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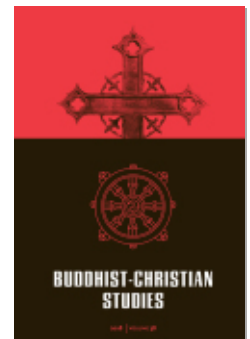
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# Ippolito Desideri: Anthropologist of Modernity

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*(English translation from the Italian by Francis Tiso)*

## ABSTRACT

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that “from the scientific point of view, missionaries gathered everything that was worth preserving” of the Otherness—and about the Otherness—that they encountered. This is a valid reason to reassess the missionaries’ legacy as the first anthropologists of modernity, from the objective and historical point of view no less than from a subjective and existential perspective. In this regard, Desideri’s scientific and human experience is almost paradigmatic. Anthropologists seek to comprehend Otherness objectively bringing into conversation the cultural assumptions of one’s own culture, which are often viewed as universal, and those of other civilizations, bringing back to the West—often unwittingly—values and behavioral models that are unknown and would otherwise be virtually unthinkable. As far as this is possible, they strive to find shared principles and common assumptions, despite the resulting challenges for theological and philosophical reflection; often, however, they cannot go beyond a mere practical co-existence in the sphere of everyday life. Subjectively, anthropologists embody a “crisis of presence,” both physically dangerous and spiritually devastating, through a journey into the unexplored world of life and thought encompassing the adventurous and fascinating movement toward the new culture, as well as the paradoxically much harsher and disturbing return journey. In Desideri’s mission, this anthropological experience is also permeated by a Christian hope for salvation that is left behind amidst the “sad tropics” of life and thought.

**KEYWORDS:** anthropology, Buddhism, Christianity, civilization, comparison, compatibility, Desideri, missions, modernity, religion, Tibet.

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that “on the scientific plane, missionaries truly gathered everything that was worth preserving” with regard to otherness (*alterité*). Missionaries are for this reason the first anthropologists of Western modernity: Not without problematic aspects, they voyage across the differences among persons in the search for

a logic that could make the contingent events of social life seem compatible among themselves and with the structures of a theological worldview that is the rationale of their thought. The journey is the adventure of an entire life dedicated to the quest to save humanity, including also a re-ordering of the world in Christian terms capable of making faith in one God compatible with the diversity of human relations and those between humans and nature. Thus, we have the need to voyage across not only the various civilizations and their modes of behavior, but also to enter in some way into their imagination so as to transcend the habits of thought established in each human "world." In this way the "tropics" of life become occasions in which thought is lacerated and the anthropological journey among differences is transformed into a crisis of presence to the point of attempting to draft a global model capable of reconciling the universality of reason with the fragmentation of life, in this way setting in motion a ritual of scientific and existential salvage.

The adventure of every missionary is obviously first of all a Christian expression of the way to salvation that, nevertheless, at least for the historian who wishes to reconstruct the formation and development of relations among civilizations, has great anthropological value: It helps to sketch out the pluricultural perspective of Western modernity. Without the work and the wisdom of the missionaries, often questioned and frequently leading to unexpected outcomes, the thought and the imagination of modernity would have labored long to redefine continuously the boundaries of its own image of the world and of the limits of that which can be thought, even apart from the question of religion. It is not accidental that Western modernity, since the discovery of the New World, finds itself constrained to know about far-off peoples and lands, and moreover to elaborate a correspondingly diverse geography of the mind and a more immediate anthropology of the non-places of the imagination. In the same way, even the most orthodox of missionaries found themselves needing to take into account the multiplicity of the practices of life and above all the paradox of non-theistic ethics that are not necessarily completely incompatible with the earthly pilgrimage of Christian faith.

