

**CHRISTIAN VALUES IN PORTUGUESE CHILDREN'S AND
YOUTH LITERATURE**

**VALORES CRISTÃOS NA LITERATURA PORTUGUESA PARA
CRIANÇAS E JOVENS**

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Abstract

The present article outlines a non-exhaustive overview of the presence of Christian values, and other aspects related to Christianity, in contemporary Portuguese writing for childhood and youth. Different modalities/genres (narrative, poetry, drama) are considered and some of the most relevant voices in this domain, such as Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Luísa Dacosta, Nuno Higino, Alice Vieira and others, are highlighted. The author acknowledges the strong presence, and recurrence, in this literature, of values and themes of Christian inspiration, regardless of the confession of faith and the Christian conviction of the authors in appreciation.

Keywords: Children's and youth literature, Christian values, contemporaneity, overview

Resumo

O presente artigo traça um panorama não exaustivo acerca da presença de valores cristãos, e outros aspetos relacionados com o cristianismo, na escrita portuguesa contemporânea para a infância e a juventude. Diferentes modalidades/géneros (narrativa, poesia, drama) são considerados e algumas das vozes mais relevantes neste domínio, como Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Luísa Dacosta, Nuno Higino, Alice

Vieira e outros, são destacadas. O autor reconhece a forte presença e a recorrência, nesta literatura, de valores e temas de inspiração cristã, independentemente da confissão religiosa e da convicção cristã dos autores em apreciação.

Palavras-chave: Literatura para crianças e jovens, valores cristãos, contemporaneidade, visão global

I asked a good friend who is an essayist and poet, besides author of short stories for childhood and knowledgeable of the Bible – and not just by obligation –, to suggest a brief passage of the New Testament which could work as a synthesis of Jesus' message, reported in the text as His word. Immediately after writing it, I sensed my request suffered from an excess of ignorance which might hold the addressee back. And yet, the answer came swiftly, though accurate and pondered. Abusive it might be, I cannot resist quoting it¹: «(...) there are several passages of the Gospels which could be used as a synthesis of Jesus' message. I would single out two from Saint John Evangelist, because he knew Christ personally and deeply and he was his dearest disciple. His testimony is, therefore, the closest to the source. The passages are the following: John, 15,12: *This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. Nobody possesses a greater love than he who gives his life for his friends*". A second example (John, 13, 1-17) was introduced in the form of synthesis and not as a direct quotation. Further on, my friend would add: "Everything by Saint John will be the most consistent. Besides the Gospel, he also wrote three letters; each of them is a good synthesis of Christianity. For example the first letter, when he says: "*He who does not love, does not know God because God is love* (I John 4, 8); or, further on: *If somebody says that loves God but despises his brother, he is a liar* (I John, 4, 20)."

As I had asked for this opinion because of the present article – in which I propose some thoughts on the question of human/Christian values in Portuguese children's and youth literature –, the answer immediately brought to memory the works of three contemporary authors, whose writing has in common what could be called the awareness of alterity as a condition of the *being who feels and acts*. Compassion, fraternal solidarity and love for the other – generally for the most unsafe and disadvantaged – are, so to say, the performative modalities of this awareness. We can find this question in *A Noite de Natal [Christmas Night]* (1959) and *A Fada Oriana [Oriana, the Fairy]* (1958), by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (1919-2004), who resorts to

¹ I thank my dear friend, the writer Nuno Higinio, the testimony I use here, by quoting fragments of our personal correspondence.

fantasy interweaved with parable, as it also happens in *O Anjo de Timor* [*Timor's Angel*] (2003). We can find it in short stories with a realist register signed by Matilde Rosa Araújo (1921-2010) in *O Sol e o Menino dos Pés Frios* [*The Sun and the Boy with Cold Feet*] (1972), but also in some poems for youth in *O Cantar da Tila* [*Tila's Song*] (1967) (the second moment of a sort of lyrical biography which starts with *O Livro da Tila* [*Tila's Book*], from 1957). And we can confirm the same theme in some short stories by Luísa Dacosta (1927-2015) which take place inside a particular fantasy world, such as *O Elefante Cor de Rosa* [*The Pink Elephant*] (1974) or *História com Recadinho* [*A Story with a Message*] (1986), characterized also by the persistent search for an encounter with *the other*. Author of challenging reenactments, which are stylistically very elaborate and suggestive, of biblical passages addressed to adults, such as *Os Magos que não Chegaram a Belém* [*The Wise Men who didn't reach Bethlehem*] (1989) and *Aleluia na Manhã* [*Hallelujah in the Morning*] (1994), Luísa Dacosta declared herself a non-believer who however had always manifested some fascination by the figure of Jesus and who was knowledgeable of the Bible, having, in her youth, integrated the reflection group Metanoia, and been editor of the journal *Grandes Páginas Cristãs* [*Great Christian Pages*]. This is where texts by Joaquim Alves Correia, his brother Manuel Alves Correia and others have been published, with the seal of Metanoia Publishing House and sometimes with her introductions and notes. This Christian group was composed, at least, by Fernando Ferreira da Costa (writer's husband), João Sá da Costa and Maria Lúcia Nobre, besides Luísa Dacosta, who signed her comments as Maria Luísa Ferreira da Costa, before having published a book. This group, whose activity dates to the end of the 40s and 50s, claimed to be a community of Christians with a strong spiritual stand characterized above all by a pondered revisitation of the great doctrinal texts and by the defense of a return to the purity of Christian ideals.

