December, 2004

Utopia in the Midst of Oppression? A Reconsideration of Guaraní/Jesuit Communities in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Paraguay

Thomas W O'Brien, *DePaul University*

Utopia in the Midst of Oppression? A Reconsideration of Guaraní/Jesuit Communities in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Paraguay

Thomas O'Brien

This essay is an examination of the 17th–18th century Guaraní/Jesuit communities in Paraguay, which were exalted as utopias by countless witnesses. These authors have stressed the long periods of peaceful coexistence, the rich and fruitful syncretistic melding cultures, the successful and bountiful economic life, and the relative justice. Nevertheless, controversy has always marked these communities because many believe that the Jesuit/Guaraní missions are best understood as integral to the larger oppressive imposition of European polity and culture. These authors stress evidence of condescending paternalism, structural inequality, restricted freedom of choice, and the erosion of a pristine Guaraní culture. This essay is an attempt to examine the language of “utopia” as a fitting description of these communities. Like all so-called utopian projects, the Reductions were conceived and developed in order to contradict the mainstream cultural forces which were unjust, violent, and led to miserable conditions for the majority of people. This essay will analyze certain characteristic elements of the communities in the light of the religio-social ideals of the Catholic social tradition.

Keywords: Jesuit; Guaraní; Colonialism; Solidarity; Missions; Reduction; Utopia

From their very inception, the Guaraní/Jesuit missions of 17th- and 18th-century Paraguay have inspired both praise and vitriol but rarely anything else in between. Playwrights, musicians, artists, philosophers, anthropologists, historians, theologians, and others have analyzed these unusual jungle communes of late Christendom from almost every possible perspective. Virtually all commentators have felt compelled to

Thomas O'Brien is an assistant professor of Catholic Social Thought at DePaul University. Correspondence to: DePaul University, 2320 North Kenmore Ave., Chicago, IL 60614, USA. Tel: 773-325-1283; Email: tobrien8@depaul.edu.

pass judgment on these so-called Reductions, whether it was in order to acclaim their achievement of paradise or to chide their collusion with colonial oppressors. Today most people's first and only exposure to these communities is by way of the 1986 film *The Mission*, which is, oddly enough, a testimony to both of these prevailing biases. It is clear that the makers of the film intended to defend and give tribute to this fabled civilization that arose in the South American jungles, which they understood as a Jesuit accomplishment among an otherwise passive native population. On another level though, some post-colonial writers claim this film is a self-parody of Western colonial attitudes toward native peoples, whose lives and deaths are served up as part of the scenery on which the European characters play out their melodramas—in much the same way that the pagan gods often worked out their mythical interactions amidst the mundane backdrop of human existence (Lora, n.d.).

In this essay I hope to achieve something different from my learned predecessors by proposing an alternative hypothesis regarding the basic composition of these communities. I will begin with a postmodern assumption that the most important characteristic marking these communities was neither the dawning of Christian civilization on an otherwise dark continent, nor the imposition of a foreign culture on a reluctant though acquiescent native society. These versions of the Jesuit/Guaraní communities do little justice to the diverse, amalgamated, and polymorphous nature of cultures and their interactions. For these reasons, this article will assume that the most compelling characteristic of the Guaraní/Jesuit communities was their capacity to manage the inevitable collision of two disparate peoples in such a way that often the best of both societies arose in what eventually became a hybrid civilization. The article will assume that the communities were not simply the accomplishment of Jesuit saints and sinners but the product of a cultural hybridization brought about through hard and patient work by both the Guaraní and the Jesuits.

My own interest in these communities arises from experiences I have had working among the homeless of urban North America. Contact with a number of communities reaching out to the poor over the course of about a dozen years led naturally to a categorization of these communities into various types. Informed by liberation theologies and infused with postmodern sensibilities, I became particularly interested in those Christian communities whose members felt compelled to embrace poverty in such a way that this embrace was more than just a spirited outreach to the underprivileged, that is, an authentic identification with the actual poor. I became even more specifically interested in those communities whose identification with the poor inspired political, social, and ecclesial change. After writing a book that is a theological narrative of my experiences at the House of Mercy in Rochester, NY, I began seeking historical examples of similar communities that identified with the poor and oppressed. This article is one installment in this broader historical project seeking examples of this curiously Christian fascination and identification with poverty.

Since some undoubtedly have little background knowledge of the Jesuit/Guaraní communities, while others maintain only a vague recollection of them, I will begin with a brief historical survey of some of the main events and key characteristics of these communities. These unusual communities will then be evaluated according to

the religio-political ideals of their own tradition using four central themes from Catholic social thought: (1) option for the poor; (2) human dignity; (3) the common good; and (4) solidarity. The question will be raised in this context whether and to what extent these communities lived up to the “utopian” moniker. Relying on the works of liberation theologians, Gustavo Gutierrez (1973) and Ignacio Ellacuria (1993), I will conclude with reflections from liberation theology in order to search for signs of Christian utopia in the midst of a broken, yet grace-imbued and Spirit-animated, history of the Guaraní/Jesuit communities.