In this aspect, Ippolito Desideri has something of importance to say to any vertical orthodoxy of religion and theology in the name of a horizontal orthopraxis that first came to characterize the missionary spirit and later the ways of the anthropologist. His experience in fact was not exclusively ethnographical, because ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss writes, "corresponds to the first stages in research-observation and description, field work. The typical ethnographic study consists of a monograph dealing with a social group small enough for the author to be able to collect most by personal observation."<sup>1</sup> Desideri does not stop at a description, but opens up the problematic aspects and digs deeply; his personal experiences are ever the fruit of an existential/intellectual encounter, enriched by comparative reflection. His way of knowing is not only ethnological, if ethnology "represents a first step toward synthesis. Without excluding direct observation, it leads toward a conclusion sufficiently comprehensive to preclude, or almost to preclude, their being based solely on first-hand information. . . . In all cases, ethnology includes ethnography as its first step and is an extension of it."<sup>2</sup> Desideri continually compares his ethnological experience

with the religion and the science of Western modernity, often running the risk of questioning, implicitly or explicitly, the principles and rules of meaning generally held to be universal. For him, the existential richness and the life-practices of various peoples must stand as responses to a religious/universal economy of life, thus coming to terms with a general logic of thought, certainly governed by theology, but with vast philosophical and scientific implications that anthropology cannot neglect.

Desideri is above all an anthropologist, because as a good missionary he aspires, as does every social or cultural anthropologist, “to discover *the whole man*, as revealed in the one case through his *works* and in the other through *representation*.”<sup>3</sup> The theological consciousness of the missionaries privileges representation, but their co-existence with otherness obliges them to take into consideration the practices of social life, to the point of elaborating a total anthropology on the existential level of relations and on the intellectual level of debate. It is not an accident that Desideri continually reflects on the direction, on the perspective, and on the meaning of the adventure into “otherness” that for a missionary coincides in every way with the pilgrimage of life; the discovery of radical diversity is only the beginning of a process of intellectual and scientific investigation, as well as a particular existential experience.

Desideri is in a way constrained to doubt his own abstract theological certainties and/or to rethink them in terms based on the relationships among persons even when historically determined and anthropologically arbitrary. A “crisis of presence” both personal and intellectual seems inevitable, obviously involving on the one hand the institutional governance of the Church and on the other the universal value of the Christian vision of the world, whether in Asia or in Europe.

On the other hand, the conflict between the religion that the Church would wish to announce as being the only vision of the world that is both possible and reasonable, and the plurality of the societies that claim their own historical specificity and autonomous system of thought characterizes not only the anthropological experience of the missionaries, but the entire modern development of relations among civilizations.

The grand process of evangelization is historically speaking the first globalization of the world, and even in this the missionaries were the first anthropologists. Their point of departure is always Christian Europe and the universal vocation of the Church:

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go forth to all nations and make them my disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. And know that I will always be with you for all time until the end of the world. Matthew 28:18–20 (see also Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:19–23)

That which is specific to modernity is the new anthropological universality that subjects even this mission to systematic comparison with the radical diversity encountered in the New World and in the great civilizations of Asia, seeking for a universal logic of both faith and reason in this comparison. From an anthropological perspective, it is possible to analyze the mission as a continual search for compatibility among

the various civilizations with a Christian vision of the world, understood theologically as universal and indispensable. This vision is theologically one of right and anthropologically of fact, a hierarchy of life and thought that posits and imposes religion as the first priority of every civilization, subordinating to itself all other canons of social life, precisely because the relations between God and humans must—and do—govern the relations among persons and between humans and nature. This social and symbolic model of the missions is universalized because it is the unique European cosmology at the origin of modernity and it was this vision that empowered Europe's relations with the New World, with all the political and social consequences that this entailed.

Desideri's experience reflects a completely different cultural environment, both within Western modernity as well as in terms of relations with other civilizations. By Desideri's time the Christian view of the world was paradigmatic only for the Church, since European societies had evolved political priorities that governed the relations among persons, and scientific criteria that defined relations with the natural order, whereas the relations between God and humans were menaced by militant atheism on both the political and intellectual levels. At the same time, the missionaries had encountered many difficulties in India,<sup>4</sup> China,<sup>5</sup> and Japan,<sup>6</sup> as the Jesuits of Desideri's time knew quite well. The great civilizations of Asia are complex, not only on the linguistic and cultural level, but above all demand a special "calling" and a large dose of anthropological understanding.

