



PROJECT MUSE®

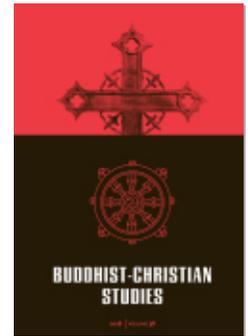
Editors' Introduction

Carol S. Anderson, Thomas Cattoi

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 38, 2018, pp. vii-x (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2018.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709166>

Editors' Introduction

October 14–15, 2017, the city of Pistoia in Tuscany hosted an international symposium to honor the legacy of Fr. Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), the first Jesuit missionary to Tibet who engaged in sustained interreligious dialogue with local Buddhists and whose extraordinary command of the local language even enabled him to author Christian theological treatises in Classical Tibetan. Desideri's name is perhaps not as well known to the educated public as those of his confreres—and compatriots—Matteo Ricci and Roberto De Nobili, whose missionary efforts marked an important moment in the history of cultural and intellectual exchange between Western Christianity and the cultures and religious traditions of Asia. Desideri's achievement, however, is no less impressive, and his intellectual legacy as a pioneer in the field of comparative theology and interreligious dialogue is gradually becoming better known to the English-speaking public thanks to a number of translations of his works that have appeared in print over the last ten years.

Desideri's early life and education followed the usual trajectory of Jesuit missionaries from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Born into an aristocratic family from the city of Pistoia, in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, Desideri joined the Society of Jesus at the age of sixteen and embarked on the usual Jesuit educational curriculum at the Collegio Romano, which included extensive study of the theology of Thomas Aquinas, but also of mathematics, geography, and the natural sciences. In 1712, he left Italy for India, having been chosen by Michelangelo Tamburini, the 14th General Superior of the Jesuit Order, to reestablish the Jesuit mission in Tibet. While a number of members of the Society of Jesus had visited Tibet in the seventeenth century—we know of the journeys of Antonio de Andrade, Estavão Caella, and Albert d'Orville—there had been no stable Jesuit presence in the country since 1642, and the Capuchins had taken control of the local mission. After spending some time in Goa, Desideri set out for Tibet in September 1714, leaving Delhi in the company of the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel Freyre and reaching Leh in Ladakh in June 1715. From Leh, Desideri traveled another eight hundred miles through the Tibetan plateau during the winter, finally reaching Lhasa on March 18, 1716. Freyre would soon return to Delhi, but Desideri remained in Tibet until April 28, 1721, when, in obedience to instructions from Rome, he set out for India again. The indefatigable Jesuit would remain in India for another five years, until he was summoned back by his superiors.

Desideri reached Rome in January 1728 and spent his last few years pleading with Vatican authorities to grant official control over the Tibetan missions to the Jesuit order. Unfortunately, Desideri's efforts were in vain. He would die in Rome in 1733, at the age of forty-eight, without returning to Tibet or even publishing the account (*Relazione*) of his travels.

Desideri's *Relazione* was eventually published by the Italian scholar Luciano Petech as part of his anthology *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (Italian missionaries in Tibet and Nepal), parts V–VII (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1952–1954). An excellent English translation by Michel Sweet with an extensive introduction and critical apparatus by Leonard Zwilling was published by Wisdom Publications in 2010 under the title *Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri S.J.* Trent Pomplun's *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet* (Oxford University Press, 2009) also offers a full-length study of Desideri's travel and works. More recently, the interest of scholars has turned to the publication of Desideri's Tibetan works. In the 1980s, Fr. Giuseppe Toscano, SX published Italian versions of four of Desideri's Tibetan works: *Tho rangs* (The dawn), *Snying po* (The essence of Christian doctrine), 'Byun K'uns (The origin of living beings and of all things), and the *Nes Legs* (The highest good and the final end). In 2017, under the title *Dispelling the Darkness: A Jesuit's Quest for the Soul of Tibet*, Harvard University Press published Donald S. Lopez Jr. and Thupten Jinpa's English translation and commentary of the *Snying po* and of some excerpts of Desideri's longest Tibetan work, the impressively titled *Mgo skar gyi bla ma i po li do zhes by aba yis phul ba'i bod kyi mkhas pa rnams la skeye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba'i sgo nas zhu ba* (*Inquiry concerning the Doctrines of Previous Lives and Emptiness, Offered to the Scholars of Tibet by the Star Head Lama called Ippolito*, usually known as *Inquiry*; a review of Lopez and Jinpa's volume is included in the review section of this issue). While an English translation of Toscano's Italian versions of the *Tho rangs* and the 'Byun K'uns was published by Guido Stucco in 2015, Trent Pomplun's translation of Desideri's Tibetan original works is forthcoming.

