

# Representations of Tibet and Responses to Missionary Failure in Ippolito Desideri's Italian Writings

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**Abstract:** This chapter considers the long shadow of failure on the 1716-1721 mission to Tibet by Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733). Analysing Desideri's letters, his missionary manual, and his *Notizie storiche del Thibet*, it focuses on the historical actors' perceptions of missionary failure, and on the expectations and biases these perceptions created, to expose otherwise neglected aspects of this intercultural encounter. It investigates the impact that these perceptions had on the tensions extant in the Jesuit Province of Goa, on Desideri's description of the populations of the so-called "Three Tibets" (Baltistan, Ladakh and Tibet), and on the missionary policy he proposed for creating a Catholic Christendom that could spread globally.

**Keywords:** Tibet, Ippolito Desideri, Eighteenth century, Jesuits

The eighteenth century was a period of crisis for the Society of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Anti-Jesuitism had been on the rise during the previous century, while the Society had been losing influence in the highest spheres of Catholicism and support among the other Catholic religious orders (Pavone 2019; Lewis 2001). As the Iberian presence was becoming less prominent in Asia, and their patronage less able to support them, Jesuits lost optimism regarding the possibility of success for their missions. At the beginning of the 1700s, the negative resolution of the Rites Controversies that engulfed the Chinese and the Malabar missions, focused on the orthodoxy of Christian concepts translated into non-European cultures, was a blow to the Society's Asian missions and to its standing in Europe (Von Collani 2019). The Society was eventually suppressed by the Papacy in 1773 and would not be restored until 1814.

This chapter will consider the long shadow that failure cast on the eighteenth-century Jesuit mission to Tibet, more specifically on the work of Italian Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), who lived in Lhasa from 1716

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to 1721.<sup>2</sup> Following Hertel and Keevak, the analysis focuses on perceptions of failure by historical actors, aiming to expose otherwise neglected aspects of intercultural encounters, by unveiling expectations and biases that surround them (2017, 2). Desideri applied himself to the study of Tibetan religious beliefs and practices, composing various refutations in Tibetan,<sup>3</sup> but was forced to leave the country when Propaganda Fide confirmed that the mission was an exclusive of the Capuchin friars. This chapter will explore the impact that the perception of past and contemporaneous missionary failure had on the tensions extant in the Jesuit Province of Goa, on Desideri's description of the populations of the so-called «Three Tibets» (Baltistan, Ladakh, and Tibet), on his proposed missionary policy, and on his interpretation of the works of Providence. To do so, it will focus on some of Desideri's Italian writings, namely his letters, his missionary manual, and his retelling of his missionary endeavours, his *Notizie storiche del Thibet* (Historical Notices of Tibet).<sup>4</sup>

### The Long Shadow of Failures Past

The shadow of failure already looms over Desideri's early letters from India, written soon after his arrival on the subcontinent. Desideri opens his first letter of 12 November 1713, from Goa, by declaring that the Father Provincial has assigned him to Tibet. He is now seeking the additional support of the authority of the Father General, Michelangelo Tamburini, as «the most efficient among human means» (MITN, V:3), in the form of a written patent. Desideri explains that the dangers of travelling are not what worries him, although he recognises that certain obstacles might frustrate his ambitions: he will either overcome them or die, he declares dramatically. Regarding the latter outcome, Desideri states that he would be «very satisfied» with it, because it would allow him to attain «a death like that of the Redeemer, of the Saints, and of the true sons of my beloved Mother, the Society of Jesus» (MITN, V:3). Since such an end is adjacent to martyrdom (Räisänen-Schröder 2020), it is not envisaged by Desideri as a failure. What does worry Desideri is human meddling:

The experience of what happened to others, on other occasions, has taught me about obstacles of a different kind, the most fierce and therefore the most formidable, which require the greatest precautions: [these] are the decisions of Ours [i.e. their Jesuit confreres], who shackle those who run, and clip the wings of those who fly; in a word, they fiercely oppose the will of the zeal of Your Paternity, and therefore the manifest will of God (MITN, V:3-4).

<sup>2</sup> A detailed biography of Ippolito Desideri is available in Bargiacchi (2008).

<sup>3</sup> A brief introduction to Desideri's Tibetan works, their origins and their content is in Pomplun (2019). See also Lopez and Jinpa (2017).

<sup>4</sup> The English translations of the *Notizie storiche del Thibet* and *Tibet Missionary Manual* used in this chapter are from Sweet and Zwilling's *Mission to Tibet* (2010; henceforth MT). Critical editions of Desideri's correspondence and of the three *Defenses Against the Capuchins* are found in vol. 5 of Luciano Petech's *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (1952-1956; henceforth, MITN; translations mine).

Here, in the frank style that sometimes characterises his correspondence, Desideri explicitly depicts his confreres as working against God's plan and thus, implicitly, as the main cause («most fierce») of the failures that plagued the Tibet mission.

