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# A Classless Society or Your Kingdom Come? *Plegaria a un labrador* and the *Nueva Canción Chilena*

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## ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the case of *Plegaria a un labrador* by Víctor Jara and its social biography as a song to show how the utopia of a classless society converges with the idea of the kingdom of God on earth in the *Nueva Canción Chilena*.

**Keywords:** kingdom of God, messianism, *Nueva Canción Chilena*, religious atheism, Unidad Popular

## IZVLEČEK

Ta članek se osredotoča na primer pesmi *Plegaria a un labrador* (*Molitev k poljedelcu*) avtorja Víctorja Jara ter na njeno družbeno biografijo. S tem primerom pokaže, kako se utopija brezrazredne družbe združuje z idejo o božjem kraljestvu na Zemlji v glasbenem gibanju *Nueva Canción Chilena* (nova čilenska pesem).

**Ključne besede:** božje kraljestvo, mesijanizem, *Nueva Canción Chilena*, verski ateizem, Unidad Popular

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## Introduction

The *Nueva Canción Chilena* (Chilean New Song) is a musical movement that was born in the Chilean socio-political context of the 1960s and subsequently spread across Latin America. The movement can be understood as an aesthetic response to a Chile dogged by inequality and, in this context, it aspired to convey not only criticism but also hope. The movement has not only been historically linked to the political left but has also exhibited important religious and spiritual elements both in its sonic forms and conceptual ambitions. Although still little researched, these dimensions within the *Nueva Canción* were widely practiced and firmly established. As I argued in a study of the song *El hombre* (*The Man*) by Rolando Alarcón and its intertextual comparison with other works such as *Despierta niño Dios* (*Wake Up Little Child God*) by Héctor Pavez (1967), the *Oratorio para el pueblo* (*Oratorio for the People*) by Ángel Parra (1965), the album *Requiem* by Fernando Ugarte (1970) or the version of *Camilo Torres* by Víctor Jara (1969), among many others, the religious aspects of the movement are not only observed in the repertoire's lyrics, but also in its musical structure or its melodic features (Rojas 2020). As proposed in another article, I draw attention to the fact that several supposedly atheist musicians and groups such as Víctor Jara, Rolando Alarcón, Juan Capra and Tiemponuevo demonstrated great interest in religious figures and, from this perspective, the relationship between religion and *Nueva Canción* can be understood through the lens of religious atheism (Rojas 2022). As Michael Löwy (2015, 37–38) explains, religious atheism is a category pertaining to those who distance themselves from traditional forms of religion but, nevertheless, do not remove all ties to it. Thus, the category explains the paradoxical situation in which the sacred and the profane find a point of convergence, namely, in precisely that messianism that shines through in the *Nueva Canción*. In this sense, the religious dimension stays present at the core of the political imaginary and is explicit in the revolutionary discourse, charging it with a spirituality that escapes the usual distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the transcendent and the immanent. In this way, the religious remained at the very heart of the *Nueva Canción Chilena* and was inserted into the political proclamations of the movement, connecting the roots of popular Christianity<sup>1</sup> with the strong Marxist influences of the movement.<sup>2</sup> As might be supposed, these religious and messianic aspects of the *Nueva Canción*

1 Popular Christianity constitutes a “religious field” on its own, with relative autonomy, which should not be confused with the official sacerdotal religion. It has its own subjective popular beliefs, symbols, rites, behaviors and cultural productions, which are the result of the historical capability of the people to construct and reconstruct the structures of their own faith (Dussel 1986; Gimenez 2013).

2 According to available evidence, the religious aspect of the *Nueva Canción Chilena* precedes Liberation Theology (Rojas 2020, 278–279).

Chilena are in open ideological tension with a clerical or official religiosity. Within this context, one interesting striking aspect is that the Nueva Canción Chilena, in a certain way, imagined the political project of the *Unidad Popular* (*Popular Unity*), of which it became a part, as the realization of the kingdom of God. To examine this issue further, I have chosen the excellent example of Víctor Jara's song *Plegaria a un labrador* (*Prayer to a Peasant*), the primary focus of this paper, because it exemplifies the ideas and concepts expressed by the Nueva Canción.

The choice of this particular song is based on the one hand, on the considerable analytical potential it presents for investigating religion, spirituality, messianism and eschatology in the Nueva Canción and on the other hand, on the extensive prominence it has been accorded within the Nueva Canción Chilena movement. Moreover, I am not simply referring to the fact that it was one of the winning songs of the First Festival of the Nueva Canción Chilena in 1969 but also that it became one of the most widely disseminated and covered songs of the movement.<sup>3</sup> In the following section, I will conduct a conceptual analysis of the song, examining the most arresting words and terms concerning the religious and the messianic. I will also address other musical aspects such as melody, tempo and vocality (voice usage in diverse musical experiences) and relate these elements to other songs of the Nueva Canción Chilena and to the political project of Unidad Popular, a conglomerate of left-wing movements and parties whose candidate Salvador Allende was eventually elected president in 1970. Thus, I will look at the meaning of certain terms and how Nueva Canción Chilena interprets and uses them. In a second section, I will take the concept of the social biography of songs to refer to the new paths taken by *Plegaria a un labrador* and the ideas expressed therein after the 1973 *coup d'état* with particular reference to the case of ecclesial base communities. In this way, I seek to demonstrate how the messianic ideas of *Plegaria a un labrador* developed historically in a context of political oppression.