Their pluricultural process of civilization and their "atheism" awaken a sense of crisis in the theological and philosophical presuppositions of European culture. On the one hand their social, scientific, and political development was competitive with that of the West, on the other, they had elaborated perspectives on a civilization without God, that is, something impossible and unthinkable for the Christian imagination. Catholic universalism was in crisis in the West both as a vision of the world and as a model for social life. The new anthropological universality subjects the missions to a systematic comparison with the radical diversity encountered in the New World and in the great civilizations of Asia.

The theological intransigence of the Church was barely able to hold its own and the missionary, especially in Asia, had to invent anthropological strategies capable in some way not only of preserving the universality of the Catholic religion, but also the logic of Western thought.

Thus, it was opportune to make a virtue of necessity and to adapt oneself to the contingencies of history and to the arbitrariness of cultures, entering the competition with the patrimony of knowledge (including theology) so as to discover new horizons in the variety of worldviews.

In this the missionaries participated in the great anthropological project of Western reason, from the discovery of the New World to the era of the Enlightenment: to seek for universal principles and rules, at least on the practical level, so as to hold back the implosion into entropy and relativism of the newly conceived globalization as well as of reason (in Western terms) as applied to life and its intellectual constraints. The missionary must remake himself completely as an anthropologist to save not only the universality of religion and the catholicity of the Church, but also the worldview

of the West and its value as civilization. Religion and civilization are not accidentally the fundamental categories of the worldview of the Catholic Reformation and of Jesuit missionary praxis. An anthropological reading of these fundamentals helps to understand both the universal perspective of theology and of the institutional Church, as well as the practical contingencies of relations among civilizations. Religion is not only the cultural code that regulates the relations between God and humans, but also a structural law<sup>7</sup> that governs the relations among persons and between persons and nature. Consequently, for the Catholic missionary, every civilization depends on religion, every worldview reproduces in some way the transcendent principles, each social rule is necessarily connected to a ritual capable of making present and efficacious the action and the grace of God.

Civilization as a complex of social regulations and practices of life, obviously tied and hierarchically subordinated to religion, had been elaborated for quite some time through the theory and practice of missions in the New World. José de Acosta lays out the coordinates starting from the [West] Indies in terms of natural history (the relations between humans and nature) and moral history (relations among humans), that is, usages and customs (mores), that depend in some way on the system of beliefs. Idolatry connected with “savagery” is in fact the re-positioning and translation into the wilderness of the Christian-Western relationship between religion and civilization.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the Jesuit “reductions” were the institutional and working exemplars of the theory. There is no evangelizing mission without a process of civilization building, based on the intention of finding theoretical convergences and compatibility in and with the experience of living with a cultural “other.” For the missionaries, and above all for the training and anthropological experience of the Jesuits, religion is a principle both immanent and operative by which the world is ordered, that sees being and moral duties to be in relationship—rigorously set up in a hierarchical system—between God and humans, among human beings, and between humans and nature.

Religion is concerned therefore with the imagination of the possible and the thinkable, of the duties of an individual life and of collective history. Immediately subordinated to religion, the category of civilization includes political institutions and legal codes, down to the models of behavior in social life. Thus, not only may dharma be translated as religion, but so also all the cultural patterns that posit and impose systems of a general order of existence as priorities and hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> In this way, both Confucianism and Buddhism become paradoxically “religions without God” not only for the missionaries, but also for all of Christian civilization. Desideri shares this vision of the world and works within this epistemological perspective: He classifies “otherness” in this way with the widest categories that he has at his disposal, and he structures his reports along these lines. He frequents on the one hand rulers and princesses in order to understand the way social relations are governed; on the other hand, he consults monks and experts of knowledge to enter into the imaginative world of radical “otherness”: the “lama from the West” correctly understands the practices of life and he is granted recognition in the role of a mediator between two civilizations.