Brief History

The first contact between the Guaraní and Europeans occurred in the first decades of the 16th century in the midst of the Iberian political rivalry between the Spanish and Portuguese empires. At this time, colonial South America consisted of a few dozen backwater settlements dotting the Eastern and Western coastlines of the continent. More peaceful than their neighbors, the Guaraní initially welcomed the European newcomers. Their hospitality would be rewarded with the frontier barbarity of the colonists, the brutality of the *Paulista* slave traders, and the indentured servitude of the *encomienda* system, which placed the labor of the native at the disposal of the settler in exchange for the settler’s Christianizing influence.¹ Logically, the Guaraní revolted against such shabby treatment but their ill-fated attempt to seize Asuncion in 1539 only inspired greater repression on the part of the conquerors (Lacouture, 1995).

In the last half of the 16th century, the Guaraní would be introduced to a new kind of European, one armed with a much gentler and respectful approach. The Franciscans were the first European missionaries to conduct large scale proselytizing among the Guaraní. In fact, many of the ideas and methods behind the later Jesuit missions in Paraguay were borrowed in part from a Franciscan, Luis de Bolaños who, in the last decades of the 16th century, helped establish 18 communities among the Guaraní. These communities represented a style of mission that gathered numerous area tribes into modest sized settlements under the patriarchal rule of a missionary. The Jesuits inherited this system from the Franciscans, and with indispensable support from the Guaraní, developed it into the legendary “Empire” (Marygrove College, 1942, p. 4).

In spite of the great missionary efforts of the 16th century, the vast interior of the Paraguayan territories had scarcely been touched by the time the Jesuits were given the task of proselytizing the Guaraní. In 1609, the Jesuits established their first Reduction in Guaraní territory (Abou, 1997). The term *reduccion* or “Reduction” was a term of colonial hubris indicating that the natives, who once lived in the wilderness, had been “brought back” (*re ducir*), or “brought together” (*reducir*) in community by the preaching and civilizing influences of the Jesuits, who brought with them technology, law, and the gospel (Campbell, 1921). Nevertheless, the Jesuits approached the Guaraní with intelligence and understanding. They could speak the Guaraní language. They respected and valued most aspects of the Guaraní cultural heritage, and they brought with them many valuable resources that were highly appreciated by the Guaraní. The Jesuits became agents of a new kind of

enlightened colonialism in the Spanish colonies, with the Guaraní playing the role of their "reduced" clients (Lacouture, 1995).

The Jesuits and early European settlers report that the Guaraní were semi-nomadic hunters who also practiced simple agriculture and animal husbandry, possessing only wooden tools and cultivating seasonal crops. Generally they lived in groups of about 20 families, practicing polygamy and cannibalizing prisoners of war (Lacouture, 1995). In fact, the Jesuits' passionate prohibition against cannibalism came as a surprise to the Guaraní, not only because it was a customary practice among many South American tribes, symbolizing the unmitigated nature of a foe's defeat, but also because the priests celebrated on a daily basis the ritual slaughter of their messiah and symbolic consumption of his flesh (Lacouture, 1995). Fortunately, peace between the Guaraní factions was one result of the Jesuit missions, so the demand for cannibalistic practices naturally diminished, making the prohibitions easier for the Guaraní to tolerate.

Guaraní society was relatively devoid of central authority or coercive institutions. The *caciques*, or chiefs, exercised a provisional authority that was balanced against other charismatic leaders like the shamans (Montoya, 1993). Both the *caciques* and the shamans "had more duties toward the community than means of swaying that community: indeed, the chief was beholden to the group rather than the other way around" (Lacouture, 1995, p. 235).

The Jesuit/Guaraní Reductions consisted of communities that spread well beyond the borders of present-day Paraguay, circumscribing areas of Eastern Argentina, Uruguay, southern Brazil, and the frontiers of Bolivia. By 1767, the year of the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish provinces, 113,716 natives lived in 57 Reductions (Bangert, 1986). At one time, the area under the sway of the Jesuit Reductions was almost as large as Western Europe and included the finest ranches and plantations in South America, which were all connected by a system of roads and rivers that was far more efficient than any other contemporary communication system on the continent. The streets of the Reductions were paved a century before the streets of Lima and Buenos Aires, and some of the churches were as large and splendid as their European counterparts (Mitchell, 1981).

The communities were modeled architecturally on European towns with a central plaza where the church was located along with the shops for crucial services like carpentry, masonry, and metal work. Homes were spread out from this central location, and beyond the homes were the orchards, farms, and pastureland for cattle. The towns, which consisted of wooden homes and enormous stone churches, were shocking to those visitors who were familiar with the conditions in other missions, where the villagers lived in straw and mud huts and still largely engaged in hunting and gathering activities (Abou, 1997). The sophistication of the Reductions was both a source of edification and scandal.

The self-sufficient nature of Reduction organization on economic, political, and ecclesial levels was a sign of their strength as well as an omen marking their demise. The Reductions were an experiment in self-sufficiency with a well-documented plan to substitute native manufactured products for imported goods by teaching a wide range of useful trades (Crocitti, 2002). Many first hand reports from visitors describe the

conditions in the Reductions of the late 17th century as “idyllic.” Rivers teemed with fish and the plains were replete with wild cattle. To the casual reader it seems that peace and prosperity must have reigned supreme in these communities (Mitchell, 1981).