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3 The following artists are just some of those who have recorded a version of *Plegaria a un labrador*: Quilapayún (Chile, multiple versions), Cecilia (Chile, 1970), Los Emigrantes (Chile, 1970), Los Lazos (Chile, 1971), Mercedes Sosa (Argentina, 1972 and 1980), César Isella (Argentina, 1973), Los Calchakis (France, 1974), Los Cañas (Cuba, 1974), Los Folkloristas (Mexico, 1974 and 1996), Aparcoa (Chile, 1975), Claudina and Alberto Gambino (Argentina, 1975), Guillermo Basterrechea (Chile, 1975), Hugo Arévalo (Chile, 1975), Paola Contavalli (Italy, 1975), Gloria del Paraguay (Paraguay, 1976), Grupo Jatari (Ecuador, 1976), Judy Collins (USA, 1976), Grupo Iquique (Spain/Chile, 1977), María Farantouri (Greece, 1977), Nannie Porres (Sweden, 1977), Tarancón (Brazil, 1977), América Libre (Colombia, 1979), Voces Oscuras Choir (Venezuela, 1980), Roberto Bravo (Chile, 1985), Duo Simón Bolívar (West Germany/Chile, 1987), Los Miserables (Chile, 1994), Compostela (Japan, 1997), León Gieco (Argentina, 1998), Vientosur (International, 2000), Reincidentes (Spain, 2001 and 2002), Illapu (Chile, 2002 and 2003), Guy Pion, Delphine Gardin and Roberto Cordova (Belgium, 2004), Symphonic Orchestra and Choir of the University of Concepción (Chile, 2008), Chancho en Piedra (Chile, 2011), Mario Lecaros (Chile, 2012), Hank Woji (USA, 2014), Shin Sasakubo (Japan, 2017), Hans Stein (Chile/Czech Republic, [n. d.]) and Ranquil (Sweden/Chile, [n. d.]).

Before proceeding further, I should like to underline that although the final judges of musical meaning are listeners of the Nueva Canción (and other music) in particular socio-cultural contexts, this does not exclude the possibility of establishing interpretations, hypotheses or readings of this musical movement, such as what I present here from the perspective of sounds, concepts and the biography of *Plegaria a un labrador* and its connection to messianism. Naturally, no narrative is neutral or exempt from mediations,<sup>4</sup> so that other interpretations based on the same material are also fully possible. As Diego García (2017, 34) points out, any analysis will always be mediated by readings, constructed from the present time as a starting point. In the following analysis, however, I will attempt to sustain a particular interpretation which I believe is both appropriate and timely.

### *Plegaria a un labrador* and the Messianic

*Plegaria a un labrador* by Víctor Jara is an important milestone in the Nueva Canción and its messianic ideas. In her biographic book<sup>5</sup> about the musician Joan Jara writes that the form of *Plegaria a un labrador* is reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer and "reflected Víctor Jara's interest in the poetry and humanistic values of the Bible at a time when the understanding between progressive Catholics and Marxists in Latin America was deepening."<sup>6</sup> Some scholars, for their part, underlined the intertextual references in *Plegaria a un labrador* not only to the Our Father prayer, but also to the Hail Mary (Dubuc 2008, 84; Guerra 2014, 81).<sup>7</sup> In a certain way, the song re-signifies both the objective as well as the structure and order of the Eucharistic prayer of the Catholic rite; it rescues the sacrificial, messianic character, as in the symbolic act of eating the bread (the body) and drinking the wine (the blood, through which life circulates) in the Eucharist. In addition, there is an exhortation to response and action with a resolute "Amen" at the end (Rojas 2020, 264–265).

4 According to Maurice Beuchot (2016), facts and events are never presented to us chaotically in the world, but always through our own interpretations.

5 Although a comprehensive biography is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that Jara met and learned popular Chilean religious music (*Canto a lo Divino*, folk-religious songs, etc.) during his childhood and adolescence, and later during his participation in the group *Cuncumén*. He also participated in Catholic Action and entered a seminary in 1950 where he was particularly drawn to religious chants and the performative elements of the liturgy. However, the isolation from the world, the morbid self-flagellations and the contempt for the corporeal led him to leave the seminary two years later. He then severed all ties with official Catholicism. In 1970 he actively participated in the election campaign of the Unidad Popular and after three years of intense social and cultural activity he was brutally tortured and murdered in the Estadio Chile concentration camp after the 1973 coup (Jara 2008).

6 Original: "Su forma, que recordaba el padrenuestro, era un reflejo del renovado interés de Víctor por la poesía y los valores humanistas de la Biblia, en una época en que se estaba acrecentando la comprensión entre católicos progresistas y marxistas en Latinoamérica" (Jara 2008, 137).

7 Peter Gould (2002, 155) also proposes a link between the first verse of the song and Psalm 121: "I will lift up mine eyes unto to the hills."

