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Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet*

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*Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century
Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S. J.*

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A Review of *Jesuit on the Roof of the World:
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Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet. By Trent Pomplum. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, xvi + 302 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-537786-6 (cloth), \$29.95.

Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S. J. Translated by Michael J. Sweet and edited by Leonard Zwilling. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010, xxiv + 797 pages, ISBN 978-086171-676-0 (pbk), \$34.95.

Trent Pomplum's *Jesuit on the Roof of the World* captures the ambition of Ippolito Desideri's quest: "The gravity-defying domes and impossible skies of Jesuit architecture evoked, with precise deliberations, the interior extravagance of generous abandon" (*Jesuit* 42). Jesuit visual aids and verbal rhetoric—employed in the prolix account Fr. Desideri (1684–1733) sent back and re-wrote five times—aimed at inspiring novices in the Society of Jesus with the same fervor that fueled this young scholastic to ask to be sent to convert Tibet in 1712, despite not having

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substantial knowledge of this most remote outpost in the Society's Indies province. The Jesuits had abandoned a mission there in the second quarter of the previous century, a fact apparently forgotten by Vatican officials. Furthermore, although there remains some ambiguity in the historical record as to what Desideri and his superiors knew and when, the Capuchin Franciscans had already been granted papal permission to establish themselves in Tibet. At any rate Desideri, not yet ordained when he left Italy for the East, arrived in 1715 and reached Lhasa the following year.

There, he rapidly perfected his Tibetan; the preceding efforts of the Capuchins assisted him, but he certainly made astonishing progress, beginning his first book in the language the same year. The invasion by the Zunghar from Mongolia in 1717 impelled the Jesuit missionary to flee for a time to Dakpo. Between there and Lhasa, amidst civil war, he continued with preparation of his *Notizie istoriche*, intended to justify his mission against both the claims of the Capuchins and, more crucially, the assertions of those whom later centuries would call Buddhists.

Their Mādhyamaka philosophy earned the brunt of Desideri's assault. He sought to undermine the Buddhist denial of a supreme God as absurd, arguing that proof against this "evident falsehood," combined with the need for salvation, rested on "certainties of reason in addition to certainties of faith" (*Jesuit* 94). Trent Pomplum discusses this in a dense chapter that analyzes Desideri's methods via post-Tridentine theology and scholastic applications. The Tuscan Jesuit sought to deny his Tibetan hosts and interlocutors the ability to assert their claims to what Desideri might define as prevenient grace, the assistance given by God to those seeking Him without their direct knowledge, but who gain—by their unwitting good will to seek the ultimate truth—the benefits of natural virtues.

This theme creates intricate terrain to explore in a compressed chapter, and those without adequate theological training may find themselves challenged here. Still, in showing why Desideri sought to

refute Buddhist doctrines, Pomplum sums up a contrast between the “natural virtues” an unbeliever might possess and the “supernatural fulfillment” that directs these virtues towards Christian salvation. Desideri, as any missionary of his time and background, admired Tibet even as he tried to undermine its religious and cultural formations, in an attempt to win it over for Christ. Therefore, he had to unrelentingly refute the claims of *Dharma*.

This book progresses through Desideri’s training as a Jesuit, as Pomplum introduces us to the baroque mindset within Italian Catholicism. In several hundred pages Pomplum sets out a narrative that conveys the gist of Desideri’s aim to confront and convert a land of which he was almost completely ignorant. As the first Jesuit to establish a mission in the “third Tibet” of the innermost heartland, Desideri mastered the arguments of his opponents, who were also his instructors. He translated works and commented upon them, seeking to correct what he regarded as mistaken notions of some Christians who had discovered Asian resemblances to Trinitarianism (i.e., in the Three Jewels) or those who had speculated that Nestorian traces of a vanished Christianity remained in China.

The narrative devotes additional treatment to Jesuit missionary efforts in Asia and India, as it concentrates upon two of Pomplum’s areas of overlapping expertise, Indo-Tibetan religion and culture, and Jesuit mission history. For a reader coming from a background in Buddhist studies, Pomplum presumes familiarity with these theological and philosophical essentials. He delves efficiently into the finer points of Catholic-Buddhist contention as taken up by Desideri.

A hundred pages of notes and a bibliography add to the usefulness of this critical biography of an intriguing zealot. Despite what may be for more casual readers an onslaught of information about the Zunghar invasion, there is merit in analyzing the complications reported, if with bias, by Desideri. For scholars of this period, the summation in the fourth chapter will prove useful. The book covers a

wider area than its subtitle suggests, and readers will learn more about the influences that allowed missionaries such as Desideri to sustain themselves and accomplish so much in so little time. While one might wish to have seen more about Desideri as a crafty and flawed figure, given his half decade in the “third” Tibet, and the aim of his report to provide a “true history” on behalf of the Society, Pomplum energetically examines the nuances of the Jesuit’s self-presentation and self-justification with all the scholarly acumen he and his academic colleagues have acquired in the centuries since this mission.