Most of the productive economic pursuits of the Reductions were conducted as community activities. At first, the communal arrangement of work was only applied to agriculture and animal husbandry; however, eventually, it became the ideal way to manage most other common enterprises including the manufacture of textiles, the many skilled workshops, and the production of *mate* for trade and export (Reiter, 1995). In the mature Reductions, the workload of any given person was relatively equal to that of any other member of the community. “Many hands make light work” was a truism that certainly applied in these circumstances. These communities offered ample opportunities for the enterprising while, at the same time, offered ultimate security from hunger and need to the masses (Reiter, 1995).

The Reductions of Paraguay would ultimately produce a unique culture of their own that was neither a strict reproduction of European life, nor a wholesale adoption of Guaraní ways. This syncretistic practice even extended to the areas of faith and religious practice, resulting in an extraordinary brand of Christianity, which assimilated symbols, myths, rituals, and physical artifacts from Guaraní tradition to the extent that visitors were sometimes startled and disoriented by the experience. For instance, the Eucharistic liturgy included original architecture, furnishings, statues, vestments, hymns, music, and mystery plays, all performed in a style that was often grander and more precise than the European archetype (Bangert, 1986).

The Reductions had enemies among the Spanish colonists and officials who were jealous of Jesuit power and prosperity and resentful because they were excluded from exercising any economic or political authority over the Reductions (Mitchell, 1981). The Reductions competed directly with the *criollo* settlers in regards to access to Guaraní labor. They were legal refuges for the Guaraní from the *encomienda* system of forced labor, which effectively limited the pool of available exploitable natives (Crocitti, 2002). During the Jansenist controversies of the 18th century, when the Jesuits were suppressed by both the Church and the European states, the Reductions would serve as a sign of Jesuit apostasy and the flaunting of legitimate authority by the order (Bangert, 1986).

The Jesuits enjoyed little success establishing Reductions among other native peoples like the Guayacuru who lived on the vast plains of the Chaco. Eventually, later in the 17th and into the 18th centuries, a few of these other tribes would be “reduced” as well (Mitchell, 1981). However, frustration was the more common experience encountered while trying to establish Reductions among other native peoples. For instance, French Jesuits in North America attempted to reproduce the Reduction model among the Hurons of Ontario and Quebec (1648–1649);² however, the *kairos* for such a project was lacking in these circumstances and it never came to fruition (Bangert, 1995). The relative failure of the Reduction model among other peoples in the Americas is further evidence that the decisive factor at work in the success of the Guaraní Reductions was the cooperation of the Guaraní themselves. Clearly, the Paraguayan Reductions were not models of undiluted Jesuit success, which the Jesuits could then transplant, at will,

to other peoples of the world. In truth, the Guaraní/Jesuit Reductions were a testament to a joint effort between the actively cooperative Guaraní people and their Jesuit agents who were an indispensable political and social resource.

An Evaluation from the Perspective of Catholic Social Thought

In the following discussion, four major themes found in Catholic social thought will be used to analyze Reduction theory and practice. The purpose of this examination is better to grasp the extent to which Reduction society conformed to the foundational Catholic standard developed by the official bodies of the Church during the span of the past century. It is important to keep in mind that this task could easily devolve into anachronistically projecting principles formulated in a later period onto a time and place where they will necessarily serve only to condemn Christians who did not have the benefit of this substantial tradition. Therefore, during these discussions, I will try to contextualize the Reductions by identifying the salient expectations and standard practices of colonial-era South American society. Nevertheless, if the principles of Catholic social thought possess a genuinely timeless quality—as many would argue given the claim that they have their foundation in Scripture and tradition—then Catholics should be able to identify them in any historical period, wherever Christians actively seek to reify the Reign of God in their communities. Also, although this body of literature only infrequently utilizes the term *utopia*, it could certainly be argued that Catholic social thought possesses a *utopian* spirit insofar as it attempts to correct the shortcomings of contemporary society with moral prescriptions harvested from the religious ideals associated with the ideal of the Reign of God found in the Christian Scriptures.

Option for the Poor

The option for the poor is an often-misinterpreted theme that runs through Catholic social tradition. When people first hear the phrase, and its frequently-affixed prefix “preferential,” their initial reaction can be one of righteous indignation because, for most Christians, God loves all equally and this love is not discriminatory. Therefore, preferential option for the poor is initially experienced by many as a counterintuitive principle that needs some explanation.

Although option for the poor, at first glance, seems to be a principle of inequality asserting divine discrimination in favor of a specific social class to the detriment of others, in truth it is the ultimate principle affirming the equal love of God for all. It is grounded in the belief that there was once a time in the history of human-divine relationships when God ruled and human beings were essentially equal under God’s providential care. In Hebrew Scriptures, the period before the Kingship of Saul is often cited as representing such a time in sacred history. The contrivance of hierarchies among human beings is understood as a corruption of the intended egalitarian nature of the Kingdom of God in which God is the one and only King of the people.

The conflict between these two disparate visions of human society is reflected in the struggles over the Kingship of God versus human kingship witnessed in the books of

Samuel in the Hebrew Scriptures. How can God be King, when Israel has raised up a human king from among themselves? The option for the poor is a principle that disrupts the king-making impulse in human society, not by means of revolution against the mighty, but by raising up the lowly. Far from being a principle of exclusion, the option for the poor is the ultimate principle of inclusion to the extent that it brings back and raises up those who have been excluded in the sinful competition for wealth and power inherent in socially stratified societies.