Table 1: Lyrics of *Plegaria a un labrador* in Spanish and English translation

Section	Line	Original text	English translation
Verse 1	1	Levántate y mira la montaña	Arise and look at the mountain
	2	de donde viene el viento, el sol y el agua.	where the wind, sun and water come from.
	3	Tú que manejas el curso de los ríos.	You who direct the course of the rivers.
	4	Tú que sembraste el vuelo de tu alma.	You who sowed the flight of your soul.
Verse 2	5	Levántate y mírate las manos.	Arise and look at your hands.
	6	Para crecer estréchala a tu hermano.	To grow, reach them out to your brother.
	7	Juntos iremos unidos en la sangre.	Together we will go united in blood.
	8	Hoy es el tiempo que puede ser mañana.	Today is the time that can be tomorrow.
Refrain	9	Libranos de aquel que nos domina en la miseria.	Liberate us from him who dominates us in misery.
	10	Tráenos tu reino de justicia e igualdad.	Bring us your kingdom of justice and equality.
	11	Sopla como el viento la flor de la quebrada.	Blow like the wind, the flower of the ravine.
	12	Limpia como el fuego el cañón de mi fusil.	Clean like fire the barrel of my rifle.
	13	Hágase por fin tu voluntad aquí en la tierra.	Your will be done finally here on earth.
	14	Danos tu fuerza y tu valor al combatir.	Give us your strength and courage in battle.
	15	Sopla como el viento la flor de la quebrada.	Blow like the wind, the flower of the ravine.
	16	Limpia como el fuego el cañón de mi fusil.	Clean like fire the barrel of my rifle.
Verse 2'	17	Levántate y mírate las manos.	Arise and look at your hands.
	18	Para crecer estréchala a tu hermano.	To grow, reach them out to your brother.
	19	Juntos iremos unidos en la sangre,	Together we will go united in blood.
	20	ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.	Now and at the hour of our death.
	21	Amén.	Amen.

The first elements of the song's text that attract attention are the intertextual references to the Lord's Prayer (lines 10 and 13) and the Hail Mary (line 20), mentioned above. While the reference to the end of the Hail Mary remains unchanged, the "Your will be done" of the Lord's Prayer focuses on the urgency of the present time and on the earth, omitting the mention of heaven. It is useful to refer at this juncture to Jara's song *Qué saco rogar al Cielo* (*What is the Point of Praying to Heaven*, 1967). In this song, the earth is foregrounded in its physicality and functions as a direct critique of an escapist theology that despises today's world. The song ends with an allusion to the idea of shared bread which is the fruit of, and right accruing to, human labor on earth: "if we harvest it together / great will be our bread."

In similar fashion, Jara in lines 7 and 19 utilizes a similar concept with the phrase "together we will go united in blood." Referring to ideas such as solidarity, these lines also address the importance of the concept of blood in Jara's work which take on new dimensions in his song *Vientos del pueblo* (*Winds of the People*, 1974).<sup>8</sup> This song draws direct parallels between the feeding of the

8 This song is based on the poem of the same name by Miguel Hernández. It is significant that this mention of the feeding of the multitude, as well as the reference to the cross of Christ, are original contributions by Víctor Jara.

multitude<sup>9</sup> to the giving of blood: “Thousands upon thousands / have already given their blood / and multiplied the loaves / in bountiful abundance.” From this example, it can be deduced that blood does not mean ancestry, but life. Tamar Dubuc (2008, 90) notes also that verses 7 and 19 of the song “may be considered inclusive in that the addressor addresses a collective rather than an individual, a collective to which he belongs as per his own assertion.”

Other noteworthy verses are 5, 6, 17 and 18 which reinforce the idea of brotherhood and solidarity and establish the hand as a central symbol of solidarity. As Verena Knöpfle (2016, 70–82) suggests, the word “hands” in the world view of Víctor Jara mainly represents four metaphors: 1) hands reaching out as a symbol of solidarity; 2) hand as a creative tool and symbol of non-alienated labor, 3) soiled or stained hands as a sign of violence and 4) the fist as a sign of struggle and revolution. All four metaphors are united in *Plegaria a un labrador* although the first predominates, as I suggested above. The idea of hands as a creative tool and symbol of non-alienated labor can be associated with lines 9 and 10 in which there are direct references to liberation, justice, and equality. The fist metaphor is not explicitly mentioned in the song, but in the chorus (especially in line 14) where there are clear references to revolution and struggle. Finally, the metaphor of dirty hands as a sign of violence has a clear connection to the peasantry, as well as to the concept of domination (line 9). The potency of this motif can be seen most clearly in Jara’s 1969 album *Pongo en tus manos abiertas (I Put in Your Open Hands)* whose cover shows the dirty palms of a peasant or worker.

