

# The Holy Trinity in Ippolito Desideri's *Ke ri se ste an kyi chos lugs* *kyi snying po*

Trent Pomplun  
*Loyola College in Maryland*

On April 10, 1716, Ippolito Desideri, a Jesuit who had but recently arrived in Tibet, wrote a long letter to another Jesuit missionary, Ildebrando Grassi, who was stationed in Mysuru, India. Desideri recounted his adventures since the two men had last been together, three and a half years earlier, at the Jesuit residence in Goa. He told of his travels to Surat, Delhi, Lahore, Leh, and Lhasa, and recalled his first impressions of Tibetan religion and culture. Tibetans, he told Grassi, were gentle and docile, but coarse and uncultivated. In Desideri's opinion, they had neither arts nor sciences, but they did reject the doctrine of transmigration and appeared to have some knowledge of the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> "Here is what I learned about the Tibetans' religion," he wrote,

They call God *könchok* (*dkon mchog*), and they appear to have some notion of the adorable Trinity, for at times they call Him *könchok chik* (*dkon mchog gcig*), that is, the One God, and at other times they call Him *könchok sum* (*dkon mchog gsum*), that is, the Triune God. They also use a kind of chaplet, over which they repeat the words *Om ab hūm*, and they say that the word *Om* signifies knowledge or an arm, that is, power; *ab* is the word, and *hūm* is the heart, or love, and that these three words mean God. They also worship a being named Padmasambhava, who was born some seven hundred years ago. When asked if he were God or man, some people replied that he was both God and man, having neither father nor mother, but having been born from a flower. Even so, they have statues representing a woman with a flower in her hand, whom they call Padmasambhava's mother, and they venerate several others whom they treat as saints. In their churches, one finds an altar covered with cloth and ornaments, and a sort of tabernacle sits in the middle of the altar, where they say Padmasambhava dwells, though they also assert that he is in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

This letter, which survives only in a French translation, is noteworthy if only because Ippolito Desideri would later repudiate almost everything he affirmed in it. In a matter of months, the Jesuit missionary would change his mind about Tibetans' capacities for art, for science, and for culture. He would also change his mind considerably about their religion.

Perhaps the most significant change—and one that would later play a large role in his legal battle with the Capuchins for control of the Tibetan mission—concerned the knowledge that Tibetans had of the Holy Trinity, the central Christian mystery that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In what follows, I would like to explore Ippolito Desideri's explanation of the Holy Trinity, especially in the *Ke ri se ste an kyi chos lugs kyi snying po* (*The Essence of Christian Doctrine*). I will briefly situate Desideri's account of Tibetans' knowledge of the Trinity in the general historical and theological context of the early modern missions, outline his various attempts to explain this central Christian mystery in Tibetan, and offer some tentative speculations on the Jesuit's motives for choosing certain Tibetan terms. I hope this discussion of Desideri's treatment of the Holy Trinity might contribute to Christian theologians and Buddhist philosophers who are engaged in interreligious dialogue and assist them in their reflections about how best to translate their respective faiths in such dialogue. Desideri's translations are not always perspicacious—as we shall see—but they are instructive, especially to the extent that they show us the issues that must be considered when anyone wishes to translate the basic terms of his own religion into an alien language. With this difficulty in mind, we might also consider the inadequacy of all language, human or angelic, when confronted with the mystery of God's infinite transcendence.

#### IPPOLITO DESIDERI IN CONTEXT

Before addressing Desideri's translations, I would like to point out that the description of Tibetan religion in his letter to Ildebrando Grassi hardly differs from the descriptions of earlier Jesuit missionaries in Tibet.<sup>3</sup> António de Andrade, who established the mission in Tsaparang on 28 August 1625, felt that Tibetans had some dim knowledge of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Virgin Mary, the angels, and the sacraments.<sup>4</sup> In one of the more sympathetic missionary accounts of non-Christian iconography, Andrade even pointed out that the wrathful depictions of Buddhist deities were but their outer forms, which they displayed to frighten demons.<sup>5</sup> Francisco Godinho, another veteran of the first Christian missions in Western Tibet, explicitly noted Tibetans' recognition of the Holy Trinity, although he also expressed great skepticism about their religion: "The peoples of this great Tibet are not idolaters, since we have found that they acknowledge the adorable Unity and Trinity of the true God; they know that there are three hierarchies of angelic spirits, which are divided into nine choirs according to their different excellencies and dignities; that there is a Hell that awaits the wicked and a paradise to reward the good. But these truths have become mixed up with so many clouds of error, which through their nearness to pagans, have spread like a plague."<sup>6</sup> A few things might be noted about Godinho's account. He does not call Tibetans "idolaters," since he believes that they worship God rather than some aspect of His creation, nor does he call them "pagans," but only notes their proximity to such, by which he almost certainly means Hindus. Those familiar with early modern theological debates about the salvation of non-Christians will note that Godinho hints that Tibetans fulfill the necessary requirements for implicit faith and thus that God might save them through their own religious practices, at least theoretically.<sup>7</sup>

