

**America, Joy of Man's Desiring:
A Comparison of *Visão do Paraíso* with
*Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought***

Robert Wegner¹

Translated by Luiz Augusto da Silveira

In a recent study on millennialism, Jean Delumeau points out that hope for a period of bliss and tranquillity on earth played an important role from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries in Europe. The scarcity of studies on this subject consequently means that periods situated between the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance remain obscure. Furthermore, these ideas are just as relevant for the American continent; thus, the French historian finds it reasonable for L. I. Sweet to state that "the history of America began with the expectancy for the millennium."² About forty years ago, having noticed the importance of ideas on the wish for happiness and fulfillment, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda performed the research on Edenic motifs in the discovery and colonization of Brazil that led to *Visão do Paraíso* (*Vision of Paradise*), published in 1959. The Brazilian historian was fifty-seven years old at the time and, after having published *Raízes do Brasil* (1936), *Monções* (1945), and *Caminhos e Fronteiras* (1957), this was his fourth book, based on the thesis he had written in order to become Chair of History of Brazilian Civilization at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP).

Even if the book of Genesis' Garden of Eden from which our ancestors were expelled existed somewhere on earth, according to Catholic Church doctrine as outlined by St. Augustine (A. D. 354-430), it would still be inaccessible. Furthermore, the millennialist belief in a period of happiness on earth to precede a second coming of Jesus Christ and the Church's definitive redemption had already been rejected.³ In spite of that, myths related to the existence of an earthly Paradise still held a strong attraction for medieval men, some of whom even believed that it could be reached physically or at

least glimpsed, as with Moses before Canaan.⁴ At the time of the discovery of America by the Europeans, it was not difficult for the focus of these hopes, normally directed to the East, to be shifted to the new continent, a transferal whose history was researched by Buarque de Holanda in *Visão do Paraíso*.

In his book, Buarque de Holanda presents the descriptions made by Portuguese and Spanish travelers and clergy as marked by Edenic and wonderland motifs that fused Christian and pagan literary traditions. Such motifs worked as a sort of lens deployed to view the new lands, and which despite having been revised or attenuated, continued to thrive for a long time. Buarque de Holanda maps out a number of these recurrent *topoi* both in texts descriptive of American lands and in those that sought to demonstrate that the Biblical garden from which Adam and Eve had been expelled was in fact to be found there. These *topoi* or literary lenses become variegated and, to a greater or lesser degree, are reinvented at the moment of their confrontation with new experiences, as if some sort of compromise existed between literary tradition and historical experience, the consequences of which led to the search for a “middle path” (*via mediana*) between practical conclusions emerging from the discovery of unknown lands and the prestige of the sages’ authority, be it Christian or pagan.⁵

The belief in the existence of “paradise on earth” in some unknown place was widespread even outside the Iberian peninsula, and it acquired very different contours and overtones depending on where it originated. According to Buarque de Holanda’s study, whereas in Spain the belief was painted in strong colors, among the Portuguese it was portrayed in a more discreet and simple manner. Thus, the new experiences supplied by the American world were described by the former in bold and delirious inductions, and by the latter in a way that recalls the “prosaic ‘realism’ and particularism characteristic of Medieval art, chiefly that which was produced toward the end of the Middle Ages”:

[An] art in which even the angelic figures appear to give up flying, settling for more plausible and reserved gestures (such as walking on small clouds that would serve them as a base, as if they owned tangible bodies), and in which miracles assert themselves through more convincing resources than haloes and nimbuses, so familiar to painters of other times.⁶