What is interesting here is that the cover image is closely linked to the content of all the songs on the album, several of which have a deeply religious and messianic meaning. I would like to mention only two for the time being. Ruben Ortiz’s 1969 composition *Zamba del Che (Che’s Zamba)*, for example, refers to the guerrillero Ernesto Guevara as the “saint” Ernesto de la Higuera, giving him a certain messianic status. In addition, *Camilo Torres* alludes to the figure of the guerrilla priest and his role in left-wing Christianity in Latin America. Víctor Jara’s version (the original version is by Daniel Viglietti) is very evocative because it plays with representations of the *Jetztzeit* (now-time) by changing the time signature, the tempo and the rhythmic motif of the guitar when he sings: “It was God who shouted: revolution!”

Line 8 contains perhaps one of the most important phrases in relation to the messianism of *Plegaria a un labrador*. This applies not only to the poetic text – suggesting a contraction of time in which a hoped-for future is already becoming a possibility – but also to the fact that the phrase, at this precise moment, leads directly to the refrain and marks the arrival of a “new (musical)

9 Cf. Matthew 14:13–21; Matthew 15:32–39; Mark 6:31–44; Mark 8:1–9; Luke 9:10–17; and John 6:1–14.

time.” It is precisely at the word “tomorrow” that the tonality transitions from F minor to F Mixolydian, the meter from 6/8 to 3/4 and the tempo from  $\downarrow \sim 69$  to  $\downarrow \sim 126$ , (that is, from  $\downarrow \sim 207$  to  $\downarrow \sim 252$ ), all the simultaneous changes marking the beginning of an *accelerando*.<sup>10</sup> These elements can be related to Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, which, in contrast to homogeneous time, refers to that moment that stops the course of history and opens a door through which the messiah can enter (Benjamin 1991, 701–704). Thus, the instant that the word “tomorrow” is established, it can be understood as a miniature model of the passage from habitual time to messianic time.<sup>11</sup>

Before commenting on the song’s refrain, I should like to mention one last element that is present in the second stanza (lines 5 to 8): it is a vocal accompaniment to the main melody that refers in virtual form to a mystical acoustic space, a religious space. The distribution of voices (the soloist sings relatively rapidly while other voices accompany at a slower pace) and the absence of text in the vocal accompaniment (the accompanying voices sing “ah”) supports this idea.<sup>12</sup> This rightly suggests that *Plegaria a un labrador* is not a mere secularization of religious references, if lines 3 and 4, which make mention of certain divine attributes, are also taken into account. Indeed, lines 5 to 8 could even be understood rhetorically as a proposition against the first 4 lines, insofar as they offer a shift in person and proposition concerning the divine attributes of the first stanza (i.e., the repeated “you” of lines 3 and 4 becomes the “we” of line 7).

The refrain of *Plegaria a un labrador*, exactly where the prayer takes place, contains further suggestive elements. Jara asks for liberation through the imperative (line 9) and for the kingdom of justice and equality to be “brought” (line 10). The latter is interesting because the usual “your kingdom come” of the Lord’s Prayer is replaced by a “bring us your kingdom.” It suggests, in a way, a more active messianic intervention in the coming of the kingdom of God. Here, Jara also emphasizes the category of the kingdom that, based on the ideas of justice and equality, is to be realized on earth for the betterment of the world.

This refrain is sung by the soloist in a style related to plainchant, in particular the so-called liturgical recitative (lines 9, 10, 13 and 14). The vocal liturgical recitative is syllabic, utilizes repeated pitches, and has religious connotations

10 As Dubuc (2008, 98) notes, “changes in dynamics, timbral quality, tempo and musical texture combine to create an overall impression of progressive urgency,” which is particularly evident at this point between stanza and chorus. In other versions by Jara himself, such as the one performed at his concert in Lima in 1973, there is also a slight *accelerando* between verses 7 and 8, precisely preparing this moment of “now-time.”

11 These types of musical arrangements are not so common in the Nueva Canción Chilena and are also present in other songs with an intense messianic meaning, such as Víctor Jara’s *Camilo Torres* or Rolando Alarcón’s *El hombre*.

12 About this kind of vocal accompaniment and its significance in the Nueva Canción, see my article “Sonido, religión y Nueva Canción Chilena” (Rojas 2020, 258–264).

due to its development in the history of Western Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the use of this seemingly intoned melody can also be viewed as a paradoxical connection between the religious and the profane.

It is worth noting that some sources indicate that parts of the chorus were composed in conjunction with Patricio Castillo (Jara 2008, 138; Rodríguez 1988, 80–81). In my opinion, lines 11, 12, 15 and 16 could be the result of this collaboration. This is suggested by both the lyrics and the shaping of the melodic material of the refrain. The incorporation of Castillo's ideas in this section are suggested by a pronounced change in the style of the text, namely the dominance of the dactylic metrical foot of the verse. His influence can also be seen in the acceleration of the harmonic rhythm, and melodic leap of a third (the only accented ascending leap in the whole song).

It should also be mentioned that in the altered repetition of the second stanza (where the last verse changes), the guitar playing is modified. Instead of the initial arpeggio, the last verse maintains the strumming used in the refrain which not only intensifies the section, but also modifies the meaning of the verse: it no longer represents the moment before the arrival of a messianic time, but is inserted within it, bringing to mind what was expressed in the refrain.