Allow me to highlight Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, not only for her confessed Catholicism of progressist breed, but also for the fact that her narratives are unanimously considered classics of Portuguese children's literature. *A Fada Oriana* [*Oriana, the Fairy*] stages the atonement of narcissist-driven guilt, whereas *A Noite de Natal* [*Christmas' Night*] portrays the social orphanage of Manuel as a reincarnation of child Jesus, image which, at the end, gives meaning to the values of friendship, share, thrift – which enlighten the gestures of little and lonely Joana – and the search for a union between human and sacred. A further narrative by the author of *O Cristo Cigano* [*The Gypsy Christ*] affirms, in turn, the victory of moral integrity and self-denial over the forces of perversion. We are referring to *O Cavaleiro da Dinamarca* [*Denmark's Knight*] (1964), which illustrates an initiatory and probative voyage which, by confronting the protagonist with a succession of diverse human types, events and mythical places, reveals everything to this untarnished knight: danger and temptation, the value of family, examples of heroism, passion and art. Not to mention the (not entirely solved)

tension between a theocentric worldview – which finds in the glorification of Christmas its most symbolic element – and a new anthropocentric gaze which emerges from Renaissance. On the way, we get to revisit Denmark, the Holy Land, Italian cities of the north and Flanders. We can feel the fascination for the humanist splendor (the action takes place in the 15th century) and for the great adventure of the Portuguese navigators and “conquerors”, during what is presented as a “new time” for Europe and the World, without however ignoring the drama engendered by the clash of cultures and ethnicities – and that is why *O Cavaleiro da Dinamarca* [*Denmark's Knight*] is one of the first Portuguese narratives for the youth which poses the question of the need for intercultural dialogue. Let us add that, in this beautiful fiction by Sophia, a chain of ethically modeling narratives embedded in the main plot can be observed: the story of Vanina (almost a version of Romeo and Juliet, with a non-deceptive ending), the lives of Giotto, Dante, and the adventures of a Flemish sailor and a Portuguese one, Pero Dias. In this manner, this work represents also a passionate homage, almost always implicit, to the narratives of great cultural tradition of the West: the Bible, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Decameron*, travel books, maritime chronicles...

In the three mentioned authors, Christian ideals represent a fundamental axis which cannot be ignored by the reader and which actually permeates the writing of authors generationally close, albeit with different political-ideological beliefs. We are referring to voices connected to the poetry magazine *Távola Redonda* [*Round Table*], such as António Manuel Couto Viana (1923-2010) or Fernando de Paços (1923-2003) – above all, in texts for children's theatre – or figures such as Esther de Lemos (n. 1929) and Maria Isabel de Mendonça Soares (1922-2017). This one, in particular, is the author of a considerable narrative production in which humour and a certain educational concern coexist, but in which friendship, family and the valuation of personal effort are recurrent themes, often in articulation with whether the defense of natural heritage (in a permanent devotion to Nature), whether the celebration of Christian festivities, such as Christmas and Easter. As far as this is concerned, one should reread *Dias de Festa e Outras Histórias* [*Festive Days and Other Stories*] (1983), *As Amêndoas do Padrinho Pascoal* [*Godfather Pascoal's Almonds*] (1990) and also youth novels such as *Logo Se Vê* [*We shall see*] (1994) and *Verde É a Esperança* [*Hope is Green*] (1998).

On this subject, allow us to remind that both Christmas spirit (a very Christian topic) and the victory over loneliness and egocentrism, family and its importance have always constituted pivotal themes in literature read by children (it is impossible not to evoke classics such as *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* (1816), by E. T. Hoffmann, certain short stories by Hans Christian Andersen or the unforgettable *A Christmas Carol* (1843), by Charles Dickens).