This phenomenon, involving a coldness and realism nearly unheard-of for the Portuguese *cinquecento* mentality so alien to a “sense of the impossible,”

as Lucien Febvre noted,⁷ Sérgio Buarque named “plausible attenuation.”⁸ Yet the historian believes that the contrast between a naive credulous background (“*um fundo singelamente crédulo*”) and realism is not as sharp as it may be surmised on first consideration. For in fact, this realism is rooted in the credulity of the Portuguese, “which in the face of reality tends to constitute a sort of radical passivity and meekness.”⁹ Satisfied with the description of the self-evident, immediate and usable, the credulity that nurtures Portuguese realism is evidence of “an extremely rich emotional undercurrent that, given its power, can barely achieve the standards of minimal neutrality necessary to objectify oneself in fantastic representations” associated with common fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European paradise-on-earth *topoi*.¹⁰ In that way, the “plausible attenuation” phenomenon refers to the plasticity of the Portuguese as discussed by Buarque de Holanda in his first book, *Raízes do Brasil* (1936). In this work, Portuguese colonizers appear as “sowers” of cities, in that they would adapt their construction plans to environmental circumstances and local geography. In this sense, the Portuguese differed from the Spanish. The latter came through as the greater builders, for by rejecting the former’s complacency they were able to overcome geographic accidents and accomplish their town building projects in the desired sites.

Representative of this Portuguese brand of prosaism that contrasts with the wondrous Hispanic descriptions is the fact that, out of the different myths disseminated in the continental conquest, most legends, such as belief in “Amazons,” the existence of mountain ridges of silver, of fountains of youth and magical lagoons, were propagated by the Spanish. As soon as such beliefs entered into Brazilian territory they tended to fade, to lose their sharpness; that is, they went through attenuations toward the plausible.¹¹ Just one myth appears to have a Portuguese-Brazilian origin, that of São Tomé, in which the follower of Jesus appeared in America as the herald of good news from God. But even more meaningful than the dissemination of a single myth out of Portuguese America is the fact that when the myth first appeared it was very close to the prosaic and yet as it spread toward Spanish America it lost its humble character, making the figure of São Tomé appear gradually better dressed. Thus the historian wrote:

If we are to give credit to a number of statements about the saint’s wanderings, in Brazil São Tomé walked barefoot, taking along with him one companion at most—someone who could be a follower of Jesus or even his own guardian angel.

... However, judging by the footsteps left in the cluster of rocks near Asunción, as mentioned by Lourenço Mendoza and Antonio Ruiz, the Paraguayan version of the myth has the saint wear sandals. In reaching Peru, the Natives had him wearing three-soled shoes that resembled sandals such as those he left behind near Arequipa's volcano after having crossed smoking lava fields that flowed like torrential rivers. The shoes' internal soles exhibited the imprint of the sweaty feet of a man so huge as to make everyone gape in wonderment.¹²

To conclude the counterpoint established with the humble tableau of a nearly Franciscan disciple of Jesus as portrayed in Portuguese America, it should be noted that according to Buarque de Holanda, "differently from what happened in Brazil, where, stalked by the Native Brazilians, he would try to flee from their treachery and tyranny, the Peruvian São Tomé legend described the saint as intolerant of any offense."¹³

Yet, in spite of the prosaic and humble character acquired by the myths in Brazil, despite the phenomenon of "attenuation toward the plausible," it cannot be said that "during the Middle Ages and in the time of overseas discoveries, the Portuguese were less seduced by the Edenic theme than the other Christian peoples of Europe, or even the Jewish and Muslim peoples."¹⁴ Among the Portuguese descriptions and eulogies of the new lands usually related them to Edenic visions whose nexus—almost an absolute criterion of identification—consisted in a balanced, "neither cold nor hot" climate that had been associated with the Biblical paradise since Isidoro de Sevilla.¹⁵ Thus, a text by Father Simão de Vasconcelos, which was censored immediately after its publication in 1663, may be viewed as an instance of the existence of this *topos* in Brazil. In it, the Catholic priest, following written tradition, analyzes the likelihood of the Earthly Paradise being located in America. He wrote at one point:

Saint Boaventura... clearly states that God placed Paradise near the Equinox: *Quia secus Equinoctia est ibi magna temperies temporaris*: for near the Equinox the climate is quite tempered... One may add: that place in the Equinox has a mild climate, abundance of water, and frequent winds to purify the air, for experience has shown that the regions under the Torrid Zone, held by the ancients as uninhabitable, are mild and inhabited with great comfort by men.¹⁶

This is how, based on the medieval religious and pagan traditions associated with narratives about the new worlds, Vasconcelos argues for the

idea that the earthly Paradise must have been located in Brazilian soil. There one would find an agreeable place unaffected by the curses issued from the first sin, where, of course, pain, aging and death were inexistent. And there, again, man would be free from having to sweat in order to earn his daily sustenance. Paradise lost was, therefore, in Brazilian lands.