Previous attempts to reach Tibet had been beset by a shortage of funds and workers, by difficulties in coordinating operations with Rome, and by the deaths of several missionaries (Sweet and Zwilling 2010, 23; 26). Thus, the resumption of the mission, ordered by the General in 1706, had not yet come about, despite the local support of the Visitor, Miguel de Amaral, and of the Provincial, Manoel Sarayva. Now, it appeared to be a common expectation among the Jesuits of Goa that this latest attempt, too, would not only fail, but would be actively hindered by local superiors. «Everyone says here», writes Desideri, «[that there will be] an arrest along the way, after the letters to [the General] have already been sent» (MITN, V:4). A second letter, written three days later, reiterates this fearful expectation: «If, as happened on other occasions, and as they say will happen this time too, [...] what I am being ordered [to do] now is obstructed and impeded by Ours [...] what should I do?» (MITN, V:6).

Desideri's third letter to the General from the subcontinent confirms that pervasive negativity and lack of confidence surrounded the question of the Tibetan mission among Jesuits throughout the Province, not just in Goa. Written in Surat on 30 December,<sup>5</sup> this text offers a longer, more polished discussion of the main points found in the previous letters. Desideri's travels confirmed his fears:

In Goa and in the rest of the Province, I heard so much against [this mission to Tibet], and I know of so many examples of others who were first sent and then recalled, that, to speak frankly, I have a great fear of suffering a solemn arrest in Agra (MITN, V:7).

A patent from the General – he reiterates with a certain contempt – would allow him to ignore any counter-order «from these local Superiors and Provincials» (MITN, V:8).

Explicitly revealing a pattern, Desideri's writings point to some of the tensions that troubled the Goan Province at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The fact that – at least in Desideri's account – many Jesuits expected him to be stopped and reassigned to a different mission, suggests that there was opposition on the ground to Rome's ambition to expand her extra-European missions. Tamburini had indeed exhorted the missionaries in Asia and South America not to limit their activities to the care of local Christian communities, but to extend their work to the conversion of non-Christian people (O'Neill and Domínguez 2001, II:1651-52). The resistance met by Desideri indicates that some superiors considered such a plan too ambitious for the overworked Goan Province. A letter

<sup>5</sup> As Desideri only reached Surat on 7 January 1714, it is possible that he actually wrote this letter before arriving there (Pomplun 2010, 223n58).

written to the General in 1713 by Father Giuseppe Martinetti,<sup>6</sup> who had relinquished his appointment to Tibet for unspecified reasons, sheds some light on the causes of this opposition. First, the mission had recently been assigned to the Capuchin Fathers by Propaganda Fide. Moreover, supporting a mission in Tibet

is impossible for this Province, owing to the enormous distance to stay there, both because the expenses exceed its means, and because also it is short of subjects; and to make one reach there, it is necessary to send four [...] There are the true informations; and, if others are spread over there (always excepting a miracle of the divine Omnipotence), believe that they are fables, because I have well examined the point for three years (Hosten 1938, 590-91).

The lack of funds and workers was thus the other main objection raised by Martinetti. Although less beleaguered than the Province of Malabar, Goa had indeed seen a steady decline in workers since its peak in 1627 (Sweet and Zwill- ing 2010, 26; Alden 1996, 581-82). The limited availability of manpower explains the local superiors' needs to prioritise certain missions over others. For instance, in 1708, Sarayva had to redirect to Mysore two Jesuits, who had originally been destined for Tibet, to replace two recently deceased missionaries (Wessels 1924, 207). Unlike in Malabar, revenues in Goa were still significant in the mid-eighteenth century (Alden 1996, 582). Nevertheless, the expenses for the Tibetan mission were considered excessive, even for this relatively rich province.

Although it appears that Desideri never met Martinetti (Sweet and Zwill- ing 2010, 26; 69In577), the arguments he presents in his Surat letter counter the reasons invoked by Martinetti against the Tibetan enterprise. Indeed, the topics considered in the two texts mirror each other to a considerable degree of precision. Just as Martinetti decries the excessive expenses required for the proposed mission, Desideri provides assurances about the availability of special funds allocated to Tibet that had been provided by a noblewoman living at the Mughal court. The lack of manpower is counterbalanced by Desideri's dedica- tion to the enterprise and his commitment to reaching Tibet.<sup>7</sup> While, according to Martinetti, the mission was under the authority of Propaganda Fide, Desideri explains that the Tibetans had requested the return of the Jesuit missionaries, and described Father Andrade's cassock in detail to clarify which religious order they had in mind.<sup>8</sup> According to Martinetti, the Capuchins there despaired of evangelising the country, owing to the pervasive «idolatry» of its inhabitants, which had resisted even the influence of Islam. Desideri, on the other hand, said

<sup>6</sup> Letter written on 29 November; edited and translated in Hosten (1938).

<sup>7</sup> The *Notizie storiche* gives an image of Desideri as an «ideal missionary and Jesuit», in con- trast to the less efficient Capuchins (Pomplun 2010, 186). This trend already emerges in these early letters, where Desideri's dedication and enthusiasm seem to be presented as ef- fectively making up for the limited number of missionaries.