Finally, the "Amen" with which *Plegaria a un labrador* ends, should be highlighted. Of course, it is very rare to find this word in non-ritual music. Here it not only fulfils the function of a closing formula of the prayer, but also opens up the hope of making a better tomorrow from now on. The use of the Picardy third, commonly used by the Nueva Canción to express the idea of hope, also reaffirms this idea.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Realization of the Kingdom in the Popular Unity (1970–1973)**

The Unidad Popular was formed by several left-wing parties and movements in connection with the elections for 1970 whose candidate, Salvador Allende, won the presidency in the popular vote. Through the so-called Chilean road to socialism, the Unidad Popular wanted to conduct a democratic and non-violent transition to a society without antagonism between social classes, i.e., to a classless society. In a way, this road to socialism was identified with the realization of Christian hopes and aspirations. There were, for example, Christian sectors such as the first MAPU (Popular Unitary Action Movement), the Izquierda Cristiana (Christian Left) and the movement Cristianos por el

13 A detailed analysis of the liturgical recitative in the Nueva Canción can be found in my article "Sonido, religión y Nueva Canción Chilena" (Rojas 2020). It is worth noting that this liturgical recitative is not constituted as "sacred sound" because of its "immanent" properties, but because of the widespread use that was historically given to such recitatives in the Roman Church.

14 The Picardy third corresponds to the introduction of a major tonic chord in a composition in a minor key, generally at the end of a piece of music. For the use of the Picardy third in the Nueva Canción, see Rojas (2020).



Socialismo (Christians for Socialism) that not only considered Christianity and socialism to be compatible, but they understood that the socialist project was very close to their Christian values and identified the struggle to overcome capitalism as a Christian duty (“Izquierda Cristiana” [n. d.]; Miranda 2020, 50). It is worth mentioning that Allende himself, in his May Day speech in 1971, greeted Chilean Catholics in this way: “Receive the affection from the people because increasingly your word is closer to the thought of Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

There are thus significant elements that indicate that the Nueva Canción Chilena interpreted the Unidad Popular as the realization of the kingdom of God. First of all, many Nueva Canción musicians actively participated in the campaign and the subsequent government of the Unidad Popular (McSherry 2017; Rolle 2000; Schmiedecke 2013, 2017). But not only that. The scholar Natalia Schmiedecke (2013, 181–182) has suggested that in the Nueva Canción Chilena two ways of interpreting the present can be distinguished which are closely related to the political situation: until 1970, the hope for future change predominates, whereas between 1970 and 1973 the emphasis is on the break with yesterday under the idea of bringing “today” closer to “tomorrow.” *Plegaria a un labrador* is precisely one of the songs that create the transition between the two moments.

Thus, from 1970 onwards, various songs emerged that celebrated the coming to power of the Unidad Popular and identified it as the moment when the people achieved their liberation and overcame the past of hatred and exploitation (Schmiedecke 2013, 181–182). For example, in the song *Marcha de los pobladores* (*March of the Settlers*, 1972) by Víctor Jara, this connection becomes clear by explicitly linking the Unidad Popular “with the flags of the people’s government” and the fulfilment of the basic material needs of food, drink, housing, clothing, which are closely related to the criteria of the Last Times (cf. Matthew 25, 35–36). And all this is expressed in a collective voice that aspires to signaling mass participation.

In a way, there is a notion of a messianic path in the Nueva Canción in which the realization of the kingdom is understood as resulting from a process. For example, in the above mentioned *Marcha de los pobladores*, the use of the grammatical future tense and the idea of “marching together towards the future” are predominant. Another salient example is Víctor Jara’s song *Vamos por ancho camino* (*Let Us Take the Wide Path*, 1971) in which the present is interpreted as the hope of a way to walk: “Come, come, come with me / We are on a wide path / A new destiny will be born, come.” For this reason, the Nueva Canción Chilena should not be understood as a historical messianism, insofar as it does not interpret the present as the millennial kingdom and the

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15 Original: “Recibe el cariño popular porque cada vez su verbo está más cerca del pensamiento de Cristo” (Allende 2020, 105).

last age of humanity. Unidad Popular's identification with the kingdom is not yet complete: it is not yet the kingdom itself but, crucially, the possibility of building it. From this perspective, the 1973 film *La tierra prometida* (*Promised Land*) directed by Miguel Littin, with a soundtrack composed by Ángel Parra, stands out. As Guerrero and Vusković (2018, 323) point out, the film (but especially the soundtrack) reflects on the redemptive sense of a coming revolution in which all sacrifices would become meaningful. These authors also refer to the biblical and messianic meanings the revolutionary struggle would acquire from the film's title (*Promised Land* in English), such meanings clearly expressed in the songs *Cuando amanece el día* (*When the Day Dawns*),<sup>16</sup> *Vengo de un lugar* (*I Come from a Place*), *Tierra prometida* or *Levántense, compañeros* (*Rise Up, Comrades*) (Guerrero and Vusković 2018, 285).