The Edenic vision described by Buarque de Holanda and that prevailed among Iberian settlers—a vision which was even taken to refer to the “land without evil” of the Guarani¹⁷—was well synthesized by George Williams in his *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (1962). There he summarized Buarque de Holanda’s work when he wrote that in the Southern parts of the continent “the vision of an Earthly Paradise *merely waiting to be gained*” prevailed.¹⁸

Moreover, if in *Visão do Paraíso* it is possible to note a counterpoint between the colors and tonalities of Edenic motifs in the Portuguese and Spanish conquests, the reading of *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, in which the professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford University compiles his studies on the search by Anglo-Saxon settlers for a paradise on earth, may be of help in outlining a more complete sketch of Edenic ideas in the colonization of the Americas as a whole. In this sense, even a rough comparison between Williams’ and Buarque de Hollanda’s works may help light the way and even suggest engaging solutions towards a comparative approach of the Iberian and Anglo-Saxon processes of colonization.

To conclude this sketch, I believe it is useful to employ one of the most constant paradise-on-earth motifs as noted by Buarque de Holanda: the temperate climate. It is quite possible to find visions similar to those that circulated among the Iberians who sought to discover lost paradise ready and waiting. A good example of the similarity is provided by Thomas Morton, the Puritan who upon arriving in New England in 1622 thought that he had found “new Canaan.” What made Morton believe this was again precisely the *locus amoenus* criterion, since for him the new land: “shares heat and cold at the same time, though it is overburdened by neither. In truth, it may be said to be located within the boundaries of an intermediate position, which is very suited for settlement and reproduction, for God Almighty, the Great Creator, placed it in the so-called temperate zone.”¹⁹

However, even with cases such as this one narrated by Delumeau, George Williams’ insistence in pursuing a vision that is nearly antagonistic to the one that prevailed among the Iberians seems plausible, for although *there is* an

ongoing search for Eden, it does not follow of necessity that the garden of the New World is ready to be inhabited. On the contrary, the image most often used among the Puritans to describe the new land is that of the wilderness. Here the US historian traces a long tradition back to the Old Testament and the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt when, under the guidance of Moses, Israel wanders for forty years in the desert before reaching the promised land. The double significance of the word “wilderness” survives in this long tradition, exhibiting both the positive meaning of a place of protection and one suitable for Christian missions, and the negative one of a wasteland without redemption. In any case, it signifies the place where Eden is to be built—even though it may be of just a temporary nature, an idea faithful to the millenarian movements. Thus, prepared for the true Church that has been persecuted since the time of Moses, the wilderness becomes a place of refuge and of missionary activity, capable of becoming the Garden of the Lord by means of moral and spiritual temperance rather than through mere physical conquest.²⁰ Within this context, with the temperate climate no longer being a quality inherent to the new lands, the preaching on the construction of the true church in the desert may transform itself into a metaphor for the transformational action of the pioneers. An example of this is a nineteenth-century case presented by Williams, that of Yale’s founder, Timothy Dwight, who, while discoursing on the mission of educational establishments in 1812, preached as follows:

The Gospel is the rain and sunshine of heaven upon the moral world. Wherever its beams are shed, and its showers fall, the wilderness blossoms as the rose, and the desert as the garden of God: while the world beside is an Arabian waste, where no fountains flow, and no verdure springs, and where life itself fades, languishes and expires.²¹

In that way, it may be said that if the *topos* of the *locus amoenus* was present among North American Puritans, this motif was a metaphor for the purifying action of the Gospel rather than an attribute of the place where the colonizer ought to settle, quite independent in this case of knowing whether this was merely a literary cliché that found a correspondence in the actual climate.

