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# Jesuit On The Roof Of The World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission To Tibet



## Synopsis

*Jesuit on the Roof of the World* is the first full-length study in any language of Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), a Jesuit explorer and missionary who traveled in Tibet from 1715 to 1721. Based on close readings of a wide range of primary sources in Tibetan, Italian, and Latin, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World* follows Desideri's journey across the great Western deserts of Tibet, his entry into the court of the Mongol chieftain Lhazang Khan, and his flight across Eastern Tibet during the wars that shook Tibet during the early-eighteenth century. While telling of these harrowing events, Desideri relates the dramatic encounter between his Jesuit philosophy and the scholasticism of the Geluk monks; the personal conflict between his own Roman Catholic beliefs and his appreciation of Tibet religion and culture; and the travails of a variety of colorful characters whose political intrigues led to the invasion of Zā nghar Mongols of 1717 and the establishment of the Chinese protectorate in 1720. As the Tibetans fought among themselves, the missionary waged his own war against demons, sorcerers, and rival scholastic philosophers. Towering over all in the mind of the missionary was the "fabulous idol" Avalokitesvara and its embodiment in the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso. In describing his spiritual warfare against the Tibetan "pope," the missionary offers a unique glimpse into theological problem of the salvation of non-Christians in early modern theology; the curious-and highly controversial-appeal of Hermetic philosophy in the Asian missions; the political underbelly of the Chinese Rites Controversy; and the persistent European fascination with the land of snows.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The strength of this book is in the immense detail that goes into situating Desideri in his cultural, historical and theological context. It also gives a critical reading of his reports against other documents from the time, showing that the way he presents things is not always exact. All of this was very helpful and added greatly to my understanding of the Jesuit missionary. However, having been interested in Desideri for nearly three decades, I already know the story. The odd thing about him is that while everyone goes on about how engaging was his dialogue with Tibetan Buddhism, no one gives you details to decide for yourself. This book, for example, while the reviews and description bring his story up as a "seminal moment in...interreligious dialogue" with "the first Christian intellectual to engage Tibetan Buddhism on its own terms" showing a "dramatic encounter between [Desideri's] Jesuit philosophy and the scholasticism of the Geluk monks" leaves us nearly completely in the dark about the details, yet again. I find this typical of discussions about Desideri; even English translations of his own writings leave out these sections. What this book does cover, instead, are Christian theological issues and the details are about doctrinal and procedural debates between different Christian groups, predominantly the Jesuits and the Capuchins. We are repeatedly brought to the door of Desideri's opinions about why he disagreed with Buddhism, but are not really let inside. More than once we are drawn into the fact that he greatly disagreed with the idea of rebirth, enough so that he wrote a large document on the subject, but we are not told any details of why he disagreed with it or what arguments he put forward against it. The only hint, in another context, is that he felt the Dalai Lamas used it as a social control mechanism. Surely there has to be more to it than that. Again, more than once we are drawn in to Desideri's study with Buddhists in monastic settings, where it is clearly shown that he was reading the right books and had a special interest in Madhyamaka, even though he disagreed with aspects of it. Other than that part of the disagreement centered on the denial of a Creator God by Madhyamika authors, we are given no idea of the details of this incredibly interesting worldview encounter. Pomplun knows the details enough to mention, more than once, that Desideri had some strange ideas about Madhyamaka, but, again, no details. And all this in a book with a chapter titled "Tibetan Religion in Theological Perspective," which is one of the main reasons I bought it. Readers can be excused for starting to wonder if the emperor has no clothes. At one point, Pomplun notes that, despite Desideri's claim that many Tibetan intellectuals came to read his refutation of Buddhist doctrines, there is no reference to this in any contemporary Tibetan accounts. Is it because they didn't find anything of real substance? ;) Someone needs to write a book on what Desideri actually wrote on the subject and the arguments he used. Perhaps Michael Sweet's upcoming book or the one Pomplun says he wants to write next on Desideri's Tibetan documents, will finally fill the gap for

those of us who neither read Tibetan or Italian nor have easy access to the journals where some of this work is starting to appear. Either way, if none of that is your concern, than this book will not disappoint your quest to understand Desideri in a more thorough manner. It reveals the man at his best and worst, as well as disbanding a number of romantic myths about both him and Tibetan culture. If you have any interest in Desideri, it is rich in historical detail and well worth your time. Each of the six chapters is a self-contained unit focusing on a major issue in his life, picked up in chronological order. We are given a detailed examination of his Jesuit background, the literary context of his writing style, a general overview of how he situated Tibetan Buddhism in relationship to Catholicism, his understanding of the Tibetan politics during his visit, his theological disputes with other Christian groups, and how all of this fits into the European cultural context of his time. By the time you are done the introduction, you will clearly see that Pomplun is not going to get into the issues that interested me. Too bad the preview cuts off before then.

