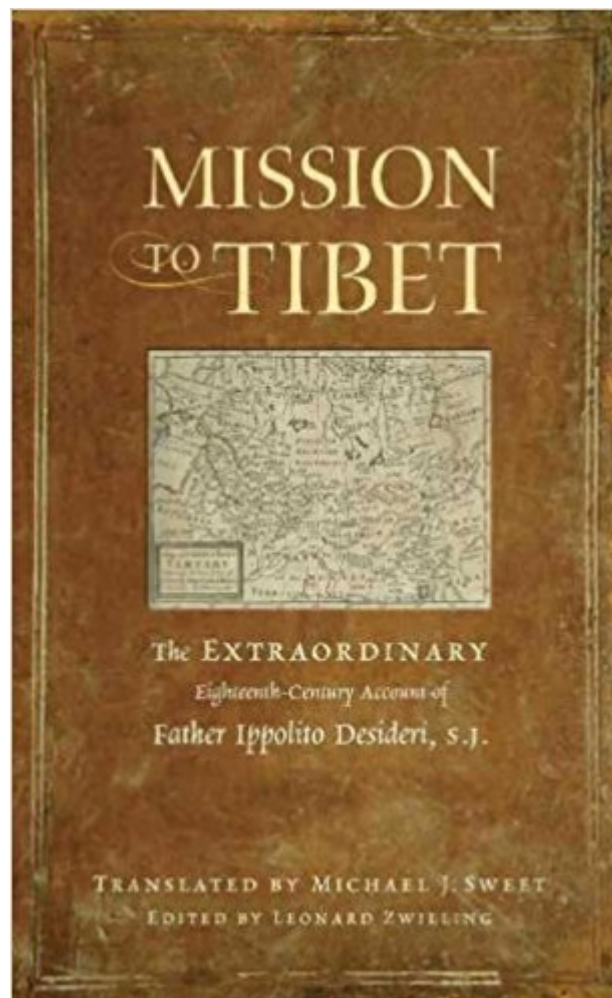




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# Mission To Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account Of Father Ippolito Desideri S. J.



## Synopsis

Mission to Tibet recounts the fascinating eighteenth-century journey of the Jesuit priest Ippolito Desideri (1684 - 1733) to the Tibetan plateau. The Italian missionary was most notably the first European to learn about Buddhism directly with Tibetan scholars and monks - and from a profound study of its primary texts. While there, Desideri was an eyewitness to some of the most tumultuous events in Tibet's history, of which he left us a vivid and dramatic account. Desideri explores key Buddhist concepts including emptiness and rebirth, together with their philosophical and ethical implications, with startling detail and sophistication. This book also includes an introduction situating the work in the context of Desideri's life and the intellectual and religious milieu of eighteenth-century Catholicism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Michael J. Sweet and Leonard Zwilling should be commended for their splendid presentation of the text, their edition and translation, their abundant notes, and their outstanding introduction to Desideri and his book." (Catholic Historical Review) "Written in a fluent, readable style. For English speakers, Mission to Tibet will be the benchmark." (Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu) "The combination of Sweet's assured translation and Zwilling's attentive editing make a solid contribution to Tibetan studies, Jesuit missionizing, and early European travel reports from Asia, and provide crucial evidence for the importance of this pioneering scholar-priest." (Journal of Buddhist Ethics) "Of all the Roman Catholic missionaries to Asia, the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) was perhaps the most remarkable. Despite his fervent hope of converting Tibet to the Christian faith, he was in

important ways the first Western scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, translating Buddhist texts into Italian and writing scholarly tomes in Tibetan, complete with quotations from Nagarjuna. *Mission to Tibet* offers the first complete English translation of Desideri's captivating account of his sojourn in Tibet." (Donald Lopez, Arthur E. Link Distinguished University Professor and Chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Michigan)"As this accomplished translation by Michael J. Sweet, edited by Leonard Zwillling, demonstrates, Desideri was more than merely a determined and subtle opponent of a religion not his own; he was also a perceptive scholar of Tibetan doctrine, an amazing linguist, and a fascinating travel writer. Sweet has captured his essence in this commanding work. Everyone with an interest in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, world history, and world religion will enjoy this wonder-filled account of Desideri's pioneering adventure, intimately detailed from Rome to Lhasa and back." (Jeffrey Hopkins, author of *Meditation on Emptiness*)"Mission to Tibet is the most important work to appear in the field of Desideri studies since Luciano Petech's critical edition of the Jesuit's writings over fifty years ago. That *Mission to Tibet* provides a rip-roaring adventure, political intrigue, and a window onto a long-lost Tibet only adds to the pleasure of reading this new translation." (Trent Pomplun, Dept. of Theology, Loyola University Maryland, and author of *Jesuit on the Roof of the World*)"Sweet's and Zwillling's thorough historical work and beautiful translation make this book an instant classic and essential resource for anyone interested in the history of intercultural learning, comparative theology, and missiology." (John Makransky, Associate Professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology, Boston College)