At first glance, the answer to the question of whether the Reductions incarnated the principle of option for the poor seems to be an obvious affirmative. After all, the Jesuits advocated justice for the Guaraní on countless occasions during their 150-year history in the jungles of Paraguay. The communities themselves model justice, equity, and participation, and many would point to their relative prosperity as an impressive witness to the divine inspiration behind these institutions. In fact, the communities were originally designed to rectify certain injustices built into early colonial society which created intolerable circumstances for native peoples. Also, the Jesuits encountered immediate success setting up peaceful communities among Guaraní factions from different tribes whose *caciques* would not, under normal circumstances, tolerate one another, let alone submit to one another's authority (Reiter, 1995).

On closer examination, however, one can identify a number of practices and attitudes that challenge the notion that the Reductions were clear or obvious exemplars of the option for the poor. Sometimes cast in the image of the ideal communist state, the Reductions were never really a state and always reflected, at some level, the hierarchical political biases of the time. Although the polity of the Reductions contradicts many of the policies and practices popular in the monarchies of Renaissance Europe, it is still cogent to cast the Jesuits in the role of particularly benevolent despots. In other words, the Reductions would never be a particularly good fit for the image of a workers' paradise, or a hippy commune, even if some of the descriptions of the Reductions suggest these to the contemporary reader. The Reductions were creatures of their time and their European Catholic culture, which framed utopia according to Biblical stories and hagiographies of great saints and not to a systematic political philosophy espousing egalitarian ideology. The Reductions were a kind of benevolent patriarchal autarchy that included some significant elements of native self-rule, though never enough for the Reductions to flourish in the absence of their Jesuit overseers (Barthel, 1984).

There was no capital punishment; however, corporal punishment was used regularly by the Jesuits in the form of caning—normally administered by another Guaraní at the request of a priest. The ultimate deterrent was expulsion from the community, which was universally feared by members of the Reductions (Mitchell, 1981). The priests maintained oversight of virtually all aspects of communal life, leaving the execution of the overall plan and those onerous tasks, like discipline, to the native *caciques*. Discipline often took the form of whippings and severe beatings which were justified by some of the priests by reference to the so-called natural laziness, ravenous appetites, and lack of foresight among the Guaraní. It is important to keep in mind that some of the methods used by the Jesuits, which by today's standards would be considered

oppressive or abnormally restrictive, were the normal *modus operandi* for missionaries during the 17th and 18th centuries (Barthel, 1984).

While the Guaraní conducted trade relations with outposts along the rivers unaccompanied by the Jesuits, the priests maintained tight control over the terms of trade, demonstrating distrust for both the native boatmen, who might steal the cargo, and the colonial traders, who might cheat the natives. In fact, all transactions between the Guaraní and those of European descent required Jesuit approval (Crocitti, 2002). The imposition of seemingly harsh conditions, along with the condescending and distrustful attitudes of some Jesuit missionaries, combine to build a strong and persuasive case for denying that the Reductions represent a particularly outstanding historical example of an option for the poor (Crocitti, 2002).

Early in the 17th century, the Jesuits freed their native slaves in Paraguay beginning with those working at their college in Asuncion. The natives were, of course, overjoyed, but this revolutionary precedent infuriated the colonists, such that the settler donations that the college depended upon dried up almost immediately. Undeterred, the Jesuits went on to free all native slaves within their province by the end of 1608 (Reiter, 1995). However, this liberation of native slaves by the Jesuits stands in stark contrast to their ongoing ownership of African slaves. In order to avoid enslaving the Guaraní, the Jesuits used African slaves on occasion, which is yet another practice of the Reductions that compromised the option for the poor (Lacouture, 1995).

Although there are numerous elements of Reduction life that obfuscate employment of the option for the poor, I believe the Reductions can still be understood as falling within the spirit of this theme if they are reconsidered collectively as constituting a kind of "church of the poor." Pope John XXIII first coined the term "church of the poor" during a radio address on the eve of Vatican II. Latin American liberation theologians, like Gustavo Gutierrez, have taken up this theme and developed it extensively in their writing (Gutierrez, 1993). As church of the poor, the Reductions indeed made the theological identification between Christ and the oppressed natives in such a way that the communities became signs and, therefore, sacraments of Christ's salvific presence. Jesuit journals are replete with references to Christ being made real and present to the missionaries through the people of the Reductions. These communities were initially founded so that the gospel could be proclaimed to the disinherited natives but, over time, they became concrete signs of the Reign of God. Together the Guaraní and Jesuits faced the misunderstandings and oppression that their option provoked on the part of the powerful and violent forces aligned against such an idealistic venture. The Reductions were considered vessels for a Reign of God that actively undermined the inequities structured into colonial society. In this way, they exhibited powerful manifestations of an option for the poor.