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear where Desideri came across this (erroneous) information, as no request was ever made for missionaries, let alone Jesuits (MITN, V:226n6). It may simply have been a rumour used to counter the Capuchins' claim on Tibet.

that he had collected evidence that the Tibetans were «very much inclined» towards Christianity. While Martinetti believed that Tibet could only be entered from China or even Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), Desideri found more than one accessible route (MITN, V:8; Hosten 1938, 590-91).

In his third letter, Desideri lists all these supporting elements that should stave off the threat of failure during the journey, instead of dismissing certain hazards as mere mundane complications, as he had done previously. This suggests that he encountered more specific objections to his journey to Tibet and was keen not to let the General feel discouraged, should they have come to his attention. Martinetti's experience, therefore, and his account of it appear to have influenced the dominant narrative about Tibet in the Goan Province. As Martinetti interpreted his inability to reach his destination as due to «heavenly providence», he presumably took it to be a sign that God did not support the Jesuits' return to Tibet. Still, his remark about the possibility of conflicting information being circulated in Rome points to the presence of other, rival interpretations. Although such contentions were common enough when tensions emerged between the desire for missionary expansionism and the commitment to maintaining existing Christian communities,<sup>9</sup> Desideri was certainly among those who had a negative view of Martinetti's endeavour and added it to the list of the Society's failed attempts to reach Tibet.

Missionaries around the globe commonly reinforced their arguments with appeals to their own experience in the field, as direct observation had already become an acceptable source of authoritativeness in the early modern period (Pagden 1993, 52-57). For instance, in his *Notizie storiche*, Desideri referred to first-hand experience as the only trustworthy source of information about distant countries (MT, 451). However, in the years we are now considering, no Jesuit could claim eyewitness status in relation to Tibet. While Martinetti could at least boast of having spent three years collecting data in India, in his letters, Desideri emphasises that he had made «various inquiries with truly special attention», and refers to trustworthy fellow Jesuits as his sources. He deploys an arsenal of rhetoric centred on the other common source of authoritativeness of that period, the biblical canon (Pagden 1993, 52). He declared he was ready to go to Tibet, «even through Hell if necessary» in order to save the Society of Jesus from being blamed for the Tibetans' faithlessness before God (MITN, V:8). Just like the references to the glorious deaths of past Jesuit missionaries in Desideri's first letter, these allusions to the Society's responsibility before God with regard to the Tibetan mission are aimed at boosting confidence in the Society's sacred role in the world. Such a boost was especially needed at a time when missionary activities were posing problems that – if the negative attitude of the Goan Province is anything to go by – were undermining the Jesuits' belief in the uniqueness of their order and their ability to fulfil their mission. By

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the consultation of Bungo called by Alessandro Valignano in Japan in 1580, which involved similar questions of funds and manpower (Schütte 1985).

echoing Tamburini's own letter of support for the establishment of new missions (MITN, V:5; 9), Desideri presents himself as the right man for a zealous cause, comparing himself to the Jesuits of old. As he repeats in a later letter, he has no doubt that God is calling him (MITN, V:14). He reminds the General of the Society's most important aim, the greater glory of God, in the face of what he considers to be mundane problems. Softening his tone through a final apophysis, Desideri even suggests that the General's charitableness and goodwill should be awakened by his brief description of the situation, with no need for any explicit request or explanation. Desideri refers to the raising of Lazarus by comparing his own request to the General to Martha and Mary's message to Jesus that «the one he loved» was sick (John 11:3). Like the two sisters, who refrained from begging for the immediate restoration of their brother's health and simply appealed to Jesus's love, Desideri's appeal should have been enough to move the General. This image will return in *Notizie istoriche*.

### The Ladakhi people as Potential Christians

As is clear from the letters just discussed, Desideri's main goal was to reach Tibet. Not much is said about his plans once he got there. His initial correspondence quickly dismissed the Tibetans. As shown above, he declared that they were well-disposed towards Christianity and awaiting the Jesuits. Some more information about the inhabitants of the Tibets only appears in his letter to the General from the city of Leh, on 3 August 1715. By this stage in his travels, Desideri had visited two countries called Tibet: Baltistan, also called «Little Tibet», which he crossed swiftly, since it was not his destination; and Ladakh (in Kashmir), «Great» or «Second Tibet». His 1715 letter quickly dismisses the former as lacking potential for conversion, since the inhabitants were Muslim: «therefore [the country], even if potentially fertile, gives no hope for the desired fruit» (MITN, V:23).<sup>10</sup> The people of Ladakh, on the other hand, received more attention. However, Desideri's depiction of Ladakhi religious practices and beliefs is merely a list of features that he traces back to Christianity. Most Ladakhis are «gentiles»,<sup>11</sup> the text begins, «and it appears that in ancient times they learned about the Holy Faith» (MITN, V:26). The Ladakhi people are depicted praying on a rosary to a triune god; worshipping a holy man, Urghien (Padmasambhava),

<sup>10</sup> This concept often occurs in connection with the Muslims of Baltistan. It appears in Desideri's *Tibet Missionary Manual* (MT, 635) and in his letter to the Pope of 13 February 1717, from Lhasa: «[in Baltistan] the blasphemous sect of Mohammed closes all doors to the work of the Evangelical missionaries» (MITN, V:41). Interestingly, to justify the fact that he travelled on to Lhasa instead of remaining in Leh, Desideri states that in Ladakh, too, the Muslim influence was such that it would be futile to attempt working there, for the time being (MITN, V:41).