At this point I should like to return to *Plegaria a un labrador* and address an issue that has not yet been discussed. To whom is the prayer of intercession addressed? What representational role might peasants play? It seems that the figure of the peasant embodies the messianic task of beginning to build a new world full of justice and equality. In this sense, the term *labrador*, which usually emphasizes the sense of someone who works the land, does not only refer here to the worker of the land (Dubuc 2008, 81), but to the underprivileged and oppressed who are working for a longed-for liberation. I should, therefore, like to explore some of the correspondences between the peasant figure and the different messiahs conceived in the Unidad Popular.

Of course, the idea of a messiah embodied in Salvador Allende had a specific trajectory in the Nueva Canción. It is true that after the coup of September 11, 1973, Allende attained the status of the redeeming Christ with particular intensity, sacrificing himself for the poor and oppressed, just as Jesus did (Ortúzar et al. 2009, 231–247). But there are songs of the Nueva Canción that already exhibit this idea. A clear example is Rolando Alarcón's *Compañero presidente* (*Comrade President*, 1971). Probably because of certain perception of Allende as a messiah, Allende himself declared in a speech in 1971: "I am not an apostle and I am not a messiah, I am not a martyr, I am a social fighter fulfilling a task, the task given to me by the people."<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that Allende repeated exactly the same words on the day of the coup when he was killed (Allende 2020, 513).

In tandem with Allende, there are also frequent instances of songs that conceive of Ernesto "Che" Guevara as the messiah. Some examples are Víctor

16 It is interesting that this song appears for the first time on the album *Se cumple un año, ¡y se cumple!* (*One Year Has Passed, and We Comply!*, 1971), a collective work released as a homage to the first year of the Unidad Popular government.

17 Original: "Yo no tengo pasta de apóstol ni tengo pasta de Mesías, no tengo condiciones de mártir, soy un luchador social que cumple una tarea, la tarea que el pueblo me ha dado" (Allende 2020, 231).

Jara's aforementioned *Zamba del Che* and Quilmay's *El hombre nuevo* (*The New Man*). The latter song compares Guevara to Jesus of Nazareth through the alternation of elements characteristic of each: "The new man / Christ Guevara / Love and struggle / Cheek and bullet." Of course, one can also encounter allusions to Jesus as the messiah. Pertinent examples include Ángel Parra's *Oratorio para el pueblo* (*Oratorio for the People*) from 1965 and *Passion selon Saint Jean* (*Saint John Passion*) from 1974,<sup>18</sup> and Fernando Ugarte's *El cristo cercano* (*The Close Christ*, 1970) whose text reads, "Christ Guerrillero of Justice and Peace, Christ of Freedom."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, and according to the Marxist eschatology, in the Nueva Canción the people, broadly speaking, are also interpreted as the messiah. That is, the people emerge here as the subject of their self-liberation. The song *Vientos del pueblo* is an example of where the people as messiah carry the "same cross that Christ dragged." So in this case it is the people as messiah that makes the miracle of feeding the multitude possible.

Considering this overview, I would like to suggest that the *labrador* to whom the prayer is sung in *Plegaria a un labrador* is a kind of distillation of all these possible messiahs. The idea of the peasant as "one who works for liberation" allows his significance to be expanded in this way. Thus, in *Plegaria a un labrador* the messianism as a path is more important than the messiah himself; a path that would be realized in the Unidad Popular.

### ***Plegaria a un labrador* and the Christian Base Communities During the Dictatorship (1973–1990)**

As I have already mentioned, this "realization of the kingdom" was interrupted after the coup of 11 September 1973. From that moment on, the sympathizers of Unidad Popular adopted an attitude like the first Christians: while being persecuted, exiled and killed, they expected a restoration of the kingdom and a kind of second coming of Allende. As Laura Jordán explains, this period is characterized by the use of music as a form of resistance which wandered between the public sphere and the private and clandestine space (Jordán 2009, 77–102). In this context, *Plegaria a un labrador* continued to be played in the following years in Chile and Latin America where the song acquired new dimensions.

To refer to these new paths of the song, I shall adopt Julio Mendivil's notion of the social biographies of songs. This author proposes, in contrast to an Adornian conception of music, that music listeners are not condemned to passivity. On the contrary, music acquires its values and meanings not only at the

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18 Original title in French, although the music is in Spanish.

19 At least until 1970, Ugarte was a priest of the Catholic Church and recorded his first three records as a priest.

moment of production, but also in its reception, consumption and use. Thus, the social biographies of songs correspond to “the different interpretations and adaptations that can be given to a song when it is inserted into collective life stories beyond its status as a commodity” (Mendivil 2013, 6).

Although *Plegaria a un labrador* took many paths (as can be surmised from the long list of covers of the song, see Footnote 2), I should like to examine the case of the Christian base communities in Chile because they show with great intensity the messianic tension that the song developed.<sup>20</sup> These Christian base communities, persecuted by the dictatorship, wrote new pages in the social biography of *Plegaria a un labrador*, using the song in their almost clandestine meetings as well as in the so-called People’s Way of the Cross. The arrival of the aforementioned coup in 1973 coincided with a period of development of ecclesial base communities. As Esteban Miranda (2019, 58) explains, although the new situation was one of discouragement and crisis, popular communities were gradually opening “cracks and windows.” One of these windows was the People’s Way of the Cross which took place every Good Friday from 1980 onwards as part of protests against the “signs of death” of the Chilean dictatorship. These Way of the Cross events were structured by a correlation between the stations of Jesus’ Via Dolorosa and the situation of human rights violations in Chile. *Plegaria a un labrador* thus took on new meanings through its widespread use during these popular Way of the Cross processions where participants intoned it “with mysticism,” as Esteban Valenzuela (2014, 75) reports. Some sources even indicate that, in this context, this song was called the Latin American Lord’s Prayer (Valenzuela 2014, 74).