Common Good

The common good is probably the theme of Catholic social thought that stands in starkest contradiction to individualistic conceptions of human society. It is the conviction that the state is responsible for ordering social, economic, and political institutions

in a way that benefits the entire community. Solidarity and our shared human dignity bind us to one another in a manner that demands recognition in the social sphere. While the Reductions were never a state in the strict sense of the term, they did carry out many state functions for those who lived in these communities. Therefore, a discussion of the common good is not out of place.

Like the option for the poor, the common good, at first glance, appears to be alive and well in the Reduction communities. One very clear sign of the common good was the communal agriculture that provided for more than merely the subsistence of individual families; it paved the way for certain members of the Reductions to pursue non-subsistence trades like carpentry, masonry, music, and art in order to augment the greater good of all. Eventually, all material culture produced in the Reductions was ordered according to a communistic pattern, and ownership was conceived in pluralistic rather than individualistic modes. Although the governance of the Reductions was never entirely participative, overall, the leadership and decision-making patterns in these communities appears have been guided by the principles of the common good.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that some Guaraní occasionally resisted Jesuit domination of Reduction polity and economy in both small and significant ways. Some Guaraní surreptitiously conducted harvesting, production, and trade activities outside the watchful eyes of the Reduction hierarchy. Some Guaraní flaunted their transgressions: eating draft animals and seeds, neglecting agricultural obligations, and stealing cotton (Crocitti, 2002). At some level these transgressions demonstrated the existence of forms of resistance to the imposed regime of the Jesuits. However, it is important to keep in mind that evidence of resistance has often been over-interpreted as widespread revolt, when in truth piddling corruption and subversion on the part of the underprivileged is an attribute of all social systems. Such evidence, on its own, does not necessarily mean that there was a wholesale rejection of the Reduction system on the part of the Guaraní, or that the system itself was not fundamentally serving the common good.

In fact, there is ample evidence contradicting the idea that the Guaraní were generally disgruntled captives of Jesuit overlords, trapped within a demeaning and oppressive system. It has been argued by some that the Guaraní tolerated the Reductions for the sole purpose of avoiding the even more oppressive *encomienda* system. However, there is strong evidence that challenges this conclusion. If it were true that the Guaraní had no significant investment in the Reductions and merely tolerated their Jesuit chains in order to avoid the more brutal chains of other colonial conquistadores, then it would be reasonable to assume a purely passive role for the Guaraní in the development and implementation of the Reductions. In other words, if this scenario were true, the Reductions should have been simply an imposition of the European village onto the Guaraní, with occasional resistance to this system being explained as native bridleing against the foreign occupier. However, the very active and, at times, spirited role that the Guaraní played in the cultural, economic, and political development of the Reductions should guide the contemporary researcher toward other conclusions that reaffirm the presence of a commitment to the common good.

Solidarity

Solidarity is a theme very closely related to the common good in that its principle object is the formation of a just society characterized by right relationships among all members and the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for the purpose of human flourishing. Again, the Reductions give the immediate impression of being communities where solidarity thrived. One obvious sign of solidarity in these communities was the Jesuits' insistence that only Guaraní be spoken in the Reductions, thus not only preserving Guaraní culture but also developing it by giving it a singular and written form. Another area of general solidarity between the Jesuits and the Guaraní was their mutual and genuine disinterest in wealth. Avaricious pursuit of wealth, which typified the motivations of most European colonists, was a force that tended to disintegrate society by pitting individuals against one another in a self-aggrandizing quest for limited resources. Internally, the Reductions were remarkably free from these degenerative forces.

The art and architecture of the Reductions tell the story of cultural synthesis or hybridization more than they speak to the cultural hegemony witnessed in most other instances of colonization. The symbolism used "speaks powerfully of a tropical culture" (Lacouture, 1995, p. 229). It was obviously not, on the one hand, simply an imposition of European culture; however, it is equally clear that the assimilation of Guaraní architecture, symbolism, and language was more than mere native window-dressing over a transplanted Western European town. The Reductions were a powerful witness to a genuine syncretism that melded the forms of two very different cultures into a distinct communal expression.

As was their practice in other non-European settings, the Jesuits adapted their Christian proselytization to the myths and religious symbols of Guaraní culture. For instance, the Guaraní myth of the *Pai-Sume*, which posited a land free from evil where they would be led by a civilizing hero, was adapted in order to reflect Christian messianism, which led the believer to the heavenly realm—of course, also a place free from evil (Montoya, 1993). It is important to point out in these circumstances how European Christendom itself was also altered in fundamental ways in this theological hybridization process. Nonetheless, Guaraní culture, like any established tradition, was not perfectly plastic, and never embraced the notion of sin, or the distinction between the natural and supernatural. Catholicism's most compelling feature for the Guaraní was the extravagant liturgical celebrations with their pomp, gold, incense, art, and, above all, music. The Guaraní were accomplished musicians long before the arrival of the Europeans and this became an authentic venue for mutual exchange between the Jesuits and the natives. Many renowned European composers, like Domenico Zipoli, composed cantatas for the Guaraní to perform—such was their reputation for vocal prowess (Lacouture, 1995).