<sup>11</sup> On the terms Desideri uses to refer to non-Christians and their religions, see Pomplun (2020). In my rendition of Desideri's texts, I try to provide as literal a translation as possible of such words.

who is both human and divine in nature, born of neither man nor woman approximately 1700 years earlier; worshipping other figures, identified as saints of God. Ladakhi churches, where God and Urghien are stated to dwell, have altars, altar frontals, and altar cloths. Their religious specialists («Lamma»), Desideri continues, are celibate and are distinguished from the laity by a special garment and tonsure; they study their Law in books written in a special language, different from that which they commonly use, and take part in ceremonies; they offer to their God and Urghien all kinds of foods, which are then eaten as holy things; they live together and recognise local superiors, as well as a universal one, «like the General or the Pope» (MITN, V:26-27). The king and his ministers are reported to recognise the Jesuits as «Lamma» and to have shown interest in the Christian breviary and to approve of the Christian religion, following a common topos of missionary literature (Sweet and Zwilling 2017, 8). Desideri's description concludes stating that local authorities have declared that their own religious book and the one owned by the Jesuits are the same and that they wish that better communication were possible (MITN, V:27).

The descriptions of the peoples of «Little Tibet» and of «Great Tibet» could not be more different. Notwithstanding his admiration for Jerome Xavier's work at the Mughal court and for his books refuting Islam, Desideri assumed that it was impossible to successfully evangelise the people of Baltistan precisely because they were Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Ladakh, conversely, is described as a much more fertile ground for evangelisation. As Desideri had anticipated (or rather, hoped) in his previous letters, its inhabitants showed some potential as future converts for two main reasons. First, as seen above, he held Ladakhi religion to be already very similar to Christianity, that is to say, Desideri does not mention in this letter any belief or practice that he cannot recognise as an echo of a Catholic one. Even the Lamas are depicted as long-lost Jesuits, in light of their habits, generals, and local superiors. The idea of Asian religious beliefs and practices as remnants of Christianity, as elements that had degenerated over time but historically derived from the Christian faith, had been a leitmotiv in Jesuit missionary literature since Francis Xavier's time.<sup>13</sup> The expectation of finding Christian countries outside Europe had been an important aspect of the ideology of Iberian expansion, and had accompanied the search for Prester John, a legendary

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the attitude Desideri displayed was similar to the one that emerged in Spain in the early seventeenth century, after the failure to convert the Morisco communities (Colombo 2009, 207). The Society of Jesus's attitudes to Muslims in the early modern period were ambivalent, since it supported both military intervention and evangelising efforts (Colombo 2019). Desideri himself does not appear to have completely ruled out the prospect of missions to Muslim lands, and encouraged efforts to study Islam and the Qur'an in *Notizie istoriche* (MT, 570).

<sup>13</sup> A well-known episode in this respect is Francis Xavier's impression that the Japanese Buddha Dainichi Nyorai (Mahavairocana) was the Christian God, an impression which was soon changed, once he had the opportunity to converse with Japanese Shingon monks (App 1997).

king living in the Orient, whose amazing riches and pious devotion made him a desirable ally for Christendom. The myth of «hidden Christianities» appeared in Catholic literature on Asia in different forms and contexts, and was behind much of the Jesuit exploration of India and China (Didier 2000, 26-37). Thus, it was often the case that Jesuit missionaries believed they had found traces of Christianity during their initial contacts with cultures they were not familiar with. These misunderstandings were fuelled by language barriers and by the enthusiasm of the missionaries, who would hastily report the good news that their expectations had been fulfilled. On some occasions, such as Desideri's journey to Ladakh, the missionaries' discovery was accompanied by reciprocated recognition on the part of the non-Christians.<sup>14</sup> When, upon closer inspection, it became clear that it was a misunderstanding, the many similarities convinced the missionaries that they were witnessing either vague influences from an ancient form of Christianity (brought to India, for example, by Saint Thomas) or a devilish imitation of the true faith, the work of the *simia dei*. Overall, for the missionaries, belief in the existence of faded memories of Christianity was very encouraging, because it confirmed the possibility of salvation for those who subscribed to certain practices (Pomplun 2010, 76-77). It strongly anticipated the likelihood of success, being tangible proof of certain peoples' inclination towards Christianity. That this narrative was proposed more than once in missionary literature about different regions and religions speaks of the strength and malleability of this vision.

