On the 20th of December 1984 there occurred the third birth centenary of "one of the most pious, fervent, enthusiastic missionaries which the Society of Jesus sent to Asia...Strong and enthusiastic in character...gifted with a lucid and sharp intelligence, an extremely insightful man...who succeeded in understanding intimately the culture of the place and seeing clearly its characteristics and conditions". The subject of such an eucharist is Ippolito Desideri, of Pistoia. The country, Tibet, at whose capital, Lhasa, 31-year old Ippolito arrived on 18 March 1716, less than four years after his ordination, abandoning it less than six years later.

In this short time this intense man penetrated into the heart of the Tibetan religion. He went much beyond noticing superficial resemblances between Lamaist and Catholic cults, but, as Tucci says, "he tried to understand Tibetan dogmatics, imbued with a philosophy that is very difficult to grasp. Thus there occurred on the roof of the world the meeting of St Thomas and of Tsongkhapa, both of whom had written a *Summa* of the theological bases of their own faith." 

The contribution of Desideri to missiology and Tibetology has been known for years. As Tucci says, "With Desideri Tibetan studies were born: he dedicated himself to read and meditate the principal works of Lamaism as nobody has done after him, perhaps not even we who are professionally dedicated to this type of research. It should not astonish if I said that the work of Desideri was ahead of his time: the secrets of the speculations of Mahayana Buddhism which began to be uncovered to technical orientalists in the last years of the nineteenth century are already found in the logical scholastic architecture of Desideri's *Relatio*."

2. G. Tucci, in *T'o-Ra-o*, p. 7.
3. G. Tucci in *Civiltà* and in *Le Missioni Cattoliche e la cultura dell'Oriente*, Rome 1943, as quoted in *Shin-Po* (see note 6) p. 26.
The bibliography about Desideri is sufficiently abundant, but mostly in Italian. All his Italian writings were published in *Il Nuovo Romusio* Vol. II, parts v, vi, vii, a total of nearly a thousand large pages. The only English book available is F. de Filippi, *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia S.J.*, 1712-1727. H. Hosten published a 200-page account, "Letters and other papers of Fr. Ippolito Desideri S.J., a missionary in Tibet (1713-1721)" in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1938, pp. 567-767. But while the Italian work and some English translation have thus been available to the public, his Tibetan works had remained so far hidden in MS form in the archives of Rome.

This lacuna is now filled by the Istituto Italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente (IsMEO). We have therefore the first two volumes of Tibetan Christian literature available to us, which represent the first evidence of an indepth contact between Buddhism and Christianity. Tucci, it is true, wonders whether in the Tibetan library where Desideri studied in Lhasa there were any Nestorian Christian works composed in that country. It is a possibility: there is evidence of a Nestorian Christian presence in Tibet from the 8th century A.D. We may recall that the early Jesuit ventures into that country were largely inspired by rumours coming down from Marco Polo and tales from contemporary travellers that spoke of a sizeable Christian community in Cathay, China or Tibet—nobody had any clear ideas about Asian geography! The long search for such reputed Christian communities was started a century

before Desideri by Antonio de Andrade S.J. (1580-1634), who entered Tibet in 1624. After him about a dozen Jesuits worked during the seventeenth century in the Western part of Tibet, around Tsaparang and near the Mansarovar lake where they reached following the pilgrimage routes in north U.P. A couple of others entered Tibet via Bhutan. But by 1642 the last missionary in the place died and subsequent efforts in that century to reopen the mission failed.