The integration or outright adoption of native traditions in the art, architecture, organization, technology, and structures of authority in these communities suggests something other than the normal European colonial model of subordination and assimilation (Lacouture, 1995). Nevertheless, the Reductions exposed the Guaraní to

new and often abstract levels of hierarchy. Beginning with the Jesuit Fathers themselves, the political hierarchy extended up through the provincial governors, the viceroy of Peru, and the royal administration of Madrid. On the ecclesial level, the Guaraní again found that the Jesuit missionaries were rather low on a hierarchical ladder that stretched upwards through the Bishop of Asuncion, who was subordinate to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who himself was beholden to the Pope in Rome. Many of the misunderstandings between the Guaraní and the Jesuits were a result of the Guaraní's limited grasp of the abstruse exercise of power in European authoritarian ecclesial and civil politics. It was difficult for the Guaraní to accept that many of the crucial decisions affecting their communities were not theirs to make (Lacouture, 1995).

In virtually every case, the Reductions were a vibrant blending of cultures and not merely an imposition of European culture on an unwilling and resistant native population. For instance, while the architecture of the towns was fundamentally Spanish, the materials and building methods were basically Guaraní. Also, the governmental institutions were those imposed by Spanish law, but certain Guaraní, who had already been singled out as leaders by their community, filled these positions. Although it was the Jesuits' responsibility to appoint the office-holders, this was never done without significant consultation with the Guaraní (Reiter, 1995). The Guaraní and the Jesuits were relatively respectful of one another's religious beliefs and practices.

Human Dignity

What shall we say of the Indians? In Europe they are conceived almost as savage animals, sullen, ugly, of a frightening aspect. Certainly this is very far from being right. The Indians are individuals of human nature, men and women like the rest of us. (Labrador, 2001)

These words of a Jesuit priest speak volumes about the humanizing role that the Reductions played in the lives of the Guaraní. Needless to say, prejudices overflowed among Europeans and colonists regarding the animal nature of the natives, rendering them not fully human and, therefore, an exploitable resource. The Jesuits knew from their long and respectful interaction that the natives were not only fully human but that Europeans had much to learn from these peoples. From the way in which they raised their children, to their long and relatively healthy lives, the Jesuits marveled again and again at the genius of the Guaraní way of life. The Jesuits fought the *encomienda* system primarily because it was an offence to the human dignity of the natives. The syncretistic methods used to build Reduction society were a confirmation of the value both cultures saw in one another's beliefs and practices. Human dignity appears to be a centerpiece of Reduction life.

However, like all of the other principles of Catholic social thought, human dignity was, on occasion, negated in practice. In this case, the sin of negating the full human dignity of both native and European contributed to the collapse of the Reduction system. The Reductions were informed by a two-edged ideology current in European society which cast the Europeans in the role of clever but corrupt and vicious schemers, while portraying the natives as innocent, ignorant, and childlike.

Preconditioned to think in ontological and natural law categories, many thoughtful Europeans assumed the revolutionary political, economic, and social forces at play in Western Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries were the result of a divine judgment, or some flaw in their human nature. The papal scandals of the 15th century and the Reformation had a disillusioning effect on Europeans who were scandalized by both the worldliness of the papacy and, more importantly, its weakness and ineffectual nature in the face of the manipulations of temporal rulers, and its puny response to the Reformation. Medieval social and ecclesial order was giving way to new ways of structuring and conceiving these realities. Europeans were openly questioning the medieval order and finding it wanting. Some of the answers Europeans of this era were giving to these questions can be found in the literary works of the period that imagine a perfect society situated in a far-away land, like Thomas More's *Utopia*, written in 1516, or Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, published in 1593, Fr. Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, composed in 1602, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, written in 1626.

The types of adventurers naturally drawn to colonial territories only reinforced these biases against Europeans and their faulty nature. The hardships and dangers of the colonies were well publicized in Europe, so the pool of willing travelers and settlers was reduced to swashbuckling globetrotters or those who could be enticed by either their overwhelming avarice or need to escape a tainted or nefarious past (Johnson, 1999). The Bishop of Santa Marta, Juan Fernand de Angelo, expressed his frustrations about European vice when he wrote to his superiors in Spain.

In these parts there are no Christians, but only demons ... as for the Indians, nothing is more abhorrent to them than the name Christians, whom they call in their language *yares*, which means demons, and they are right, for the works which are wrought here are not of Christians, nor of men endowed with reason but of demons. (Marygrove College, 1942)

In this ideological climate, the old and corrupt nature of the Europeans was logically contrasted with the supposed pristine, innocent, and childlike nature of the native peoples who could only be tainted by their exposure to the colonists (Johnson, 1999). This ideology became the motivation behind the remote reservation system that the Jesuits advocated before the Spanish authorities. In the words of a Jesuit testifying before the Spanish crown: "The Spaniards are addicted to a great many vices of which our simple-hearted Indian folk know nothing, but which they would doubtless soon acquire as a result of their association" (Barthel, 1984, p. 201).

Although the ideology of the corrupt colonist and the childlike native would serve the Jesuits well in their relationships with both the Spanish crown and the regional governors, they were well aware that these biases were genuinely false depictions of both groups (Johnson, 1999). For instance, the Jesuits themselves belied the myth of the essentially corrupt European and, as stated earlier, the Guaraní had verified their full humanity in convincing ways through their overwhelming contributions to the development of the Reductions.