For the first time, the 2017 conference brought together the international community of Desideri scholars in the city of the Jesuit's birth. *Buddhist-Christian Studies* is glad to devote the first half of this issue to a selection of the conference's papers; some of them were delivered in Italian and were then translated into English by the journal's former editor Francis Tiso, himself a Desideri scholar and enthusiast to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude. The papers discuss Desideri's contribution to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue (Pomplun, Cattoi, Tiso); the study of Tibetan art, history, and customs (Polichetti, Sweet, Zwilling, Gasbarro); the exploration of Asia and his missionary work (Attisani, Bray, Cantile, Colas); as well as his reception by later scholars (De Rossi Filibeck). Most importantly, the editors of *Buddhist-Christian Studies* wish to thank the Pistoian independent scholar Enzo Gualtierio Bargiacchi, who has devoted his life to making Desideri's work and legacy better known, and without whose tireless efforts the 2017 conference would never have taken place.

The remaining articles included in the 2018 issue open up new ground in the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. The first set of articles was originally presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Society for Buddhist Christian Studies (SBCS), during a session designed to honor the work of James Fredericks and his legacy to the history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Aihokhai, Enriquez, and Habito each ground their articles in the topic of friendship, but each of them takes that theme in different directions. Aihokhai takes the subjects of friendship and liturgy from Fredericks's work and draws out various implications, advocating for greater inter-liturgical exchange, while also calling for a more complete understanding of the role of interreligious friendship as a motivation for comparative theology. On a similar note, Habito discusses the role of friendship as the springboard for Fredericks's interreligious work, but also as a topic that Fredericks explores in his writings. Hugh Nicholson delves into an intimately related topic—the different types of commitment that can inform interreligious work—and points out that what distinguishes Fredericks's dialogical model of comparative theology from non-theological approaches to the study of religion is that the former “works with representations of the compared traditions that presuppose the continuity of tradition,” as well as an individual rootedness in it. Enriquez observes how understanding interreligious friendship as a spiritual practice leads her to see that “such dialogue and friendships can also be seen as part of the cultivation of one's sacramental imagination, of ways of seeing the world as mediating God and God's presence in diverse and surprising ways.” As a whole, these papers offer an intersecting set of insights into Fredericks's work that open up new questions about the phenomenology of friendship and comparative theology.

As editors of the journal, we are also pleased to offer a set of comparative essays that we grouped under the title “Bodhisattvas, Images, and Mirrors: Rethinking Buddhist-Christian Conversations.” In the first of these essays, Jiani Fan explores the notion of the mirror as a metaphor in Chinese Buddhism and early mysticism, using the work of Meister Eckhart and various mirror-related metaphors drawn from Chinese Buddhist traditions. Peter Feldmeier draws our attention to some mistaken approaches in our thinking about bodhisattvas—sometimes conceived as beings having chosen to delay full enlightenment—and enters into a dialogue with Meister Eckhardt so as to open up new ways of understanding the notion of Buddhahood. R. Todd Godwin offers a sophisticated reflection on the interaction between Chinese officials and East Syrian Christians in the seventh and eighth centuries, exploring the possibility that the “image” (*xiang* 像) offered by these Christians to the Chinese emperor and mentioned in the Xi'an stele of 781 might have been a Byzantine Christian icon with esoteric, tantric, Buddhist influences. Finally, John Becker draws our attention to the ontological assumptions that undergird most instances of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, calling for a greater attention to the context of the earliest Buddhist traditions that were characterized by a lack of ontological claims.

The next three papers touch on the topic of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and spiritual practice. The first was presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the SBCS by Charlotte C. Radler, in which she explores how the *prajñā* eye sees; her essay

brings theologians as diverse as Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, and Margaret Farley into conversation with Mahāyāna teachings. Peter Tyler explores the practice of *oración mental* in the Iberian schools of the sixteenth-century “Golden Age,” bringing into conversation Spanish mystics Jiménez de Cisneros and Teresa of Avila and the Buddhist notion of *sati*, or mindfulness. Ralph H. Craig III reviews the theological anthropology of Nichiren Daishonin, taking the writings of Anthony Pinn as his springboard to “do theology differently.” Asking how Nichiren Daishonin might define what it means to be “Buddhistically human,” he engages in a conversation with Karl Rahner, US Hispanic Catholic theologian Miguel Diaz, feminist theologian Jennifer Beste, and womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland.

The final set of papers explore the interface between Buddhist-Christian dialogue and issues of gender and race. Bee Scherer takes us on an exploration of an inclusive vision of the theology offered by the figure of Tārā. Carol S. Anderson and Rebecca J. Manring unpack assumptions about gender in early Pāli Buddhism and Christianity, toward a more accurate location of the term in Buddhist-Christian studies. Wioleta Polinska explores the ways in which mindfulness meditation might be employed as a remedy for “white ignorance,” and in so doing finds resources in Buddhist-Christian dialogue that white Buddhists may use as a means to explore our own ignorance of race and racial disparities. Finally, Pamela Ayo Yetunde delves into different Buddhist conceptions, looking at the ways that African American Buddhist same-sex-loving women see non-self as a form of “relational interdependence” that is distinct from other white insight meditation practitioners. Taken as a whole, we are excited by the range of papers and reviews published in this issue.

Carol S. Anderson
Kalamazoo College

Thomas Cattoi
*Jesuit School of Theology
at Santa Clara University
and Graduate Theological Union*