Ippolito, who had joined the Jesuits in 1700 was a student in the *Collegio Romano* when on August 14th 1712, aged 26, he wrote a letter to the Jesuit General, Fr Michelangelo Tamburini, asking fervently and insistently to be sent to India. The reply of the General granting the request came the next day, the 15th of August! He was ordained priest on the 28th of the same month and on the 27th September he left Rome for India. In Goa his destination was given to him: to try to reopen the Tibet mission. He was asked to go first to what was called the Great Tibet, covered in part by the present Ladakh, which he reached via Kashmir. When he and his companion and superior, Fr Emmanuel Freyre, reached the place they soon realised that that was not the country they wanted, and certainly not the old mission field of Andrade and his successors. Hence the two Jesuits took again the caravan route eastward, in the direction of Lhasa, the capital, which they reached eight months later, in March 1716. Freyre would at once return to India by another route leaving Desideri alone for his next six years of Tibetan study, dialogue and writing. Not quite alone, however: for a few months later a group of Capuchins, who had earlier already been in Lhasa, quite unexpectedly returned. I do not know how the situation is today, but an index of the chaotic state of affairs in the Roman church at the time is that the Jesuit General who had many men in India was totally ignorant in 1712 that the Congregation of Propaganda next door had entrusted the Tibetan mission to the Capuchins in 1703! The problems of jurisdiction in this situation will soon emerge and Desideri will be forced to leave Tibet in 1721, his mastery of the Tibetan language and Lamaist religion notwithstanding.

It had indeed been Desideri's first interest to learn the language thoroughly. Already in his journey from Ladakh to Lhasa he
studied it day and night. After his arrival, he will report years later.

I felt an incredible ardent in applying myself with every possible effort to the exercise of my task, especially to a well-founded study of the language. For this purpose from the day of my arrival to the last day of my stay in the kingdom I took to this rhythm of life which I kept for nearly six years, till the last day of my stay in that kingdom: to study from morning to sundown, and in order to do this more comfortably to delay my daily meal to the night, keeping my strength during the day (except on solemn and other occasional days) by drinking cia (tea), which prepared in the local manner is very nutritious.\(^8\)

In his “Manual for Missionaries” Desideri advises that they should learn both the popular and the erudite language. If they only study the former they will not be able to communicate religious truth. If they only study the erudite language they will not be able to communicate at all to ordinary people! Both are necessary.

**Tibetan Works of Desideri**

According to Toscano’s account there are five important Christian works in Tibetan written by Desideri. They are:

1. *T'o rains mun sei ni ma sar ba'i brda* (“The Dawn is the sign that the sun is about to rise which will dispel darkness”). We will speak about this in a moment.

2. *mGo skar gyi bla ma pi li da 'zes bya ba jis p'ul ba'i Bod kyi mk'as pa rams la skye ba sra ma dan ston pa i'ni kyi 'ta ba'i sgo nas zu ba b'zugs so* (“Questions about the theory of desire and of the past lives put to the sages of Tibet by the Christian lama named Ippolito”). This is a large volume on the question of reincarnation.

3. *Sems can dan c'o la sags pa rams kyi 'byun k'lu'i b'zugs so* (“Where there is contained the origin of living beings, things, etc.”). A theodicy on God the Creator.

4. *Ke ri se sti an gyi c'o lugs kyi sli kh po b'zugs so* (“Where there is contained the essence of the Christian religion”). We shall comment on this work presently.

5. An untitled volume dealing with “The Last End”.

Of these the first and the fourth volumes have been published now in the original Tibetan (photostat copy of Desideri’s beautiful MS) and annotated Italian translation. We will come back to them presently.

Besides these there are other drafts of works or writings of minor importance, viz.,

6. A second draft of the treatise on reincarnation.

7. Drafts of works published or fragments of Tibetan works.


9. A book of Christian prayers, traditional or specifically composed for the Tibetan mentality.\(^9\)

10. A collection of texts copied from a variety of Tibetan (Buddhist) sources. The collection shows the earnestness with which Desideri studied the religion and culture of his people.