In this way, *Plegaria a un labrador*, originally conceived as a concert piece, began to be used in popular religious contexts where its meanings arguably expanded: lines like 9 (“Liberate us from him who dominates us in misery”) or 14 (“Give us your strength and courage in battle”) took on new implications as a direct critique of the dictatorship, while lines 19 and 20 (“Together we will go united in blood / Now and at the hour of our death”) were no longer as abstract as before, but referred to the immanence of the real danger of death. In a sense, the song is here embedded into a Christian eschatological messianism<sup>21</sup> where prayer is now elevated to a divinity understood in Christian terms and the kingdom is urgently hoped for as the alternative future to the present.

Furthermore, I should like to point out that during these years (1980–1990) *Plegaria a un labrador* was not only sung during the People’s Ways of the Cross

20 Christian base communities (also known as Ecclesial base communities) are a model of “being Church” that spread widely in Latin America, especially between the 1970s and 1980s. This model is characterized by small groups that regularly read and reflect on the Bible and connect it with social reality. They have a strong popular character, committing themselves to solidarity and the struggle for social justice (Boff 1981; Miranda 2019).

21 Following Moltmann’s terminology (Moltmann 2005).

but also at other meetings of base communities.<sup>22</sup> María (personal communication, 2020), member of one of these base communities,<sup>23</sup> reports that the song was also used during the years of the dictatorship in all the meetings of the Christian base communities and in the small persecuted communities that met almost clandestinely. In this context, *Plegaria a un labrador* and other Nueva Canción songs began to appear in various songbooks of Chilean Catholic parishes.<sup>24</sup> Valenzuela indicates that mimeographed songbooks circulated in the parishes of Chile which contained hymns despised by the dictatorship and the segments of Chilean society that supported it who remained uncomfortable at Sunday Mass when the youth raised their voices to sing gospel songs too reminiscent of the songs of the Unidad Popular (Valenzuela 2014, 73). Since these songbooks sometimes had to be sanctioned by the church authorities, the refrain of *Plegaria a un labrador* is of course modified in most versions. Line 12 and its repetition (“Clean like fire the barrel of my rifle”) is modified by a text that avoids mentioning armed struggle. Thus, it is common to find the phrase “Delete like fire the power of wickedness” as a substitute. However, some base communities restored the original text directly with a pen, as shown in the following copy I found in the songbook *Vamos a cantar: Libro de cantos de la comunidad cristiana (Let Us Sing: The Book of Songs of the Christian Community)* in the Cristo Liberador community of the western zone of Santiago de Chile (see Figures 1 and 2).

This restoration of the original content of the song suggests a correlation between the hopes of this community and the resistance through all forms of struggle against the Chilean dictatorship in which, once again, the political dimensions take on a religious meaning and vice versa. It is worth noting that during this period several members of this Catholic community belonged to political organizations that fought militarily against the dictatorship, such as the Revolutionary Left Movement or the Communist Party. In this way, cases like that of this community and its adaptation of *Plegaria a un labrador* suggest the notion that the realm of justice and equality that had begun to be realized in the Unidad Popular was to be restored.

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22 It is worth mentioning that the use of Nueva Canción Chilena songs by Christian base communities goes back at least to the time of Christians for Socialism (from 1971).

23 The Cristo Liberador community in Santiago de Chile.

24 For example, in my research in the Cristo Liberador community in Santiago de Chile, *Plegaria a un labrador* appears in three of the four songbooks of this period: *La Iglesia canta: Cancionero comunitario (The Church Sings: Community Songbook)*; *La comunidad de los pobres le canta a su señor (The Community of the Poor Sings to Their Lord)*; appears under the title *Levántate y mira la montaña*; and *Vamos a cantar: Libro de cantos de la comunidad cristiana*, and in many others from other base communities. Naturally, there were also pro-dictatorship sectors in the Church that censored these songbooks and any music that was considered subversive or too close to the Nueva Canción (Valenzuela 2014, 73).



Figure 1: Cover of the songbook *Vamos a cantar: Libro de cantos de la comunidad cristiana*.