However, even if the Jesuits were convinced of the full humanity of the Guaraní, the portrait of childlike innocence was difficult to exorcize from most Europeans' imaginations. European bias toward the Guaraní stood out in stark contrast during the final days of the Reductions when the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were dividing the

lands of the Reductions and the Jesuits were ordered to convince the Guaraní to leave their beloved towns and move to a strange land. It was an assumption of the Spanish authorities that the Guaraní were childlike and would simply and easily obey the Jesuits' command. They were perplexed by Jesuit resistance and their individual claims that the situation was not so simple (Reiter, 1995). The Jesuits were accused of being obstructionists and painting an obviously false picture of native rebellion.

The patronizing and condescending assumptions of the Spaniards toward the Guaraní can be witnessed in the ridiculously paltry value they mistakenly placed on the Reductions. When the Jesuits corrected the officials, pointing out that their actual value was almost 200 times the assessed value, the Spanish officials—unable to imagine a childlike people producing towns of such significant economic value—were convinced the Jesuits were seeking to embezzle the funds (Reiter, 1995). The Jesuits themselves were partially to blame for this distorted view of a docile Guaraní living in a bucolic Shangri-la.³ Clearly the image of quaint and childlike natives was a better ideological fit with most Europeans' self-understanding; they viewed themselves as definitively superior to the forest-dwelling natives. It also made the Guaraní seem far less threatening, especially in those moments when the Jesuits had to petition the Spanish crown for arms and military training for the natives of their towns. The image of childlike innocence also had the effect of edifying many among the European elite who donated generously to the Jesuits and the missions.

Ironically, the ideology of the childlike Guaraní, which had served the Jesuits so well for so long among a largely ignorant European elite, would “blowback” on them after the Treaty of Limits. When, in this context, their arguments suggested the natives were far more self-directive than the Jesuits had led anyone to believe, logically enough no one believed them. When rebellion occurred just as the Jesuits had warned, the Spanish authorities held the Jesuits, not the Guaraní, responsible. In the words of one Spanish official: “Madrid finally realizes the situation here: we have no rebellious Indians—only disloyal Jesuits” (Reiter, 1995, p. 203). The Jesuits had placed themselves in an impossible position, caught between European and Guaraní misinterpretations of their motives, both of which could be traced back to their own misrepresentation of the natives and their communities. During the rebellions many Jesuits died tragically pleading for their lives before the Guaraní, who now saw them as traders who had sold them out to the Portuguese. And the bewildered Spanish who had sent the Jesuits back into the jungle on an impossible mission were left with the unenviable task of enforcing the decrees of their treaty with Portugal by means of a military campaign against their own subjects in the Reductions (Reiter, 1995).

In an even greater irony, in the end, the Guaraní of San Nicolas were forced to take over as theologians when duplicitous Jesuit theologies failed to convince them to give up their town willingly:

In mutinous San Nicolas the “Asalto” was mounted by four priests including the visiting Father Limp and old paralytic Father Harder. They preached and implored but the Indians [*sic*] could not be moved. They would never give up their town! When the crucifix slipped from the hands of poor Father Harder one of them exclaimed: “You see, Padre, even your saint wants to stay here—he embraces our land!” (Reiter, 1995, p. 159)

After the Jesuits were imprisoned or escaped the rebellious towns, the Guaraní maintained some semblance of normalcy, filling from their own ranks the roles the priests had once played. They even continued to pray to the saints and performed Catholic rituals the priests had taught them (Reiter, 1995).

Conclusion

A few of the Jesuits were so deeply attached to their missions, so disillusioned by the reticence of Rome, and so cut to the quick by rumors that they had sold out to the Portuguese, that they joined the Guaraní in their rebellion as chaplains and physicians. In 1759, Lisbon would expel the Jesuits from all Portuguese territories. The Jesuit fate had been sealed and other expulsions from other nations followed, eventually leading to the suppression of the entire order almost a decade later (Mitchell, 1981). The Reduction movement among the Guaraní continued even in the absence of their Jesuit comrades. As late as 1830, some Reductions were still functioning though in a decaying fashion. The colonial wars for independence and the subsequent wars between successor states finally spelled the end for the Guaraní Reductions. "The last traces of the Guaraní republic were obliterated during the six-year war from 1864 to 1870 between Paraguay and the combined forces of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina" (Mitchell, 1981, p. 209).

Interpretations of the Guaraní/Jesuit Reductions have too often been influenced by agendas attempting to praise, exonerate, or condemn the European colonization of South America. A re-examination of the Reductions demonstrates that they were not examples of the irresistible nature of the best aspects of Christian European culture, as these were gladly embraced by an uncivilized people. However, neither were they simply a colonial imposition of European culture onto the Guaraní, "reducing" a people who had never imagined inviting them to do so. Many wonderful civilizations have arisen as the result of an action that was initially aggressive, unjust, and even brutal—like, for instance, Andalusian civilization in south-central Spain. The injustices and inequities need to be recognized and condemned as such, but these should not function to obscure the beauty of this baroque experiment in civilization that was born of adversity in 17th-century South America.