11. A Tibetan poetic translation of a Letter of Pope Clement XI to “Jiin gir K'an, regent of Tibet fulfilling the commission of the king in charge of heaven” (i.e. the Chinese emperor, to whom Jiin gir K'an was related).\(^10\)


Unfortunately there are three important works of Desideri that have been lost: a translation of *Lam rim c'eu mo* by Tson k'ha pa, the most important philosopher in the history of Tibet, who wrote this work as a compendium of the Lamaist religion. Secondly, a Dictionary of religious and philosophical terms, with perhaps a grammar attached to it; and finally a Treatise about desire.

**The Tibetan Background**

To place the literary output of Desideri in its context a few words must be said about the Tibetan religion as he found it. There were two levels: first there was the popular religiosiety, the

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10. Appendix I of *Il T'o-Rain*, pp. 275-82 gives the Latin original of the letter, a facsimile of the Tibetan text, its transcription in Roman characters, and Italian translations of both the Latin text and the Tibetan version.
original bon po religion basically shamanic, centered on the spirits and their propitiation and propounding the use of black magic.\textsuperscript{11} Once Buddhism enters Tibet in the 7th century, this form of religiosity is coloured by Buddhist concepts. The Buddhist tradition that entered the country was basically tantric, the vajrayāna which had already fed on the same ancient shamanic tradition. The great and enigmatic figure of this tradition is Padmasambhava, called in the 8th century from Kashmir, a home of tantrism. The school of Padmasambhava represents that of "the ancient ones", the rōn ma po.

A reform of this rather strange form of Buddhism took place already in the 10th century and above all in the 15th century, under the influence of the great philosopher and mystic Tsön k'a pa (1357-1419), one of the greatest figures of Buddhism, who was himself influenced by Nāgārjuna. He established the sect of the dge bzhugs po ("model of virtue"), restrained magic practices, forbade alcohol and meat, re-established celibacy and promoted serious studies. The Dalai Lama belongs to this great tradition of the higher religiosity of Tibet. It is popularly known as the sect of the "Yellow Hats", to distinguish it from the older "Red Hats".

Of the two books of Desideri presented here, the first addresses itself more directly to the older school, while the second, a more polished work, is especially appropriate for the reformed school.

The T'o-Rais

The full title of this work has been given above (p. 29). The 128-page work was meant to show the difference between the religion of Desideri and that of the monks with whom he was studying. Desideri first composed the work in Italian in July-August 1716 and prepared it for translation into Tibetan verse. From September to December 1716 he composed the work in Tibetan and on the 6th of January 1717 it was solemnly presented to the King (regent) with an introductory letter. The whole court and many monks were present at the ceremony of presentation. The book comes as a dialogue in 18 chapters (traditional number in India) between "A Christian Priest who explains the pure and true religion" and "the learned man who seeks the pure Truth". Desideri himself gives us in Italian a summary of the ideas of the book:

The matter of this book was this:
1. first to show that the principle so common among the infidels that each one can be saved in his law is false. For this we must establish this most important truth, that the Law that leads to heaven and to obtaining eternal salvation is only one.
2. In the second place I declare the qualities and notes that must be found in the true Law of salvation and which every man lover of truth and desirous of his true good and of his eternal happiness must fully apply himself to discover.
3. In the third place I propose and explain the various signs and distinctive marks by which a man may easily discern the true Law from the false among so many, so different and so contradictory laws that are found in the world.\textsuperscript{12}

The Sāhin Po

We have given the full title and translation of the work under no. 4, on p. 29. The work is found in 50 folia written on both sides. If the first work of Desideri was basically a work of apologetics, a propaedeutic De vera Religione, this one is a systematic exposition of the Christian doctrine, but explained directly to the Tibetans, and indeed addressed more specifically to the higher Buddhist tradition. Hence we find in it a heavy stress on proving the existence of a Being who is the Self-existing, uncaused cause of all that is. To this is dedicated the first part of the work. Desideri uses eight arguments to convince his Buddhist friends of the need of a First Cause:

1. The principle of causality: the impossibility of an unending chain, or that an unending road cannot lead from India to Lhassa.
2. The principle of causality: the Buddhist principle of dependent origination demands an independent cause.
3. The relative demands the Absolute, the contingent demands the Necessary Being, the dependent demands the Independent Reality.
4. There is a natural desire to know the highest and unlimited Reality and the object of this higher knowledge cannot but be the Absolute.