The second reason why Ladakh was fertile ground for evangelisation is presented in a few sentences at the end of one of Desideri's letters, intertwined with the description of a promising national character. Ladakhi beliefs and practices differed significantly from those found on the Indian subcontinent. They did not regard the cow as sacred, they did not allow more than one wife, and they did not believe in transmigration.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Ladakhis were set apart from the other non-Christians of the Goan Province, including Hindus and Muslims alike, and were spared being associated with the kind of negative characteristics that Europeans attributed to both of these groups. This uniqueness held the promise of a fresh start, ensuring some distance from past failures with Hindus and Muslims: the old failures that had plagued the Goan Province outside the territories controlled by an increasingly weak Portuguese Crown; and the more recent ones related to the Jesuits' defeat in the Indian Rites controversy in the

<sup>14</sup> For an example related to the mission in Japan, see Zampol D'Ortia, Dolce, and Pinto (2021, 81-82). Just as the Japanese monks' identification of God with various Buddhist principles was mostly met with disbelief from the missionaries, Desideri states that he does not believe that his breviary and the Lamas' book are the same text (MITN, V:27).

<sup>15</sup> A published French translation of a very similar letter addressed to Ildebrando Grassi (Lhasa, 10 April 1716), makes the comparison explicit by stating that «these are three elements in which they completely differ from the Indian idolaters» (MITN, V:37; Pomplun 2020, 541n11).



Malabar Province. The supposed similarities with Christian beliefs and practices led Desideri to expect greater chances of success with the people of Ladakh.

Desideri's hopes were unfortunately cut short when his superior decided not to open a mission in Ladakh, but to proceed instead to the «Third Tibet».<sup>16</sup> «The Law or religion of this Third Tibet is precisely that of this Second one», concludes Desideri in his letter (MITN, 5:31), evidently hopeful of finding there the same predisposition for Christianity as he had detected in Ladakh.

### Images of the Third Tibet

The large amount of information collected in *Notizie istoriche* provides a far more complex and detailed picture of Tibet, its people and its religion than the few surviving letters written by Desideri,<sup>17</sup> which do not expound much on it.<sup>18</sup> Although he admits that he only has a superficial understanding of Ladakhi religion, Desideri still finds a perfect continuity between the Second and the Third Tibet as far as religious matters are concerned.<sup>19</sup> Except for the presence of the doctrine of reincarnation and the absence, on the other hand, of any belief in the Trinity, the fundamental elements he attributed to the Ladakhi religious landscape return in Desideri's considerations about the Third Tibet. This is unsurprising, considering that these characteristics still follow the aforementioned leitmotifs in the European representation of Asian peoples. Therefore, the Tibetans of Lhasa are likewise described as positively inclined towards Christianity. This is shown, once again, through the tropes of the royal favour displayed towards the missionaries and of interest in devotional images, in this case on the part of the king of the Third Tibet (Lajang Khan) and his court. Behind their keen interest and constant attention, Desideri saw divine grace at work in their hearts, which he found very encouraging (MT, 185). Ordinary people are similarly depicted as being interested in Christianity: they are eager to attend the Christian Mass and engage in worship, and more generally display a pious attitude towards the crucifix (MT, 265).

*Notizie istoriche* often highlights how the Tibetans are also different from the Hindus and Muslims: a point that Desideri was keen to make in his letters with regard to the Ladakhis, so as to present them as an easier target for evangelisation. The contrast is drawn quite explicitly in relation to Muslims:

<sup>16</sup> On this turn of events, see Sweet (2006).

<sup>17</sup> The bibliography on the presentation of Tibetan religion in this text is quite extensive. The most comprehensive analyses are Pomplun (2010) and Sweet and Zwilling's introduction in MT.

<sup>18</sup> Chiefly concerned with the disputes with the Capuchins over the right to remain in Tibet, these later letters highlight only two elements of Tibetan religion that Desideri seeks to confute in his books: reincarnation and the possibility of attaining salvation through different religious systems.

<sup>19</sup> See his third *Defense against the Capuchins* in MITN (V:109).

in the third Tibet, [Muslims] are universally considered an inferior and despicable people. [...] This aversion of the Tibetans toward Mohammedanism and their affection toward us Europeans and the mysteries of the Christian religion that they have sometimes seen practiced by us is, in my opinion, one of the best indications that these people are inclined to embrace the holy faith (MT, 265-66).

Another positive trait of Tibetan society highlighted by Desideri is that it was not divided into castes, so it would have been possible for missionaries to engage with all people, in contrast to what happened elsewhere in Asia. Furthermore, although historically they received their religion from India, they did not accept many elements of Indian religion «owing to their subtle intelligence and continual speculative activity» (MT, 341), rejecting its «imaginary and monstrous divinities» (MT, 374-75; 429). From these elements, Desideri is able to spin a positive narrative: even if Tibetan people believe in reincarnation, which was a major point to be debated with them, they rejected several basic beliefs that were generally perceived to be strong points of resistance to evangelisation, such as polytheism. Indeed, he declares the Tibetan religion to be a somewhat contradictory form of monotheism, purer and more rational than other Asian religions, when discussing accusations of atheism against the Tibetans.<sup>20</sup> «They do accept and recognize a deity confusedly, in practice, and implicitly», he writes, just as they accept «some object of refuge and prayer» whose perfections make it identifiable with God (MT, 375-76). Spiritual considerations aside, it was certainly beneficial to the Jesuits that the Tibetans seemed to disdain two neighbouring religions whose influence and power in the region might have otherwise attracted them.