For a missionary it is a real anthropological success (as for Ricci in China), due to the hard labor of intellectual research and existential commitment, to overcome the linguistic difficulties that entail recognition of the absence of semantic compatibilities. It also requires overcoming the logistical challenges of daily life as much as having the ability to confront a kind of religiosity that cannot be reduced to the principles of Christian theology or Western philosophy. This existentially anthropological vocation continually subjects the category of "religion" to systematic doubt, involving the "human" and "sociohistorical" modes of dealing with it, as well as its existential value for daily life. The missionary's openness to otherness produces unforeseen effects of individual self-awareness and cultural self-consciousness. Here it is not only a matter of working out the rules by which civilizations might live together, but above all of different perspectives on the salvation of the world and from the world, that are entangled together almost inextricably; and the structural necessity of the rules of social life in a civilization and the means by which their value can be transcended, which is and must be for a missionary ontologically religious and implicitly Christian. After all, the essential nucleus of the Gospel message has to do with the universal salvation of human beings, and it is this existential priority that makes the mystery of the Incarnation humanly plausible and comprehensible.

Therefore, Desideri seeks also in Tibet "the true and legitimate path, outside of which there is no other by which to arrive in heaven so as to pursue eternal happiness."<sup>10</sup> He does this making use of an analogical—and almost spontaneous—comparison between the Christian Trinity and the Three Jewels of Buddhism (Buddha, Dharma, Samgha). The parallelism is as risky anthropologically as it is theologically dangerous: even if on the level of function, the Three Jewels might correspond to Jesus Christ, the Christian faith, and a form of the community of the Church, the absence of a transcendent dimension represented by the one true God is all too evident.

Theological orthodoxy can play brutal hermeneutical tricks on us when it claims to become a universal vision of the world, and Desideri is compelled to retract this interpretation.

Buddhism is a kind of religion without God: not only is the personal God of Christian theology absent, but also the God of reason (of scholastic philosophy).<sup>11</sup> *The absence* of philosophical foundations and of theological principles does not correspond to the lack of an order for the world or of a meaning for life, and even less does it entail a sterile materialism without meaning: dharma is something more than a social model of behavior and/or a symbolic perspective tied structurally to a form of transcendence that, for Desideri, is strictly linked to the religious dimension. It becomes necessary to recognize that the Tibetans, though excluding the possibility of a divinity both theologically and rationally, "in practice . . . they admit and recognize it."<sup>12</sup>

This God of the practices and of the varied rituality of life is not new to apologetics and to missionary rhetoric, beginning with Saint Paul's "unknown god" (Acts 17:23), but here it acquires a paradigmatic value to the point of legitimating Buddhism as a religion. It is all, however, the result of an anthropological inversion of the knowledge and the general perspective of Desideri: on the one hand, the passing from theological orthodoxy to missionary orthopraxis, on the other, the abandonment of every trace

of Western philosophical ethnocentrism that negatively conditions the dynamics of thought. For a missionary of the eighteenth century, this is certainly a difficult move, both because of the formation he has received, as well as for the special calling that marks his own life's journey, Desideri succeeds in making the epistemological and existential leap, to the point of understanding the fundamental structures of Buddhism,<sup>13</sup> and this success also marks the end of his Tibetan experience. This is in fact the great theological and existential contradiction of his missionary adventure, but also the affirmation of his scientific and anthropological originality:

Every attempt at understanding radical otherness is at the same time a challenge to his own culture and to its institutions, as well as a self-reflection on the deepest meaning of life. Comparison is more effective when it becomes systematic and differentiated, almost anticipating the great studies of the anthropology of complexity. He does not only analyze religions among themselves as structures of belief, but also as practical systems of relationships that organize the complexity of social life and all the symbolic representations that derive from it. Missionary necessity displaces one's attention toward life and living together with difference, and obliges in some way that one find rules of transcendence capable of creating social inclusivity and symbolic compatibility among differences, first of all in daily life in the contingencies of living and dying, and subsequently in the coherence and logic of thought. Desideri lives his relationship with otherness fully and thanks to this is capable of elaborating a complex historical-religious comparison.