The true greatness of the Reductions was the fact that the Guaraní were, at some important level, subjects of their own destiny and not merely objects of a gilded Jesuit imperialism. While clearly not perfectly just, equitable, or participatory, these communities bear witness to the powerful presence of a utopian spirit through their limited incarnations of ideals from Catholic social theory: solidarity, human dignity, the common good, and an option for the poor. The communities were born out of a Jesuit denunciation of the deficiencies of the colonial treatment of native peoples. Reduction praxis sought to subvert and reverse the dehumanizing circumstances that the natives were forced to endure at the hands of the colonists. The Reductions were concrete historico-social experiments attempting—through the application of very practical guidelines and principles—to make a suitable dwelling for the Reign of God on earth (Ellacuria, 1993). Their presence transformed both the social and physical landscape of colonial Paraguay, creating a space where relative peace, justice, and love prevailed.

The answer to the question of whether the Reductions were utopian (or not) is a necessarily complex one. Much of the confusion lies in the use of vague language that means many things to many different people. For instance, many use the term *utopia* to refer to an absolutely perfect social status, which no concrete historical community could ever hope to achieve. In this case, the answer to our question would be obviously negative; however, this is not particularly enlightening since the same could be said of all utopian experiments. In addition, utopian ideals are as varied and diverse as those who dream them up. The way North American anarcho-environmentalists understand *utopia* will be very different from the way it is conceived in mainstream consumer culture. Therefore, what exactly constitutes *utopia* will always be a contentious issue.

Given that the purpose of this issue is to explore justice from the perspectives of specific historical utopian communities, I think the term *utopia* in these circumstances refers to a genuine, concrete attempt to embody an ideal of society in a particular communal experiment. I also think the term *utopia* includes attempts to equalize human relationships, broaden participation in decision-making processes, meet basic human needs with greater abundance, and expand opportunities for human flourishing. While not every Jesuit came to the Reductions with the intention of transforming the native world according to an ideal vision of society, some clearly did. And while not every Jesuit policy led to a level of equality, justice, participation, and abundance that could be embraced by modern idealists, a surprising number did. Whether or not one wishes to apply the term, the Guaraní/Jesuit Reductions will always raise utopian questions for those who take the time to study these utterly fascinating communities.

Notes

- [1] "The *encomienda* was characteristic of Spanish society during the time of the conquest of Latin America. Conquest society was based upon the control of labor, and the Spaniards believed that the Indians existed to provide labor for them. The *encomienda* was a grant of Indian labor, given by the Spanish monarch to the early settlers as payment for service to the crown. The king required the *encomenderos* to protect the Indians and instruct them in the Catholic faith; this requirement was usually ignored, however. While the *encomienda* eventually ceased to be a major economic factor in most of colonial Spanish America, it continued in Paraguay throughout the colonial period. The Jesuits countered the abuses of the *encomienda* by establishing the *reducciones*. It was not until 1813, when the United Provinces of La Plata was formed, that the *encomienda* was abolished in Paraguay" (Wilson, 1995).
- [2] "Le Jeune expressed his ambition to create 'a second Paraguay', but nomadic Huron hunters intent on trading furs for guns, brandy, rum, and tobacco supplied by French *coureurs de bois* [pioneer traders] or Dutch and English colonists, were less docile than the Guaraní" (Mitchell, 1981, p. 152).
- [3] Fr. Barreda: "They are like children; a sacrifice in the distant future has no reality for them."

References

- Abou, S. (1997). *The Jesuit "republic" of the Guaraní (1609–1768) and its heritage*. New York: UNESCO Publishing.
- Bangert, W. (1986). *A history of the Society of Jesus*. St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources.

- Barthel, M. (1984). *The Jesuits: History and legend of the Society of Jesus*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Campbell, T. (1921). *The Jesuits, 1534–1921*. New York: Encyclopedia Press.
- Crocitti, J. (2002). The international economic organization of the Jesuit missions among the Guaraní. *International Social Science Review*, 77, 3–16.
- Ellacuria, I. (1993). Utopia and prophecy in Latin America. In I. Ellacuria, S.S. & J. Sobrino (Eds.), *Mysterium liberationis*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Gutierrez, G. (1973). *A theology of liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Johnson, A. D. (1999). In defense of paradise: A Jesuit appeal [Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999]. *UMI Dissertation Services*. (UMI No. 9929505)
- Labrador, J. S. (2001). A seventeenth-century view of the Guaraní. *Archeology*, 54, 2.
- Lacouture, J. (1995). *Jesuits: A multibiography*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint.
- Lora, M. (n.d.). The mission: The idealizing of the Guaraní turns into a reinforcement of neo-imperialism, paternalism and a sinister form of otherness. Retrieved from <http://www.geocities.com/mlhora3/academic.htm>
- Marygrove College. (1942). *A spiritual conquest: The Jesuit Reductions in Paraguay, 1610–1767*. Detroit, MI: Marygrove College.
- Mitchell, D. (1981). *The Jesuits: A history*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Montoya, A. R. (1993). *The spiritual conquest accomplished by the religious of the Society of Jesus in the provinces of Paraguay, Parana, Uruguay, and Tape*. St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources.
- Reiter, F. J. (1995). *They built utopia: The Jesuit missions in Paraguay, 1610–1768*. Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica.
- Wilson, R. W. (1995). *The Jesuit-Guaraní missions and liberation theology*. Master's thesis, DePaul University.

Copyright of Contemporary Justice Review is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.