Whether they profess the Christian faith or not, many writers feel attracted by the magic and mystery of Christmas, almost always associated with generous values (compassion, fraternity, share...) and/or the condemnation of the inhumanity of the “murdering economy” (to use Pope Francis’ expression) and the consumerist fever. Hence one of the recurring genres – let us call them so – in children’s literature be the Christmas short story. Let us enumerate a few cases closer to us in time, by order of generation, whether of more or less assumed Catholic authors (Lemos, Vaz, Vieira, Higino, Ribeiro...), whether of others who, albeit non-believers, seem to adopt a Christian cultural and moral matrix: «O hino de Natal» [«Christmas’ Hymn»] (in *A Rainha de Babilónia e Outras Histórias* [*The Queen of Babylon and Other Stories*], 2nd ed., 1987), by Esther de Lemos; *Há Sempre Uma Estrela no Natal* [*There is Always a Star at Christmas*] (2006) and other titles by Luísa Ducla Soares; *Milagre de Natal* [*Christmas’ Miracle*] (2008), by António Torrado; *Hoje É Natal!* [*Today is Christmas!*] (2000), by José Vaz; *O Cavalinho de Pau do Menino Jesus e Outros Contos de Natal* [*Baby Jesus’ Hobbyhorse*] (2009), by Manuel António Pina; *A Árvore das Histórias de Natal* [*The Christmas’ Stories Tree*] (2006) and other titles by José Jorge Letria; *Paisagem com Trenó e Neve ao Fundo. Um Conto de Natal* [*Landscape with Sleigh and Background Snow. A Christmas Carol*] (2005), by Vergílio Alberto Vieira; *Histórias de Natal Contadas em Verso* [*Christmas’ Stories told in Verse*] (2000), by Alexandre Parafita; *Sonhos de Natal* [*Christmas’ Dreams*] (1997), by António Mota; *O Meu Primeiro Natal* [*My First Christmas*] (2005), by Margarida Fonseca Santos; *Eu Fui o Menino Jesus* [*I was Baby Jesus*] (2010), by João Manuel Ribeiro; *O Nascimento de Jesus* [*Jesus’ Birth*] (2016), by Miguel de Oliveira. Numerous titles could be added to this list (by José Viale Moutinho, by Alice Vieira, by Ana Saldanha, by Rita Taborda Duarte...)! And to them examples in the sphere of poetry should be added, such as *A Casa de Cedro* [*Cedar House*] (2010), by Vergílio Alberto Vieira, or in the sphere of theatre, such as *O Menino Jesus da Cartolinha* [*Top Hat Baby Jesus*] (2007), by the same author, or *A Nascente. Em Louvor de São José* [*The Fountain. In Praise of Saint Joseph*] (2015), by Dom Manuel Clemente.

In the realm of narrative, *A Mais Alta Estrela. Sete Histórias de Natal* [*The Highest Star. Seven Christmas Stories*] (1998), by Nuno Higino (n. 1960), should be singled out. A former priest who, in 2005, renounced his ordinance and returned to laicism, Higino who, besides a well-known poet, has become an academic researcher in matters of Philosophy, and especially in Aesthetics, is one of the voices in whose work for childhood and youth the values of Catholicism are molded in a manner perhaps more dense and intense – paradoxically, in a writing which often conveys the reader an impression of purity difficult to describe. One of the key features is the fascination, on the one hand, by the mysteries of artistic creation, and, on the other hand, by the great exemplary figures of Christianity – for example, in *O Cavalo que Engoliu o Sol. Histórias da Vida de S. Paulo* [*The Horse that Swallowed the Sun. Stories of the Life of Saint Paul*]

(2008) or *O Peixe Dourado. História de São Pedro Pescador de Homens* [*The Golden Fish. Story of Saint Paul Fisher of Men*] (2011). The capacity to endow elements of nature with a magical vibration, as well as the power of enchantment of a speech in which metaphor is never banal, grant singularity to his poems for children (*O Menino que Namorava Paisagens e Outros Poemas* [*The Boy who Dated Landscapes and Other Poems*] (2001), *Versos Diversos* [*Diverse Verses*] (2008) and several other titles) and to the short stories, molded in a poetic prose which is reminiscent of the work by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen and, inevitably, of biblical narratives and other great founding texts.

On account of his relevance as poet, as author of chronicles and fiction, and as one of the most original voices in Portuguese writing for childhood, let us highlight a further author, already mentioned on the subject of Christmas stories, Manuel António Pina (1943-2012). In Pina, the parodistic inclination is notable, and we could find this approach to biblical figures in parodic register immediately in his inaugural book in this field, *O País das Pessoas de Pernas para o Ar* [*The Country of Upside Down People*] (1973). We are referring to the controversial yet delicious short stories «O menino Jesus não quer ser Deus» [«Baby Jesus doesn't want to be God»] and «O bolo e o menino Jesus» [«Baby Jesus and the cake»], in which, alongside the intertextuality with the biblical text, it is assumed an intertextuality with Alberto Caeiro, one of Pessoa's heteronyms.