\textsuperscript{11} A useful article on this tradition is "Problems of Central Asian and Siberian Shamanism" by Manabu Wada, in Nusum 30 (1969) 215-239.

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Petech, Il Nuovo Romuoso 11, Part V, p. 193, as quoted by Toscano, N T'ou-lai, 64-65. Another translation in De Filippi, p. 99. We give in an appendix the colophons of the 18 chapters as given in Toscano's translation.
5. Authentic birth of a living being demands that it did not exist before (and therefore a Creator is necessary).

6. Authentic birth being a real beginning, without the Absolute Creator there would be no reality now.

7. Reality goes by pairs of opposites: contingent—Necessary, relative—Absolute, impermanent—Permanent, just as at everyday level everything goes by dialectic of opposites.

8. The "aggregate" of things requires a cause outside itself.

Desideri ends this part by drawing a circumference and a point at its center: this illustrates that the circumference depends on its center, but the center does not depend on the circumference: it "exists" as a mere point, whether the circumference is drawn or not.

The second part of the work consists of a dialogue between "him who wants to know the essence of wisdom" and the teacher. The dialogue gives first a definition of what is a Christian:

Christians are those persons who practice and consider as a jewelled crown the spotless religion and faith which has been taught personally by the sublime and only Saviour, Jesus Christ: they have full trust in him as the supreme Saviour, without equal."14

This religion is spelled out in three parts, the three aspects of the faith necessary for a Christian:

a. "the faith to be believed"—here Desideri gives a theology and the trinitarian teaching, gives a translation and explanation of the Apostles' creed and presents the "word of the Wise Person" (Jesus Christ) as the means to make faith stable.

b. "the faith that makes hope possible"—in explaining which the author gives a translation and explanation of the Our Father, and a translation of the Hail Mary.

c. "the faith that produces joy in a pure and resplendent heart (i.e. charity)—in developing which Desideri gives a translation and explanation of the ten commandments, the commandments of the church and the seven sacraments.

13. For Buddhist thought everything is composed of the "aggregates" (skandhas).
   The fact that everything is composed is a basic tenet of Buddhist philosophy.

Concluding reflections

The theology expressed in these Tibetan works is less important for us. It is clearly Desideri's theology as received in the lecture rooms of the Roman College, exclusive, not yet open to the mystery of God's revelation throughout history and in various traditions. For all his sympathy and love for Tibet Desideri is in no doubt that he is sent to preach the "true Law" to people who wrongly think that any way is good... He is even harder on Tibetan religion than on others: while he thinks other religions, apart from Christianity, are founded by men, he finds Lamaism founded by the devil himself. We should indeed remember the stress on demons characteristic of the popular religiosity of the country.

Apart from his theological aprioris, we find in Desideri a mind extremely keen in understanding the subtler forms of Buddhist doctrine, a spirit in constant dialogue with the believers of another faith and a man able to express himself in modes characteristic of the Indian and Eastern tradition. Even through the various translations one can notice expressions, modes of thought, illustrations which are from the texture of ancient Indian cultural life. The examples are often oriental, the style of constant repetitions of adjectives very characteristic of Buddhist religious literature, the language, we are told, less polished in his first book, much improved in the second one presented here.

There is another aspect to the history of Desideri: he is a victim of ecclesiastical quarrels about jurisdiction. It is not the purpose of these pages to study this problem which is so complex: some of the documents found in the appendixes of the books we have presented, so far unpublished, may throw some light on the concrete historical problem at the time. One cannot but shed tears at the thought that the work of so brilliant and promising a man should have been cut short because the disciples of Jesus did not agree to love one another as they were telling the world to do.