Michael Sweet received a PhD in Buddhist Studies in 1977 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction of Geshe Lhundub Sopa. From 1977-78 he taught and did research at the American Institute of Buddhist Studies. After later graduate studies, he was a psychotherapist in public and private practice (1980-2004) and a sometime lecturer at UW Madison, where he has been an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry. He has written extensively on the history of sexuality in South Asia and on Buddhist Studies. Since 2001 his research has focused on Ippolito Desideri and the Catholic missions in Tibet. Current research focuses on the first mission to Tibet, led by the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Andrade. Leonard Zwillling studied with Geshe Wangyal from 1967 to 1978 and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a BA in 1970, going on to receive an MA in Hindu studies (1972) and a PhD in Buddhist studies (1976) also at UW-Madison. His dissertation, on apoha in Buddhist logic, was directed by Geshe Lhundub Sopa. He did predoctoral research in Sri Lanka (1973-74) and Nepal (1974-75) under Ford Foundation and Fulbright-Hays scholarships. From 1977 to 1983 Dr.

Zwilling taught Asian religions, Sanskrit, and Tibetan at UW-Madison and elsewhere. He received an MLS from UW-Madison in 1985 and from 1986 to 2009 was the general editor and bibliographer of the Dictionary of American Regional English in the department of English at UW-Madison, where he is presently senior scientist emeritus. Dr. Zwilling has published in a number of fields, and since 2005 his work has centered on Ippolito Desideri and missions in Tibet.

Its new edition, which was consulted by Trent Pomplum's "Jesuit on the Roof of the World" as in turn his study informed this edition, appeared in the same year, 2010. Translated by Michael Sweet and edited by Leonard Zwilling as *Mission to Tibet*, this massive compendium collects what is necessary to comprehend Desideri within his own writings, alongside a brief report from his early confrere Manoel Freyre. Desideri reworked his account often, and this version allows readers to compare, thanks to a generous introduction, careful endnotes, and appendices, how the Jesuit honed his narrative as he tried--in vain--to convince the Vatican upon his return from Tibet the priority that his Society held over the Capuchins to control the Catholic mission assigned by a rather vaguely defined set of boundaries that included, with some room evidently for error, the "third" or innermost region of the Himalayan heartland. Fr. Ippolito energetically marshals, as Pomplum explains (see my June 2012 review) and Professors Sweet and Zwilling document, the claims of the Jesuits against his Franciscan rivals, even as personally he graciously thanks the friars for their assistance during not only his roughly seven years in the Himalayas, but over his decade-and-a-half away from Italy on his wide-ranging mission to, in, and from the Indies. He likewise acknowledges the hospitality shown by his Buddhist hosts in Lhasa. They grant the newly arrived priest time to prepare his objections for debate, the better to allow a fair contest between one who has barely learned their daunting language and the comparatively tolerant lamas themselves. Desideri argues against what he calls "metempsychosis" as the transmigration of souls, against the doctrine of emptiness, and against the non-theistic nature of their "false religion." He prepares a catechism designed to woo the elite away from their faith, the better to weaken its sway over the middle and lower classes. This applies the Jesuit approach towards missionizing. While Desideri skillfully channels the arguments of the lamas, as when he seems to defend the "supposed virtue" of their practice of sky burial, he does this the better to defeat their delusions. He judges Tibetans as truly compassionate. Yet, he cannot condone their superstitions. His logic and his faith, both articulated over many pages of this hefty report, compare the natural goodness with their ultimate damnation, for idolatry and ignorance. Ethically, he praises their "inclination to mercy" among those meritorious "things practiced by this blind people," which put to shame the efforts of many Christians (*Mission*