The twists and turns of Desideri’s mission to the Indies, before and after his stint in Tibet between 1715 and 1721, elaborate only part of the story. He was forced to leave when his sometime colleagues and sometime rivals the Capuchins reasserted and were reassured of their missionary status in the region, even as the Zunghar and then Manchu invasions created havoc in the Himalayan kingdom. He later served in Delhi and other outposts in India, before returning to Rome to try in vain to convince the Vatican to rule in favor of the Society and against the Capuchins for control of the Tibetan mission, to which he longed to return.

Pomplum carefully corrects the excesses of past Catholic hagiographers and present post-colonial critics who distort the truth about Desideri’s missionary attainments. He provides a nuanced view of the Capuchins—who have been denigrated while the accomplishments of their confreres the Jesuits have been elevated or caricatured. Jesuit ambitions are placed in context during this restive era. Pomplum surveys the legacy of Desideri within the wider Chinese Rites controversy involving Matteo Ricci, as well as the controversy over Jesuit “accommodation” of native rituals and practices that characterized the Malabar Rites fracas, which in India had pitted Capuchin against Jesuit, leading to papal intervention. Pomplum defines the shared aims that linked the friars to the Society of Jesus with regard to how far to adjust Catholicism to Asian traditions, as well as the points

that distinguished Jesuit missionaries, such as Roberto de Nobili among the Hindus, from their Franciscan, Dominican, and Vatican critics.

Pomplum concludes by reminding readers that if Desideri's mission had been as successful as many Buddhist studies scholars appear to have wished it, there might not be any Tibetan Buddhism left to study, four centuries later. "Viewed as a work of history, Desideri's *narratio* is a curious *mélange* of hard-nosed reporting, breezy innuendo, and simple mistakes" (*Jesuit* 172). The author suggests it is better understood, as we would have it today, as "based on a true story." Despite its flaws as history, the *Notizie storiche* stands as a testament to how much information one diligent missionary could amass about his adopted land in order to carry out his apostolate.

A new edition of Desideri's work, entitled *Mission to Tibet*, appeared in the same year as Pomplum's work, 2010. Not only did Pomplum consult this edition, his own study appears to have informed it. Translated by Michael Sweet and edited by Leonard Zwilling, this massive compendium collects all that is necessary to comprehend Desideri within his own writings, alongside a brief report from his early confrere Manoel Freyre. Desideri reworked his account often, and this version allows readers to compare—thanks to a generous introduction, careful endnotes, and appendices—how the Jesuit honed his narrative as he tried to convince the Vatican upon his return from Tibet of the priority his Society held over the Capuchins to control the Catholic mission assigned to the rather vaguely defined territory that included the "third" or innermost region of the Himalayan heartland.

As Pomplum explains and Sweet and Zwilling document, Fr. Ippolito energetically marshals the claims of the Jesuits against his Franciscan rivals, even as he graciously thanks the friars for their assistance during not only his roughly seven years in the Himalayas, but over his decade and a half away from Italy on his wide-ranging mission to, in, and from the Indies. He likewise acknowledges the hospitality shown by his Buddhist hosts in Lhasa. They grant the newly arrived

priest time to prepare his objections for debate, the better to allow a fair contest between one who has barely learned their daunting language and the comparatively tolerant lamas.

Desideri argues against what he calls “metempsychosis,” the transmigration of souls, against the doctrine of emptiness, and against the non-theistic nature of their “false religion.” He prepares a catechism designed to woo the elite away from their faith, the better to weaken its sway over the middle and lower classes. This was the Jesuit approach towards missionizing. While Desideri skillfully channels the arguments of the lamas, as when he seems to defend the “supposed virtue” of their practice of sky burial, he does this in order to more effectively dispel their delusions. While he judges Tibetans as truly compassionate, he cannot condone their superstitions. His logic and his faith, both articulated over many pages of this hefty report, contrast their natural goodness with their ultimate damnation for idolatry and ignorance. Ethically, he praises the Tibetans’ “inclination to mercy” among those meritorious “things practiced by this blind people,” which put to shame the efforts of many Christians (*Mission* 283). While able to expound the proofs set out in Buddhist texts that portray their doctrines as convincing, Desideri accomplishes this verbal feat only to demolish the *Dharma* he examines.