Tibetan religion's relationship with Christianity is indeed a thorny issue in the *Notizie storiche*. In the case of Ladakh, Desideri had considered religious practices and beliefs insofar as they reminded him of Christianity. He would later condemn this reductive approach, and would particularly regret the error of seeing the Trinity in the Three Jewels of Buddhism, especially because his letter to Ildebrando Grassi containing this inaccuracy had been publicly distributed in a volume of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (MT, 449-50). However, while Desideri ruled out the notion of Tibet having had a Christian past, he attempted to create another connection with Christianity which could be exploited, by explaining the similarities he had identified in a different way. He attributed certain practices, such as the use of a rosary and the presence of a religious hierarchy, to Hindu imitation of the visible components of Christianity, when the latter was preached in the subcontinent by Saint Thomas and others. Since Desideri had established that the Tibetans had adopted their religion from India, he believed that they had borrowed such aspects, too (MT, 443-44). He explained the Three Jewels in the same way. He wondered whether, rather than coinciding with the

<sup>20</sup> On Desideri's interpretation of Tibetan «atheism», see Pomplun (2010, 91-96).

Trinity, the Three Jewels might simply be consistent with it, similarly to how he saw the idea of God behind the Buddhist notion of refuge. He noted that each Jewel was characterised in ways that recalled the divine Persons: the Buddha as the Father, who delivers the faithful from evil; the Doctrine as the Son, providing a path to sanctity; and the monastic community as the Holy Spirit, since monks are bound to one another by love. This correspondence was likewise understood as being caused by an imitation of Christian tenets that had reached Tibet via India (MT, 385).<sup>21</sup>

While rejecting the idea that Christianity had taken root in Tibet in the past, Desideri still strove to create some connections between the two. As he suggested to the Tibetan court on one occasion, Tibetan practices could be accepted in some form by Christianity, since he believed they were not so different; conversely, he held their dogmas to be incompatible (MT, 185-86). Other favourable characteristics that Desideri attributed to the Tibetans of Lhasa were a profound virtue and devotion, traits that are never explicitly mentioned in his discussions of the Ladakhi people. This was another topos about certain «pagans», whose virtuosity was such as to shame Christian readers (Pomplun 2010, 171; MT, 283). Desideri is keen to present Tibetans as very devoted to the Dalai Lama and to Urghien. In Desideri's aspirations, these good religious practices of the Tibetans, which also included meditation,<sup>22</sup> could easily become good Christian practices by shifting their focus: «the only thing necessary to make the Tibetans into exemplary and fervent Christians would have been to change the object of their foolish devotions and vain observances» (MT, 284). Therefore, they had the potential to constitute a solid starting point for the country's conversion, which is why they are mentioned repeatedly in the *Notizie storiche*, a text penned in the hope that Jesuit evangelisation would be allowed to continue in the country.

Alongside the positive aspects that Desideri identified in the Tibetan religious landscape, and which might have been of help for spreading the gospel, was the pervasive activity of the Devil. While he believed that a lack of divine guidance meant that the Tibetans were left to follow natural reason, with the various errors that this entailed, they were also susceptible to the influence of the Devil, who was the source of most of the erroneous beliefs held by the Tibetans, such as the idea that there is no Creator (MT, 364). In another case, as *simia dei*, the Devil had mocked the Christ by creating the legends surrounding the figure of the historical Buddha (MT, 394-95). The Devil's most impressive feat in this narrative is the invention of the doctrine of reincarnation, especially

<sup>21</sup> According to Pomplun, the description of the Three Jewels as an «obscure symbol» or a «blind fable» pointed to its being either a reflection of the original revelation to Adam and Eve, or a form of «Greek idolatry». Both represent a more positive reading than attributing these similarities to imitation of Christianity by the Indians and the Tibetans, an interpretation that comes closer to the principle of the *simia dei* (Pomplun 2010, 89).

<sup>22</sup> Desideri does not explicitly list meditation as one of these practices, but he recognised that it served the same aim as Christian contemplation and that most of the advice and guidance provided by the Tibetans were valid (MT, 390-91).

regarding the Dalai Lama, where he shows the full extent of his persuasiveness and insidiousness (MT, 310-11). Thus, Desideri concludes that the Tibetans have been given spiritual means to live righteous lives. If they then refuse to be faithful to the very God who has granted them these gifts, «he is not only justified in not entrusting them with the fuller and more precious gift of the supernatural light of faith, but even more», he believes that they deserve to receive eternal damnation (MT, 440).