Though in his book *Buarque de Holanda* refrained from making generalizations and from inferring consequences from his thesis that might

have had longer-lasting effects on the history of Brazil, it may be considered, as a conclusion, that although these myths concerning the earthly Paradise began to fade both in the northern and southern regions of the American continent, they continued to exert their power, and thus—like gods who even after having lost their currency in belief continue to wield an influence on the actions of men—remained present in the beliefs of New World inhabitants. These are George Williams' views as Buarque de Holanda transcribed them from the US professor's book. There, Williams says that the widely diverse feelings moving the men of the Old World would lead them to formulate living patterns that were quite distinct from one another, and that the effects of these patterns determine to the present day the distinct behaviors of their descendants in our continent.²² Nevertheless, one should preserve one's misgivings about stereotypes that simplify internal complexities and that dilute the history of America either into myths of paradise to be gained, or an Eden to be conquered, as if there were no dissonant voices in Portuguese and Spanish as well as in Anglo-Saxon America, voices that crop up even in a short essay such as this, and which here find an example in Thomas Morton, the Puritan who upon laying eyes on the New World describes it as a pleasant place and a land of delights.

Even then, as Williams points out, the search for Edenic motifs among settlers may suggest explanatory keys for the history of the continent that are more complex and fruitful than, for instance, the opposition between a Catholic and a Protestant America.²³ By the same token, one might add that Catholic America becomes more complex when the differences in tone pointed out in *Visão do Paraíso* are explored in the apparently similar myths linked to what Williams characterized as an earthly Paradise merely waiting to be secured, but that can be less colorful and more humble among the Portuguese than amid the Spanish.

Notes

¹ The author is grateful to the "Fundação Casa de Oswaldo Cruz," who sponsored the translation of this article from Portuguese into English through its "Incentive Program for the Publication in a Foreign Language."

² Delumeau 87, 200.

³ Holanda 174; Delumeau chap. 1; Saint Augustine Book XIII, chap. XXI; Book XXII, chap. XXX.

⁴ *Deuteronomy* (4:23-29).

⁵ Holanda 288.

⁶ Holanda 1-2.

⁷ Lucien Febvre, see Holanda 5.

⁸ Holanda 130.

⁹ Holanda 105.

¹⁰ Holanda 148.

¹¹ Holanda 130.

¹² Holanda 119.

¹³ Holanda 119.

¹⁴ Holanda 149.

¹⁵ See Holanda 560-636. On the *locus amoenus* topos, in addition to *Visão do Paraíso*, see Curtius chap. 10.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Holanda 363-64.

¹⁷ Holanda 141-42.

¹⁸ Williams 100. My emphasis. Buarque de Holanda comments on Williams' book, including the synthesis he makes of *Visão do Paraíso*, in the preface to the second edition of his book (xii, xiii). Buarque de Holanda had the opportunity of teaching and researching in the libraries of Indiana and New York universities between 1966 and 1967. It was at this time that he was able to update himself on US publications on themes kindred to his own book's, again, reviewing them in 1968 in "Prefácio à Segunda Edição" of *Visão do Paraíso*.

¹⁹ Qtd. by Delumeau 237. On Thomas Morton, refer to Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, esp. 58-65.

²⁰ Williams 5.

²¹ Quoted by Williams 124.

²² Williams 100. Qtd. by Buarque de Holanda in "Prefácio à Segunda Edição" of *Visão do Paraíso*, xiii.

²³ Williams 100. Qtd. by Buarque de Holanda, *Visão* xiii.

Works Cited

Saint Augustine. *Cidade de Deus*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1990.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. 1948. Tans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.

Delumeau, Jean. *Mil Anos de Felicidade: Uma História do Paraíso*. 1995. Trans. Paulo Neves. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.

Holanda, Sérgio Buarque de. *Visão do Paraíso: Os Motivos Edênicos no Descobrimento e Colonização do Brasil*. 1959. 5a ed. São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1992.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. 1973. 2nd ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Williams, George H. *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought: The Biblical Experience of the Desert in the History of Christianity & The Paradise Theme in the Theological Idea of the University*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962.