Desideri also interprets the intricate selection of a new incarnation of a lama. After painstaking analysis, he concludes that neither a boy barely able to talk nor the lamas assigned to interrogate him nor the toddler’s parents can be held culpable for what can only be a clever stratagem of Satan himself. Moreover, he argues, the denial by the faithful of Tibet of a First Cause makes their religion atheistic in theory if not practice. Applying classical philosophy and Catholic scholasticism, the Jesuit dismantles Buddhist philosophy as a form of Tibetan scholasticism. Summarizing Tsongkhapa’s *Lam rim chen mo* (“Great Stages of the Path”), a work he himself translated, the missionary describes how, in his judgment, the Devil crafts his glittering lures. Desideri knows

Tibetans do not worship the figures they conjure up to bow to or depict on their tapestries, but he also must convince his devout readers of the seductive construction that these “pagans” create and refine. The “vener and façade” of their elaborate “sect” hides deceit behind “pretty tinsel,” as if the Devil had crafted a beautiful artifice with which to trap Tibetans in the errors of denying a Creator and asserting emptiness as the fundamental dogma—errors which would bring damnation to Desideri’s earnest, learned, but doomed hosts, teachers, and friends (*Mission* 364).

Nevertheless, Desideri recounts their tale of Urgyen with verve and passion, conveying to his European readers the flavor of a native narrative told in the original style. He retells the life of the Buddha (albeit by another name), Trisong Detsen, and Padmasambhava. He explores the mythic origins of the Tibetans, and he takes us into their many levels of hell. Fashions, geography, food, customs, beasts, language, marriages, and funerals: all gain attentive and engrossing description.

After he must leave Tibet, once the Office of the Propaganda has ruled in favor of the Capuchins over the Jesuits, Fr. Ippolito tells of his adventures by land and sea. He sojourns in Kathmandu (where he includes in passing “Bod” among the pantheon of Newar gods), visits Benares (where he notes the birthplace of “Shakya Thupa,” his term for Shakyamuni), and delights in relating the machinations of Delhi’s khans, Patna’s date gatherers and opium harvesters, and the power plays of the Moghul Empire, whose intrigues and pitched battles match those he dramatizes between the Dzungar Mongols (“Tartars”), the Chinese, and the Tibetans during the civil strife that caused him to flee Lhasa for Dakpo. His dramatic recounting of this episode remains the only substantial account by a Westerner; Zwilling remarks how Desideri rewrote it three times to find the appropriate mix of fact and fiction. This mingling, as the editor’s endnotes and vast bibliography attest, makes this epic exciting and readable, despite its considerable bulk and

digressions, for which the author himself apologizes now and then—even if he can never apologize for his *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* sermonizing.

This logic, inescapable for any Catholic missionary, dominates the undertones of most of Desideri's narrative. The tone is by turns eloquent and overwhelming, as chapters expound how, in one of many vividly-told biblical analogies, Judith used not only her wiles but the weapons of her foe, Holofernes, to carry out her virtuous victory. Similarly, missionaries must—as Desideri did when he was given time by the Lhasa lamas to prepare his debate in favor of the Church against *Dharma*—master the arguments of their foes so as to defeat pagan errors and diabolical rituals.

Such strains of mingled sympathy and disgust, given the refusal of his Tibetan interlocutors to accept Catholicism, may infuse this central section of his travelogue with poignancy for a modern reader. Those among whom he labored in the Himalayas were unwilling to accept Christ. In India, the mission field was harsh, but the Church found some success. Fluent in Persian and Hindustani, and later studying Tamil, Desideri spent years as a pastor in Delhi and then along the coast around Pondicherry; he writes movingly of the deprivations endured by his confreres in that Karnatic mission. He also recounts implacably how his prediction of a boy's death comes true after his parents neglect his catechizing. Zwilling remarks: "One can only speculate as to Desideri's frame of mind when he wrote this account" (*Mission* 737 n. 1190).

Desideri was summoned back to Rome in 1726 to advance the cause for canonization of a Jesuit martyr in India, Fr. João de Brito. He continued to press for the approval of the Jesuit claims to priority against charges by the Capuchin friars of the Society's "poaching" of the Tibetan mission far away. His ambitious report, as Pomplum explains, is designed for the edification of both Jesuit novices and readers of "relations" sent back by the Society's missionaries to audiences in Europe, who found in them inspiration and an appeal for donations.

Desideri combines both purposes in his conclusion, using in a richly baroque rhetoric of “extravagance.”

Fr. Ippolito Desideri’s massive work was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and the combination of Sweet’s assured translation and Zwilling’s attentive editing make a solid contribution to Tibetan studies, Jesuit missionizing, and early European travel reports from Asia. Shelved next to Pomplum’s compact study—as noted, the two texts cite each other—they provide crucial evidence for the importance of this pioneering scholar-priest. One leaves this figure from three centuries past with a curious speculation. What if the Jesuits had succeeded? How might we understand Tibetan Buddhism today if, indeed, the *Dharma* had survived only through Desideri’s record?