The fundamental practical structures are at least two: the profound sense of the contingency of life that must seek out a kind of transcendence in a high spirituality of body and mind, and the need for practices that are capable of transforming individual and collective life in a continual ritual that redeems and saves the world. Buddhism remains always an "infernal doctrine and a diabolical religion" (for a missionary, the absence of an explicit faith is always seen as the work of the devil), but its practical reasons give rise to virtue and perfection: "rules of a well-ordered reason [that] not only advise a flight from vices . . . [and] inculcate victory over all the passions, but even more situate love and esteem of virtue in the heart, and that which is even more astonishing, direct man towards a humanly sublime and heroic perfection."<sup>14</sup> A missionary's vocation includes the duty of understanding in depth this sublime and heroic perfection, and Desideri does so with intellectual commitment and existential dedication: "a hundred times I returned to read and re-read, to scrutinize and to sound the depths, until thanks be to God I arrived not only at understanding, but to possess entirely (may all the glory be for God) and to grasp magisterially all these teachings, so subtle, so sophisticated, so abstruse, and supremely important and necessary for the attainment of my goals."<sup>15</sup> The Christian sense of the contingency of individual and collective life helps to understand the notion of emptiness in Buddhism, more than does theological essentialism and/or philosophical ontology:

there is not a single thing that is not in fact empty of every essence; and this is because there is not a single thing that may exist of itself . . . that may exist for its own nature and by its own intrinsic essence . . . that is totally indepen-



dent . . . disconnected, not linked together and not in relationship (correlated), but every thing considered according to its own quiddity has some relationship with some end or object, and does not have its own being absolutely from itself, but rather from the end or object of its correlation.<sup>16</sup>

Desideri also intuits that existential redemption from this emptiness is a way of salvation—dharma—that is inscribed in the community's rituality: only when all of life becomes ritual is it possible to pass from a relative and contingent reality to a higher dimension capable of offering not only elevation toward the sublime, but also a meaning superior to thought.

Buddhism for the missionary is thus a real paradox: it does not have a saving God, but has a strong ethic of transcendence, an almost mystical morality, and in its own way, a perspective on salvation from the world of appearances and contingency, including those rooted in individual and collective subjectivity. Thus, the Tibetans cannot be considered atheists; on the contrary they have much to teach Christians "who at times do not manage to do as much for the true God whom they adore."<sup>17</sup>

This comment has a double value—historical and documentary: for Western rationalism it is another example of ethical atheism and of the "secular" possibility of morality and spirituality without God, and for the missionaries and for Christians an implicit admission of the structural presence of the divine, even if not immediately evident. The transcendence demanded by the emptiness of life is more important than the system of beliefs. The rituality of Buddhism has the same function as that of the true religion in Western civilization, understood in Augustinian terms as the "true worship of the true God." Western thought, thanks to the knowledge of the great Asiatic civilizations, is constrained to take into account life-practices and structures of meaning that can do without the Subject and the centrality of reason; the Church widens the horizons of its own mission, obliged by its own missionaries, even as it ponders the practical compatibility of a civilization without God. Not surprisingly, practical religion, entirely constructed by the missionaries, not only seeks to reconcile in some way Buddhism and Christianity, but also and above all allows (not only thanks to Desideri) the West to understand anthropologically the view of the world of the Orient in terms of religion. Moreover, Desideri has another achievement that is exquisitely anthropological: He does not seek a dogmatic analogy, but a compatibility capable of socially including otherness, consequently redefining the logic of practical reason common to all humanity. In other words, it is not a question of submitting scholastic philosophy to comparison, but of overturning the priorities that Christianity and Western philosophy attributed to ontological and deontological truth: to give pride of place to the ways to make progress and the rules thereof, to privilege religion over faith, orthopraxis over orthodoxy, the rituality of life to the logic of thought. After all, even Jesus spoke of the way and the truth in relation to life, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), and the dharma (as also the Tao) refers to the obligation to be practical in a way that does not implicate pre-existent principles or authoritative structures of truth that transcend the life-world.