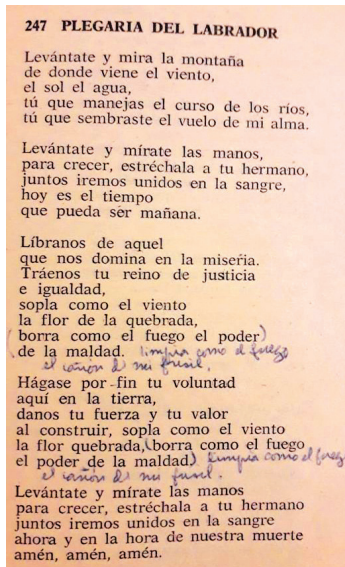


Figure 2: Restoration of the original lyrics of *Plegaria a un labrador* in the songbook *Vamos a cantar: Libro de cantos de la comunidad cristiana* found at Comunidad Cristo Liberador (Santiago de Chile).<sup>25</sup>

25 The National Library of Chile estimates that the book was published in 1982, but indicates this information in its catalog with a question mark. [http://www.bncatalogo.cl/F/FVMH8E1G-6KRXSS8CGQ9LSPYG4QXS48YJ6PFY5F4SCFVFT8H134-05367?func=full-set-set&set\\_number=096225&set\\_entry=000001&format=999](http://www.bncatalogo.cl/F/FVMH8E1G-6KRXSS8CGQ9LSPYG4QXS48YJ6PFY5F4SCFVFT8H134-05367?func=full-set-set&set_number=096225&set_entry=000001&format=999).

## Conclusion

As can be observed, both the origin and the social biography of *Plegaria a un labrador* show how messianic concepts of the Nueva Canción Chilena developed historically. If at the beginning there was a correlation between the historical turning point that existed with the entry of the Unidad Popular into government and the idea of realizing the kingdom of God, later, during the dictatorship, the idea of liberation from oppression took on particular weight.

Of course, a uniform eschatology cannot be found in the Nueva Canción Chilena. On the contrary, one can observe views ranging from the most orthodox Marxism (self-liberation in history through class struggle) to popular Christianity where messianic intervention is not only necessary but urgent. But are we therefore confronted by a secularization of the religious? It is not an orthodox Christianity. But it is not just a secularization either. The profane images have a sacral counterpart, without which they lose their meaning. *Plegaria a un labrador* is an excellent example of a composition that cries out for divine intervention in the world. At the same time it represents and establishes a break in the progression of history. Through the song and its social biography, a messianic future emerges, opening up different perspectives on a future that was already planned and projected by the “current” state of the world. A door opens in history in which the messiah can break through. The goal of the history thus finds its meaning in *Plegaria a un labrador* at the point where both the images of a classless society and the idea of the kingdom of God on earth converge.

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## POVZETEK

### **Brezrazredna družba ali prihod tvojega kraljestva? *Plegaria a un labrador in Nueva Canción Chilena***

Glasbeno gibanje *Nueva Canción Chilena* je zgodovinsko povezano s politično levico, poleg tega pa vključuje v svoje zvočne oblike in konceptualna prizadevanja tudi pomembne religiozne elemente. Pomembni člani gibanja so te elemente prevzeli iz ljudske religije v Čilu, razumeti pa jih smemo tudi v smislu verskega ateizma, s katerim si navsezadnje lahko razložimo pojave paradoksalnih oblik, v katerih se stikata sakralno in posvetno.

Pričujoča študija razkriva, da je bila verska komponenta prisotna v samem jedru gibanja *Nueva Canción Chilena* in da je bila eksplicitno zakoreninjena v revolucionarnem diskurzu gibanja. Presenetljivo, a obenem značilno stališče tega diskurza je, da si je gibanje *Nueva Canción Chilena* predstavljalo politični projekt *Unidad Popular* (katerega del je nova čilenska pesem tudi postala) kot uresničitev božjega kraljestva. Tako kaže pričujoči članek, ki jemlje kot izhodišče pesem *Plegaria a un labrador* (*Molitev k poljedelcu*) Víctorja Jare in njeno družbeno biografijo, kako se je okoli gibanja *Nueva Canción Chilena* razvila ideja t. i. »kraljestva,« ki združuje utopijo brezrazredne družbe in predstavo o božjem kraljestvu na zemlji.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**PABLO ROJAS SAHURIE** (pablo.rojas@univie.ac.at) holds a doctoral fellowship from the Austrian Academy of Sciences at the Institute of Musicology of the University of Vienna. He received his Bachelor's degree in Music Theory (2016) and his Master's degree in Musicology (2018) from the University of Chile. His main research interests are music, philosophy and religion, *Nueva Canción*, popular musicians, and Latin American music. In 2022 he received the Otto Mayer-Serra Award for Music Research. He is currently working on a doctoral thesis focusing on messianism and the *Nueva Canción Chilena*.

## O AVTORJU

**PABLO ROJAS SAHURIE** (pablo.rojas@univie.ac.at) je raziskovalec na doktorskem študiju Avstrijske akademije znanosti na Inštitutu za muzikologijo Univerze na Dunaju. Na Univerzi v Čilu je leta 2016 diplomiral iz glasbene teorije, nato pa leta 2018 še magistriral iz muzikologije. Njegovi osrednji raziskovalni interesi so glasba, filozofija in religija, nova čilenska pesem (*Nueva Canción Chilena*) popularni glasbeniki in latinsko-ameriška glasba. Leta 2022 je prejel nagrado Otta Mayerja-Serra za raziskave v glasbi. Trenutno piše doktorsko disertacijo na temo mesijanizma in nove čilenske pesmi.