#### Like Judith with Holofernes's Sword

In a passage quoted above, Desideri points to his own unworthiness as the reason for God's lack of favour towards the Jesuit Tibetan mission. However, his writings in support of this mission during the disputes with the Capuchins show that this statement was not to be taken too literally, and that Desideri identified the real causes of his own (and the Capuchins') failures elsewhere. The three *Defenses* addressed to Propaganda Fide and the *Tibet Missionary Manual* focus on the activities of missionaries proper, but it is the final chapters of *Notizie storiche* that express Desideri's ideal missionary policy, illustrated through an array of biblical examples and references. Consistently with the value he assigned to direct experience, his suggestions are based on his work in Tibet, but specific, contextualised elements are presented as a case study to support a wider, even global, evangelisation plan. For this reason, too, the policies that Desideri proposes may be regarded as a response to problems he personally faced in Asia: the lack of funds and manpower, difficulties in understanding local religious practices and beliefs, disagreements with confreres and other missionaries, and tensions with the Church authorities. The main question that this section of *Notizie storiche* is answering, the question that Desideri asks at the end and runs parallel to his considerations on the refusal of Tibetans to accept Christianity, is why the world has not converted yet, if that is the plan of Providence.

Before discussing what is needed for a mission to succeed, Desideri makes several considerations regarding what constituted a failed mission: it is not realistic to expect that a missionary could preach the gospel for a short time and immediately convince his audience to embrace Christianity (MT, 559). If Desideri is replying here to accusations levelled against him,<sup>23</sup> this statement also addresses the exaggerated expectation held by the first Jesuits in Asia that entire countries would quickly convert.<sup>24</sup> It can be inferred, therefore, that, just because people were not immediately converting en masse, it did not mean that a mission was to be considered a failure. Missionaries, Desideri concluded, were certainly not like Orpheus and his lyre (MT, 562).

<sup>23</sup> Desideri and the Capuchins exchanged accusations of not being able to make any converts, as mentioned in the second *Defense* (MITN, V:105).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the high expectations for Japan that appear in early Jesuit correspondence (Ruiz-De-Medina 1990).

On the topic of successful missionary policies, Desideri believed that more than one kind of actor was needed for effective evangelisation. The first category he discusses is missionaries. With regard to them, his *Tibet Missionary Manual* states: «[they] must be (aside from inspired and virtuous) of the best temperament, have a robust constitution, great intelligence and learning, and a talent for learning languages». The text then briefly expounds on the importance of learning the Tibetans' language in order to be able to read their sacred books, to converse with people, to understand their «false religion» and to be able to debate subtle matters, especially with monks (MT, 637-39). The *Notizie storiche* explains that missionaries need to be like the Apostles, in that their role requires prudence, intelligence, and solid knowledge of theology (MT, 556-58). In addition to this knowledge, a thorough study of local religious beliefs and practices is needed. The information collected from Asian sacred books, Desideri claims, makes a novel Judith of each missionary: just as the biblical heroine used Holofernes's own sword to decapitate him, similarly the missionary would exploit Asian peoples' own beliefs to demonstrate their absurdity and erroneousness (MT, 563). Thus, Desideri decries the use of information about religions in Asia just to «increase the stock of knowledge concerning various systems, outlandish beliefs, and clever refutations» (MT, 568). Instead, this knowledge should be used as a weapon – to demonstrate effectively to Asian people the absurdity of their beliefs and the legitimacy of Christianity.

The effects of the Rites Controversy, which was raging at the beginning of the eighteenth century, are visible in Desideri's choice of Rebecca as the personification of the Church in his following example. In Genesis 27, Rebecca sends her favourite son Jacob to find two young goats for his father Isaac, so that he might receive the latter's blessings in place of his firstborn brother, Esau. Rebecca seasons the goat meat and disguises it as the game hunted by Esau. Jacob presents this dish to his father, obtains his blessings and is granted dominion over his brothers. In Desideri's convoluted interpretation, Jacob is meant to represent the missionaries chosen and sent by the Church (Rebecca) to collect information about Asian religions (the goats). Just as Rebecca cooked the meat brought back by her son, Church theologians should analyse the translated religious texts to create refutations «with the savory seasoning of natural reason, apt analogy, and clear consistency» (MT, 571). This official doctrine should then be used by the missionaries to evangelise, win converts and obtain blessings. As pointed out by Sweet and Zwilling (MT, 751n1364), Desideri's recounting of the biblical story implicitly endorses deception and thus, arguably, accommodation. According to this practice, which had come under fire with the Rites Controversy, Jesuit missionaries would adopt local dress and customs, generally accompanied by the study of relevant languages and religious beliefs, to obtain access to non-Christian societies. If a reference to accommodation is indeed present, it is impossible to detach it, in Desideri's text, from the need for the approval of the Church authorities. While he claims that, for a missionary endeavour to be successful, specific knowledge about the local religion needs to be acquired through the missionaries' direct experience, he also concedes that a common,

orthodox interpretation must be provided by Roman theologians. It was not necessary for Desideri to write explicitly that this way of operating was meant to foster cohesion and avoid disputes like the Rites Controversy that could undermine entire missions.