This practical reason, because of its ethical and moral character, has little in com-

mon with the Logos of Western metaphysics and even less with a God thought of and lived as the Reason of the universe. It is exactly this practice of social life, preferred over every form of individualism that is the cause of atheism and of immorality in Western culture, that gives Buddhism a perspective of salvation, understood as the transcendence of the contingency and the emptiness of living.

This amounts to a true sense of liberation that in fact refers analogously to Christianity, but it is also a scientific discovery that comes at the end of a research project to which Desideri was committed for his entire life: the need to prefer the anthropology of living and dying to the theology of ontological foundations, to have the Christian perspective on contingency and its transcendence enter fully into the anthropological "participant observer" situation within the radical "otherness" of the great civilizations of Asia.

The conflict between Desideri and the Capuchins in Tibet, as well as the entire "rites controversy" (Chinese and Malabar) is a consequence of this anthropological perspective that reverses the priorities of the Church's theological orthodoxy. First of all we should avoid the interpretation that contrasts a popular mission "from below" attributed to the other religious orders with that of the Jesuits addressing themselves to the politics and culture of the upper classes; rather we seek to re-examine the overall approach to living within an "otherness." The Jesuits take the approach of addressing the higher sphere of political and cultural leaders among the Asian civilizations because their mission of evangelization makes use of public institutions: Thanks to their way of appropriating the structures of the Catholic Reformation, for the Jesuits civilization is ever connected to religion, and ought to enhance the mediation of orthopraxis and inclusivity. For the other religious orders (and for a large part of the hierarchy of the Church in the eighteenth century) on the other hand, civilization is to remain firmly subordinated to the imperatives of the faith and of orthodoxy: Every alternative form of ordering the world is structurally considered idolatrous, and every ethic without God is diabolical.

The Chinese civil rituals and the grand rituality practiced in Tibetan Buddhism are thus idolatries incompatible with Christian worship based on faith in the one God, whereas for the Jesuits they can be instruments of anthropological mediation among various models of social life.

It is not surprising that the principal obstacle within the controversies is ritual as the great mechanism of orthopraxis for social inclusivity and for the symbolic compatibility of differences.

Thus, ritual not only transforms the differences into structural equalities and effectively displays the rules of life, but above all makes all transcendence effective on the symbolic level. Each society should hold its rituals as instruments of delivery from the contingency and banality of daily life, as systems that articulate the values that the sublime can produce. For ecclesiastical orthodoxy, these rituals are either to be directed toward the one God in order to become effective means of grace, or they are to be destroyed as occasions of idolatry and perdition. For the Jesuits, however, the rites, even if they are totally this-worldly tied to civil functions, can be valorized as practices preliminary to and not incompatible with the sacramentalization of life, to

become later a true expression of faith. Moreover, ritual and life as ritual of deliverance from contingency—as both Desideri and the Tibetan monks know well—launch human beings into a symbolic dimension that is at the same time communitarian, spiritual, and in some way religious because it transcends matter, utility, and individualism. If for example one analyzes Christian *vanitas vanitatum* in ontological terms, it risks referring only to an experience of loss and perdition; if instead it is considered as an existential rite, it aids in understanding emptiness as a definitive detachment from the pretext of substantial permanence: Both become meditations on impermanence and a ritual path toward wisdom.

It is not an accident that in Buddhism the ritual aspects of life are to place in communication the relative with the absolute, the contingent with the transcendent, the finite with the infinite, the human with enlightenment. And more: rite is at the foundation of social *dharmā* and consequently of the priority of the spiritual community over every egocentric assessment of life and perception.

