of important regulators of social organization. Eric Hobsbawm goes as far as to say of the peasants and lower classes of Europe, that they are the “primitives of the West,”<sup>27</sup> and the Brazilian peasants can very well be classed under this label.<sup>28</sup> It should also be remarked that during the 19th Century one also finds in Europe a peasant movement which at least bears some similarity with the Brazilian movements: that of the Italian, David Lazzaretti.<sup>29</sup>

Thus messianic movements arise as particular reactions to a specific type of society—the society based upon lineage; they are found in such a society when it becomes dislocated, with the risk of anomy, and also when it is transformed into a society of a different type: the class society. The vigor of the reaction differs according to whether it is a case of a crisis of internal disorganization, or a crisis of transformation. In the case of the first, the actual structure of the society is not questioned; there is a wish to right the disorganization, and the movement acquires a reformist air. In the case of the second type, the very nature of the social stratification comes

<sup>27</sup> Hobsbawm, pp. 2-3. Varagnac expresses the same opinion; see André Varagnac, *Civilisations Traditionnelles et Genres de Vie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1948.

<sup>28</sup> It is impossible to mistake the Brazilian peasants for Indians; in general they are half-castes, but their institutions and customs are linked almost exclusively to the Portuguese cultural heritage. See my *O Messianismo No Brasil e No Mundo*, and my *Réforme et Révolution dans les Sociétés Traditionnelles*. See also my *Os Cangaceiros, Les Bandits d'Honneur Brésiliens*, Paris, Julliard, 1968.

<sup>29</sup> *O Messianismo No Brasil e No Mundo; Réforme et Révolution dans les Sociétés Traditionnelles*.

under attack; there is a desire for the total overthrow of the hierarchies, and the movement is subversive and revolutionary. As we have seen, without changing its form, it can use different material according to the crisis by which it is engendered.

As for capitalist societies, such as were formed during the Renaissance, these are only involved with messianic movements from the time when they change from a society with a small numerical base, built on family units, whose socio-cultural sectors are scarcely distinguishable—whether they be medieval, peasant, or primitive societies—into a society composed of vast, economically determined social classes.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MESSIAH

It is important to know how a messianic movement can arise. We have succeeded in showing the conditions which appear to us necessary for its appearance: first, the existence of a society based upon family lineage; then, that society must undergo crises either of transition, or in its running, a crisis characterized by rapid and profound upheavals in its socio-economic structure; finally, there must be present myths that will serve as models (myths of the arrival of a "Son of God," of the reappearance of a cultural hero-figure, or of the return of ancestors). We are therefore able to tell, according to the category of the society, what kind of internal conflict unleashes such reactions. However, we still do not know *when* the movement might arise.

It is possible for all the necessary conditions to be present at a given time: the type of society, the specific religion, the gravity of the crisis, and yet no movement grows, the messianic creed does not reach a take-off point. Or minor "leaders" arise who disappear almost immediately, producing those "abortive messianisms" of which Roger Bastide speaks.<sup>30</sup> In the South of Brazil, at the end of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth centuries, all the necessary elements for the birth of a messianic movement were present together: political conflict between two large family groups, creating great socio-economic disorganization in the re-

<sup>30</sup> Roger Bastide, "Le messianisme râté," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, n. 5, Jan.-June, Paris, 1958.

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gion; general discontent and resentment; and catholicism and local legends creating the indispensable mythical base. Then several minor messiahs appeared, whose communities were, however, easily dispersed.<sup>31</sup> In his turn Henri Desroche observes the appearance of 36 millenarian communities in the United States during the XIXth century, but only ten were organized by "divine messengers" thus acquiring a clearly messianic character.<sup>32</sup> Something beyond the conditions analysed above therefore seems necessary for the movement to become established and for the messianic community to be able to develop fully without almost immediately foundering on extinction.

That something would be the personality of the actual messiah. His qualities of leadership are recognized by the adepts, who come to group themselves around him; and the more he demonstrates his gifts, the more important will be the group living under his authority. Moreover, in all the documents that record messianic movements, the strong personality of the "leader" is mentioned—his eloquence, his bearing, his power of personal fascination, his above-average intelligence, the extent of his knowledge and experience.<sup>33</sup> Such personalities do not arise every day. Thus societies can be upset by change or traumatised by internal disorganization; if a messiah with strong qualities of leadership does not appear, and wishes to take direction of the movement, the reaction will follow other paths.

The messiah's conscious will to play his role is also one of the necessary requisites. In southern Brazil, around 1870, the monk João Maria, who went through the region preaching, reconciling quarrels and reordering local life, refused to be followed by adepts on his long pilgrimages over country convulsed by every manner of stuggles and conflicts. As soon as the sermon was over and the Novenas finished, he sent the peasants back to their work and dispersed the groups that wished to follow him. "Man

<sup>31</sup> See my *La Guerre Sainte au Brésil: Le Mouvement Messianique du Contestado*, Universidade de S. Paulo, Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras, 1957. See also *O Messianismo No Brasil, Réforme et Révolution, O Mandonismo Local*.

<sup>32</sup> Desroche, "Micromillenarismes."

<sup>33</sup> Such qualities characterized the two "messiahs" personally known to the author in Brazil: Pedro Baptista da Silva, the rural messiah, and Yokanaam, the urban messiah.

is good," he would say, "but men are evil." Had his will not been so fixed not to allow any attempt at the formation of a religious group around him, a messianic movement would certainly have burst forth, of which he would have been the head. When he died, legend claimed him and transformed him into the messiah whose return is still awaited in that part of the country.<sup>34</sup>

Though we have been able to answer the question: "how and in what circumstances does a messianic movement arise," it is impossible to give an answer to the question: "when does it arise." The qualities of the messiah put him in the class of individuals whose success necessarily depends upon correspondingly great personal talents: poets, musicians, painters, actors... Any individual can feel the strong desire to steer a community towards a new and more satisfying destiny, but if he does not possess the necessary talents his efforts will be repaid with defeat. To be a messiah, one therefore must have a vocation. Since a vocation is necessary, however, all prediction related to the "when" of messianic movements becomes impossible; we are in the realm of the individual, and therefore the uncertain, of qualities still very hard to define. We are in the realm of the accidental, of chance.

Thus we finally come up against the connection between, to use Roger Bastide's expression, man with his individual qualities on one hand, and the socio-economic determinants on the other. The messiah, whose creativity is expressed through his personal charisma, is the ultimate motivating factor who activates latent tendencies, who ignites the socio-economic, political and religious deterministic forces slumbering within societies. The appreciation of the role of the messiah precipitates us into that still little-known area of the human sciences which deals with the dialectics between the creative individual and the social determinants to which, in spite of everything, he remains subject.

<sup>34</sup> See my *La Guerre Sainte au Brésil*.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Bastide, "The Present Status of Afro-American Research in Latin America," *Daedalus*, Spring, 1974, pp. 118-119.