283). While eerily able to expound the proofs set out in Buddhist texts that portray their doctrines as convincing, Desideri accomplishes this verbal feat only to demolish the Dharma he examines. He approves the Tibetans for a "natural inclination to good and their propensity to virtue," even as he must condemn their entrapment by the snares of the Devil in keeping them from the "true religion." With exacting reason, he interprets the intricate selection of a new incarnation of a lama; Desideri concludes after painstaking analysis that neither a boy barely able to talk nor the lamas assigned to interrogate him nor the toddler's parents can be held culpable for what can only be a clever stratagem of Satan himself. The denial by the faithful of Tibet of a First Cause makes their religion atheistic in theory if not practice, moreover. Applying classical philosophy and Catholic scholasticism, the Jesuit dismantles Buddhist philosophy as Tibetan scholasticism. Summarizing a work Desideri has translated (an English edition may be in preparation) of Tsongkhapa's Lam rim chen mo ("Great Stages of the Path"), the missionary compellingly tells in his judgment how the Devil crafts this as a glittering lure. Desideri knows Tibetans do not worship the figures they conjure up to bow to or depict on their tapestries, but he also must convince his devout readers of the seductive construction that these "pagans" create and refine. The "veneer and façade" of their elaborate "sect" hides deceit behind "pretty tinsel," as if the Devil crafted a beautiful artifice within which to trap Tibetans within the errors of denying a Creator and of asserting emptiness as the fundamental dogma by which damnation will be achieved for his earnest, learned, but doomed hosts, teachers, and friends (Mission 364). Nevertheless, Desideri recounts their tale of Urgyen with verve and passion, to convey to his European readers the flavor of a native narrative told in the original style. He retells the life of the Buddha (if by another name), Trisong Detsen, and Padmasambhava. He explores the mythic origins of the Tibetans, and he takes us into their many levels of hell. Fashions, geography, food, customs, beasts, language, marriages, funerals: all gain attentive and engrossing description. After he must leave Tibet, once the Office of the Propaganda has ruled in favor of the Capuchins over the Jesuits, Fr. Ippolito tells with great verve his adventures by land and sea. He sojourns in Kathmandu (where he includes in passing "Bod" among the pantheon of Newar gods), visits Benares (where he notes the birthplace of "Shakya Thupa," his term for Shakyamuni), and delights in relating the machinations of Delhi's khans, Patna's date gatherers and opium harvesters, and the power plays of the Moghul Empire, which contest for court intrigue and pitched battle with those he dramatizes between the Dzungar Mongols ("Tartars"), the Chinese, and the Tibetans during the civil strife that caused him to flee Lhasa for Dakpo. His dramatic recounting of this episode remains the only substantial account by a Westerner; Zwilling remarks how Desideri rewrote it three times to mix fiction with fact just right. This mingling, as the

editor's endnotes and vast bibliography attest to, makes this epic more exciting and easier to read, despite its considerable bulk and digressions, which the author himself apologizes for now and then--even if he can never apologize for his extra ecclesiam nulla salus sermonizing. This logic, inescapable for any Catholic missionary, dominates the undertones of most of this narrative. The tone turns eloquent as well as overwhelming, as chapters expound how, in one of many vividly told biblical analogies, Judith used not only her wiles but the weapons of her foe, Holofernes, to carry out her virtuous victory. Similarly, missionaries must--as Desideri did when he was given time by his Lhasa lamas to prepare his debate in favor of the Church against Dharma--master the arguments of their foes so as to defeat pagan errors and diabolical rituals. Such strains of mingled sympathy and disgust, given the refusal of his Tibetan interlocutors to accept Catholicism, may infuse this central section of his travelogue with poignancy for a modern reader. Those among whom he labors in the Himalayas appear unwilling to accept Christ. In India, the mission field is harsh, but the Church finds some success. Fluent in Persian and Hindustani, and later studying Tamil, Desideri spent years as a pastor in Delhi and then along the coast around Pondicherry; he writes movingly of the deprivations endured by his confreres in that Karnatic mission. He also recounts implacably how his prediction of a boy's death comes true after his parents neglect his catechizing; Zwilling remarks: "One can only speculate as to Desideri's frame of mind when he wrote this account" (Mission 737 n. 1190). He was summoned back to Rome in 1726 to advance the cause for canonization of a Jesuit martyr in India, Fr. João de Brito. Desideri continued to press for the approval of the Jesuit claims to priority against charges by the Capuchin friars of the Society's "poaching" (unwittingly, perhaps, even if the priest, as Pomplum shows, remained a master of how he phrased his interpretations and justifications) of the Tibetan mission far away. His ambitious report, as Pomplum has explained, is designed for the edification of both Jesuit novices and readers of "relations" sent back by the Society's missionaries to audiences in Europe who find in them inspiration and an appeal for donations. He combines both purposes at his conclusion in a richly baroque rhetoric of "extravagance." His giant work was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and Sweet's assured translation and Zwilling's attentive editing combine to make a solid contribution to Tibetan studies, Jesuit missionizing, and early European travel reports from Asia. Shelved next to Pomplum's compact study--the two texts cite each other--they combine as crucial evidence for the importance of this pioneering scholar-priest. One leaves this figure from three centuries ago with a curious speculation. What if the Jesuits had succeeded? How might we understand Tibetan Buddhism today if, perhaps, the Dharma survived only through this record?

What a tour de force. This English translation captures the eloquence of a Baroque Italian with Baroque spiced modern English. Beneath polite formality, is underlying wide-eyed marvel. Encountering an exotic Tibetan world of compassionate individuals with most peculiar customs, Desideri, crossing half the world, scripts an epic. The lengthy introduction presents the feeling that the translators may be incarnations of this great Italian.

This is perhaps the best book on the subject. Extremely readable and interesting. Zwilling and Sweet have captured the essence and importance of Desideri's exploits and adventures. I am buying several copies to give as Christmas presents. A must read for anyone interested in Tibet, Buddhism or Jesuit history.

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