A lack of workers in the mission is identified as another cause of failure. Workers should be numerous, believes Desideri, like the men who built King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, because they are building the house of God on earth (MT, 576-77). This problem leads him to discuss the role of the rich and powerful, who should support the work of conversion. These constitute the second category of actors who can support evangelisation. He points to the widespread negative attitudes, of the sort he encountered in India, towards missionary enterprises, and denounces the defeatism of those decrying the end of the age of pious kings who supported the missionary effort, such as John III of Portugal. He exhorts his readers to recognise the same zeal in contemporary noble patrons, who, he prays, will continue to show their support, knowing that the souls that they have helped convert will speak in their favour before God (MT, 583-88).

People who are unable to help in tangible ways are the third and final category of supporters discussed in the *Notizie istoriche*. Desideri states that these people, too, owe God their love and allegiance, and are called on to help as they can. Many practices involving penance and sacrifice can aid the salvation of souls, and prayers can be offered for one's (Asian) neighbour (MT, 592). In this group, Desideri includes the indigent, but also people whose responsibilities or lack of freedom prevent them from becoming missionaries and travelling to the Indies, such as women or members of religious orders who are bound by holy obedience (MT, 596). The inclusion of the latter group allows Desideri to discuss his own condition as a missionary who was forced to abandon his mission, and to find some resolve in the face of the materialisation of his fears, namely opposition from his confreres and superiors, which led to his failure. In this narrative, the practice of prayer takes on a markedly female dimension. In this context, women are the primary example of those lacking the autonomy and freedom needed for evangelisation among non-Christians.<sup>25</sup> Desideri's references to Baroque female sainthood appeared in the form of holy virgins, with Saint Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi deemed the best example to follow: secluded in her cloister, she worshipped Christ continuously for the sake of all the world's sinners (MT, 596-97). However, it is her biblical namesake, together with her sister Martha, who appears in Desideri's depiction of the successful mission: the emulation of the raising of Lazarus.<sup>26</sup>

As we have seen, Desideri had already referred to Jesus's love for Lazarus in his 1713 letter to Tamburini from Surat. In the depiction he provides in the *Notizie*

<sup>25</sup> The Counter-Reformation's evangelising enterprise dismissed almost completely the idea of female missionaries. On the exceptional convent of Marie de l'Incarnation and her nuns in Quebec, see Bruneau (1998).

<sup>26</sup> Mary, the sister of Lazarus, had been identified with Mary Magdalene since the Middle Ages.

*istoriche*, Jesus's love returns as a central feature, now with Lazarus as an explicit stand-in for all the non-Christian souls, considered sinful and wretched: in Desideri's own experience, therefore, Lazarus represented the Tibetans.<sup>27</sup> Various characters fill the stage of this biblical episode as it is recounted here: those who accompany Jesus to the tomb, those who call for Lazarus to come out, and those who run to free him from his bandages. These are the missionaries who travel to the Indies and preach the gospel «to invite idolatrous nations and deceived peoples to come forth from their errors and rise again to a new life by means of the true faith and holy baptism», freeing them from the «snares of vice and infidelity» (MT, 593). Desideri exhorts this third group of supporters, the faithful, who cannot be like these missionaries, to find examples to imitate in Mary Magdalene and Martha, who pray to Jesus to ask him to resurrect their brother. Furthermore, according to the *Notizie istoriche*'s narrative, Jesus's reluctance to intervene before Lazarus's death, despite having been informed about his sickness, explains God's hesitancy to convert non-Christians, even if missionaries are preaching to them. Jesus's intention is for Mary and Martha's prayers to be recognised as the cause of Lazarus's resurrection, and to be praised as such. In the same way, according to Desideri, Catholic Europeans' merits are recognised in heaven, where the souls they have contributed to saving testify in their support, just as they do for the royal patrons of missions. These prayers and sacrifices are the cause of the miracles that occur in missionary lands, such as changes of heart in staunch unbelievers, sudden conversions before death, and acts of benevolence by previously antagonistic rulers (MT, 594-95).

The narrative woven in these passages of the *Notizie istoriche* therefore offers a justification for the failures encountered up to that point by most Catholic missionary efforts in Asia.<sup>28</sup> By depicting missionary enterprises as communal efforts, Desideri distributes the responsibility of the failed actualisation of the divine plan among different actors and avoids putting the blame entirely on the missionaries' shoulders. The example of the raising of Lazarus attempts to convince society at large that, despite a general sense of failure pervading missions (and the Society of Jesus, more generally), as long as enough spiritual and material resources are mobilised at all levels of the community, the promise of salvation is always at hand. The example of Lazarus thus serves to dispel the threat of missionary failure by offering a promising prospect for the future. Preoccupations of missionary failure and its remedies fill the final pages of the *Notizie istoriche*, with a clear focus on Europe and its Catholic readership. After long, detailed descriptions of Tibet, its culture and its religion, the last representation of the Tibetans sees them in their tombs bound by their sins, dead for four days, awaiting salvation.

<sup>27</sup> Sin as death, conversion as resurrection, and Jesus's love for the sinful who had not yet converted are images from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians (see especially Eph 2:1-6).

<sup>28</sup> As Desideri laments at the beginning of the *Notizie istoriche*'s final chapter, «it is little less than a whole world that still remains oppressed by the hard yoke of infernal slavery» (MT, 576).

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