I first heard about Desideri in my summer Buddhist Studies course in Nepal. In the early eighteenth century, he entered Nepal, and was the first missionary to take up extended residence there. (Others had tried, but even killed by disease or the hardship of trekking the Himalayas.) Sadly, much Desideri scholarship and sources are not available in English. Michael J. Sweet and Leonard Zwilling only came out with their mammoth translation of his journals\* in 2010, the year this historian's biography was released. Pomplun's website reveals that he is currently working on a book-length study of Desideri's theology and translating his Tibetan works into English (which has never been done). Judging from this book, I have good reason to be excited about these works. The chapter on Desideri's young life was perhaps the least interesting. Born in Italy, he entered the Jesuits at a young age. At this time, the missions to Asia and the Americas were the peak aspiration of young Jesuits across Europe. Many applied to their superiors for the privilege of this life; few were chosen. Accounts of violent deaths at the hands of natives (particular in Japan and the Americas) only increased this furor, as novices projected the martyrdom fantasies of early Christianity - a fast track into heaven - onto the exotic faraway lands of the New World and the Orient. In 1712, Desideri was granted permission to go to Tibet. His trek from Italy to India and up to Tibet took three years. Settling in Lhasa, he found a patron in Tibet's ruler, Lhazang Khan, and rapidly applied himself to learning the Tibetan language. In no time at all he was composing Tibetan catechisms and refutations of erroneous Tibetan doctrines, such as reincarnation and the lack of God. Yet this bright period was short-lived. Within a few years Khan was deposed by invading forces, and Desideri was forced to go into hiding. Simultaneously he was vying with the Capuchin

friars, who after arriving a year after him told him that the Pope had given Tibet to their order and not the Jesuits. (This kind of competition between religious orders, with the competing theologies of missions each brought to the foreign land, also happened in Japan and China.) These Capuchins eventually got him expelled from Tibet. Forced to go home in 1721, Desideri was forever embittered, feeling that his talents and calling were being wasted by a relentless bureaucracy. Yet Desideri was not idle back in Europe. There he published his accounts of Tibet. At this time, missionary accounts were bestsellers in Europe, and the line between sensational storytelling and historical facticity was often blurred. Historians unable to corroborate events he details or locate people he mentions suspect that he may have invented details to bolster the popularity and funding of the missions, and comparisons with his private letters show he omitted some of the hardships and political machineries he faced in order to make the Tibet mission more appealing for young priests. Most fascinating to me is the final chapter on these published accounts. Connecting to my other recent readings, Pomplun details how theologians confronted with massive numbers of people who had never heard of Christ had to reformulate the question of salvation outside Christendom. Yet this modern sensibility was part and parcel with Desideri's blatantly confrontational views of the Tibetan religion. He saw the Dalai Lama as a Satanic Anti-Pope, described Tibet in ways evocative of a circle of Dante's hell, and interpreted Tibetan texts as pointing toward fulfillment in Christ: "Called to Tibet for the greater glory of God, the Jesuit missionary met a magnanimous king, wicked ministers, and all manners of black magic. In doing so, he found his position not merely confirmed in the teachings of the Catholic Church but prophesied in the Tibetan tales themselves. I like to imagine that as he followed an ancient sorcerer's footsteps across Tibet, Ippolito Desideri came to think of himself as a second Padmasambava, locked in battle with demons for the land of snows, and intending to repeat his rival's great feats for the Roman Catholic Church." (196) Not only did Desideri contribute to the Orientalist vogue in Europe, the simultaneous demonization and idealization (but always exotification) of Asia, but also laid the grounds for much modern scholarship. His account of Tibet is heralded by Tibetologists as the beginning of their field. Pomplun has written the best kind of academic book: a concise, well-written study both edifying for the historian and accessible for the public. I look forward to his future work on this Jesuit and his mystique.\* Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.. The whole thing is 795 pages, including a 62-page introduction and 80 pages of footnotes and bibliography.

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