This anthropological revolution that projects the mission into the system of civilization is the great intellectual conquest of the Jesuits in China and of Desideri in Tibet, of which scientific anthropology of the nineteenth century would be the heir: religion and civilization as the principal categories for the analysis of the relations among diverse systems of life and thought.

Thus, the intellectual experience of Desideri falls within the scope of a modern logic of scientific discovery applied to the relations among civilizations: The search for compatibility is in some way the expression of a hope to find a general explanation capable of including all forms of diversity so as to render them compatible among themselves. After all it is the great intellectual inheritance that the missionary experience hands to modern anthropology and from there to the globalization of post-modernity: The absence of a faith-based or intellectually based fundamentalism does not necessarily require the dismantling of cultural relativism and the increased disarray (i.e., entropy) of thought. Desideri is too convinced of his anthropological conquest to let himself be overcome by Church polemics over the “rites controversy”: The vow of obedience, crucial for a Jesuit, does not require abandoning scientific reasoning and convictions of conscience, just as the true “catholic” faith cannot transform evangelization into exclusion and/or in surreptitious theorizing about “*sauvagerie*.”

Thus, the missionary from Pistoia is in some way constrained to live the consequences of a scientific discovery in his own life. Almost as a surrealist anthropologist he submits himself to the physically dangerous and spiritually devastating “crisis of presence,” brought on by every adventure in the unexplored worlds of life and of thought. The return voyage is thus harder and more disturbing than the outward-bound one, because every serious knowledge of otherness breaks the security of one’s identity, including the religious aspect, and obliges one’s thought to face up to the complexity of human existence. Desideri accomplishes this in at least two ways. The first is via a historico-anthropological approach—with his writings, he is attempting to push Western civilization to take Tibet into account and to “tone down the conversations of Europeans, of the chairs of philosophy and to have them run off to the missions in Tibet, there to spend their days and even entire nights in the refutation

of atheism . . . in responding to extremely intriguing errors.”<sup>18</sup> Every missionary is convinced that the Church’s view of the world should continue to be the paradigm of Western civilization. For Desideri, Christian Europe has the mission of combatting atheism (for this reason Buddhism is presented as a religion), but also the civil duty of abandoning philosophical and ideological ethnocentrism (for which one should reflect on the anthropological message implicit in the notion of “emptiness”). In an historical moment like ours today, characterized by political and religious fanaticism, this appeal to the anthropological priority of relations among civilizations is something more than an anthropological “inheritance.” The second way is that of the Jesuit serenity of conscience that makes “all labors, sweat, stress, and dangers . . . in fifteen years in very painful travels and in very wearisome missions encountered and endured.”<sup>19</sup> In every anthropologist worthy of respect scientific experience is inseparable from concrete adventure: The journey into otherness is the voyage of life.

This is also the mission of a fervent believer—the journey of life does not finish with death, but is located in the vaster soteriological perspective of Christianity (and in some way also of Buddhism), which, reconciling the individual end with the end of history, lends to the highest degree of the sublime and eternal that compatibility that anthropologists tirelessly seek on earth.

In both ways there emerges an extraordinarily modern anthropological message: The truth does not reside entirely in any civilization nor exclusively in any official religion, but hides itself in the interstices of social systems, on the peripheries of those civilizations that are in touch with one another, in the non-places of the imagination and in the symbolic, which ever govern that which we call the meaning of life. From the compatibility of these apparently irreconcilable differences have arisen both the great political, legal, and religious institutions as well as the sublime inventions of pure reason. Following the example of Desideri, we need to begin anew to seek these anthropologically in a sur-modernity that seems to have lost the unitary sense of history (the “end of history”) and is resigned to the clash of civilizations.