Regarding internal and external factors which destabilize family as a structural educational nucleus – linked to problematic psycho-affective and social frameworks, in urban contexts –, but also regarding the necessary child and youth resilience to face tensions and fears, let us read for example *Rosa, Minha Irmã Rosa* [*Rosa, Sister Rosa*] (1979), *Chocolate à Chuva* [*Chocolate in the Rain*] (1982), *Flor de Mel* [*Honey Flower*] (1986), *Os Olhos de Ana Marta* [*Ana Marta's Eyes*] (1990), *Meia Hora para Mudar a Minha Vida* [*Half an Hour to change my Life*] (2010) and other narratives by Alice Vieira (n. 1943), in whom, amidst the disquiet, a light of hope always dawns on the young female protagonists. After the death of her husband Mário Castrim (1920-2002), confessed communist and Christian, collaborator in publications by Combonian Missionaries and himself too author of fine books for childhood, besides TV critic, Alice Vieira wrote herself for such periodicals. It is no surprise that in 2012, as a Catholic, she has retold, fairy-tale like, *Histórias da Bíblia para Ler e Pensar* [*Stories from the Bible to Read and Think*], focusing on six episodes from the Old Testament which distinguish themselves for the moral wisdom they enclose and for the roguish adventure which is so dear to very young audiences. Let us not forget to note that, three years before, José Tolentino Mendonça had also proposed his *Histórias Escolhidas da Bíblia* [*Selected Stories from the Bible*] (2009), written in a poetic prose in which stylistic echoes of the Scriptures themselves are noticeable – the differences in style across the several books of the

Bible, from which the author culls episodes whether from the Old whether from the New Testaments, are recognizable.

With a writing which, especially in the books for children, assumes a religious implication (for instance, in *Jesus e Eu [Jesus and I]* (2011)), and in which spirituality and rapport with the divine are not overlooked, Maria Teresa Maia González (n. 1958) has also cared for a long time for growing pains and the confrontation with the world in pre-adolescents and adolescents, while never ceasing to propose a reflection on values, family and its conflicts (see the books from the collection «Profissão adolescente» [«Occupation Teenager»] or the *bestseller* which *A Lua de Joana [Joana's Moon]* (1994) constitutes, on the subject of drug addiction). Nevertheless, in a juvenile novel such as *O Guarda da Praia [The Beach Warden]* (1996), affective orphanage, friendship and love building, brotherly circumstances and the maternal condition are approached with sensitivity.

These notes crop up excessively. I therefore conclude by calling attention to other voices (regardless of confessing to their belief) to whose literary creations we should pay attention if we commit to studying the fierce presence of Christian humanism in contemporary Portuguese writing for children and youth: Álvaro Magalhães, Maria de Lourdes Soares, Sílvia Alves, Maria João Lopo de Carvalho, Rosário Alçada Araújo, Pedro Boléo Tomé (and his juvenile series «Aventuras na Terra de Jesus» [«Adventures in the Land of Jesus»])... Both the aforementioned João Manuel Ribeiro (n. 1968) and Afonso Cruz (n. 1971), whose books, which can sometimes be situated in the realm of an education for citizenship which never ceases to bear a Christian matrix – while not disregarding the aesthetic function –, deserve a special mention: for instance, the volumes *A Casa Grande. Manifesto de Cidadania [Big House. Citizenship Manifesto]* (2009) and *A Cruzada das Crianças [The Children's Crusade]* (2015), respectively. On this subject, there would be much to say about the role of *exemplum* which another genre could assume: biography (why not read *Teresa e o Castelo Escondido [Teresa and the Hidden Castle]* (2014), by Ana Paula Azevedo, as a work centered in the life of Saint Teresa of Avila?).

Lastly, a challenge: why not to explore the picturebooks Isabel Minhós Martins (n. 1974) has been publishing in Planeta Tangerina (an editorial project of which she is cofounder), well-humored and somehow functioning as an education for affective life, or as meditations on life and death. For example *Pê de Pai [F as in Father]* (2006), *Coração de Mãe [Mother's Heart]* (2008), *Quando Eu Nasci [When I was Born]* (2007) and *Para Onde Vamos Quando Desaparecemos? [Where do We Go when We Disappear?]* (2011).

I shall finish how I started, speaking of love and quoting a children's book by a non-believing author, José Jorge Letria. It is called *O Amor O que É? [What is Love?]*

(2005) and it says: «O amor é / o único remédio / que pode curar o mundo»² [«Love is / the only medicine / which can cure the world»]. Maybe children's books may, in their own way, put out a helping hand.

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² Letria, J. J. 2005, p. 34.

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