I began with Lévi-Strauss and I would like to close with one of the great anthropological suggestions of his *Tristes Tropiques*: for the great structuralist anthropologist Christianity had missed an historic opportunity for osmosis and compatibility with Buddhism, leaving unresolved a great intellectual and existential problem:

For what, after all, have I learnt from the masters I have listened to, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have investigated, and that very Science in which the West takes such a pride? Simply a fragmentary lesson or two, which if placed end to end, would reconstitute the meditations of the Sage at the foot of his tree. When we make an effort to understand, we destroy the object of our attachment, substituting another whose nature is quite different. That other object requires of us another effort, which in his turn destroys the second object and substitutes a third and so on until we reach the only enduring Presence, which is that in which all distinction between meaning and the absence of meaning disappears: and it is from that Presence that we started in the first place. It is now two thousand five hundred years since men discovered and formulated these truths. Since then we have discovered nothing new unless it

be that whenever we investigated what seemed to be a way out, we met with a further proof of the conclusions from which we had tried to escape.<sup>20</sup>

It is truly difficult to translate in Western terms the insubstantiality, the impermanence and the emptiness of Buddhism, which are existential and pragmatic conquests of ritual meditation that continue to upset every orthodox description of thought. Buddhism and Christianity have well understood the eternal contingency of living and dying and have made it a point of departure for their worldviews and their ways of rescuing us from the “crisis of the present” as it continuously returns to the consciousness of human beings. Ippolito Desideri worked for, lived for, and struggled for a way toward a possible convergence and compatibility between the two. In the manner of a good modern anthropologist, he represents a kind of intellectual research and existential journey similar to that of Lévi-Strauss. After all, both of them, each in his way and according to the times in which each of them lived, and with different approaches, journeyed among the *tristes tropiques* of life and thought.

#### NOTES

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 354–355.
2. *Ibid.*, 355.
3. *Ibid.*, 358.
4. Ines G. Zupanov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
5. Jacques Gernet, *Chine et christianisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).
6. Adriana Boscaro, *Ventura e sventura dei gesuiti in Giappone (1549–1639)* (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2008).
7. Here I am using “cultural code” and not “cultural pattern” as in traditional anthropology because: 1) it has the arbitrary, weighted connotation of classical cultural studies based on essentialism, which transformed religion, economy, law, etc., into invariant structures in the different civilizations; 2) if religion is the code that regulates the relations between people and the divine, law is the code of the relationships among people, whereas politics regulates the dynamic aspects of the foundations and the exercise of power; 3) relational arbitrariness allows us to analyze in a dynamic way the relationships among relationships, thus the hierarchical rapport among the various codes operative in any given system; and 4) it brings to life more effectively the empirical practices of living than do representations, more the concrete “order of the world” than the *weltanschauung* of a sociocultural system.
8. José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias. En que se trata de las cosas naturales del cielo, elementos, metales, plantas y animales dellas y de los ritos, ceremonias y leyes y gobierno de los Indios* (Sevilla: Juan de León, 1590).
9. In my own (translator’s note) fieldwork in Dolpo and Tibet, I was told that Westerners in general are considered “barbarians” because they lack religion, morals, and rituals; I was called the “Jesus Lama” because I seemed to be civilized to my interlocutors: As a priest I have religion, morals, and rituals.
10. Luciano Petech, ed., *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (vol. II: de “Il nuovo Ramusio,” in sette parti: parti I–IV, *I cappuccini marchigiani*; parti V–VII, *Ippolito Desideri*) (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1952–1956), V, 184.
11. Luciano Petech, ed., *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, VI, 167.
12. *Ibid.*, 208.

13. Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi, *Ippolito Desideri S. J. Alla scoperta del Tibet e del buddismo* (Pistoia: Edizioni Brigata del Leoncino, 2006).
14. Luciano Petech, ed., *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, VI, 292.
15. *Ibid.*, V, 199–200.
16. *Ibid.*, VI, 204.
17. *Ibid.*, 102.
18. Lettera di Ippolito Desideri citata, cited in Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi, “La Relazione di Ippolito Desideri fra storia locale e vicende internazionali,” *Storia locale. Quaderni pistoiesi di cultura moderna e contemporanea* 2 (2003): 96–97.
19. Luciano Petech, ed., *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, VII, 105.
20. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 394–395.