The ambiguity of Godinho's account of the Trinity is typical of missionary accounts during his day. Its roots can be found in the revival of ancient learning during the Renaissance. Humanists delighted in the sacred triads of other religions and believed that they promised the cognoscenti a more profound understanding of the Christian mysteries.<sup>8</sup> This delight grew to such proportions that it became a centuries-long fad. As a result, triple-faced suns and staring triangles abounded in early modern Europe and authors chose artfully concealed depictions of the Holy Trinity for their emblems.<sup>9</sup> Images of the Holy Trinity as a Janus-Christ with three mystically conjoined faces were especially common in Hermetic circles, even after Antoninus of Florence and pope Urban VIII denounced them in 1628. For all intents and purposes, they looked like the multiheaded deities of the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric pantheons.<sup>10</sup> To make matters even more complicated, authors such as Athanasius Kircher adjusted certain iconographic features of Buddhism, such as the lotus, to fit the iconographical conventions of Roman Catholicism when depicting Buddhist deities for European audiences.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, early modern humanists saw vestiges of the Holy Trinity everywhere, not merely in the emblems that adorned books, chapels, and churches, but in all created things and indeed in the structure of the human soul itself.

The voyages of discovery and the Protestant Reformation stood between the easygoing attitudes of humanists and Desideri's encounter with Padmasambhava, and missionaries often had mixed feeling about the Trinitarian vestiges they discovered. While they had been educated in a culture that revered pagan antiquities, the ancient gods of Greece and Rome were no longer rivals. Missionaries in Asia and America confronted living gods and goddesses. José da Acosta reacted quite harshly to the three sun gods that he discovered in Cuzco, and Matteo Ricci attributed false trinities to the Devil's handiwork in China.<sup>12</sup> Quoting the testimony of Spanish missionaries who saw a "three-headed male idol" in Beijing, Athanasius Kircher felt that isolated vestiges of the Christian faith existed in Asia, although he did not share other Jesuits' enthusiasm for ancient Chinese monotheism.<sup>13</sup> Jesuit figurists such as Joachim Bouvet, Jean-François Foucquet, and Joseph Henri-Marie Prémare even went so far as to claim that the ancient Chinese classics revealed supernatural mysteries of the faith such as the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.<sup>14</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas thought that the Christian Trinity was known in much of the Yucatan and the Americas, although he believed that various rites of weather magic were evidence of pacts made with demons.<sup>15</sup>

Jesuit missionaries were especially fascinated by the Trinitarian vestiges they discovered in India.<sup>16</sup> Jean Bouchet, who would later be Desideri's superior in Pudukcherry, believed that Hindus retained a confused notion of the "adorable Trinity which was formerly preach'd to them," a clear indication that he felt that the various sacred triads he encountered were historical remnants of the Gospel proclaimed by the Apostle Thomas in India. In a letter to Pierre-Daniel Huet, he explains:

A few Years ago, a Brahman thus expounded his notion of the fabulous Trinity of the pagans: We are to represent to ourselves, said he, God and his three several names [Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra], which answer to his three principle attributes, much in the Nature of those Triangular Pyramids we see rais'd

before the Gates of some Temples. You are sensible, my Lord, that I do not pretend to tell you this Imagination of the Indians answers exactly to the Truth which Christians profess; but, however, it makes us sensible that they once had a clearer Light, and that they are grown darker, by Reason of the Difficulty which occurs in a Mystery so far above Man's weak Reason.<sup>17</sup>

Although Desideri rejected the idea that Tibetans retained remnants of previous apostolic visitors, he still stands within this general theological tradition; like Bouchet, he did not believe that the imagination of Tibetans answered exactly to the Truth that Christians professed, but rather thought that the implicit understanding of the Trinity they displayed in the Three Jewels was an "obscure symbol" or "blind fable" of the Holy Trinity. For our purposes here, we need only note that whether the Three Jewels were a symbol or a fable of the Holy Trinity—Desideri did not decide this question as far as I know—it would be necessary for the missionary to explain the Holy Trinity directly to his interlocutors, and so bring them from their dim awareness of the Holy Trinity to a full understanding of this Christian mystery. This task was far from easy, for reasons that Jean Bouchet had already pointed out. The mystery of the Holy Trinity far exceeded the weak reason of all men and women, and this weakness was inherent in reason itself, even when it was illumined by faith. Christian theologians, especially Dominican and Jesuit Thomists, also felt that all human experiences of the divine, except for the very rarest like the raptures of Moses and St. Paul, were accompanied by acts of the imagination.<sup>18</sup> In other words, all religious experience, whether Christian or otherwise, walked the razor's edge between symbol and fable. The missionary's task, like the theologian's, was to distinguish the two with the light of revelation.

#### TIBETAN TERMINOLOGY FOR THE HOLY TRINITY

It is no easy task to explain the Holy Trinity in one's native language, must less in a foreign tongue. A common theological joke, which is often attributed to the great Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, offers the following list of scholastic concepts that must be memorized if one is to teach the proper Roman Catholic doctrine of the Trinity: five notions, four relations, three persons, two processions, one nature, *zero comprehension*. This joke, which has probably been told in Christian universities since the Middle Ages, expresses a more serious truth: in the traditional scholastic curriculum of Roman Catholic theologians, treatises on the Holy Trinity were often thought to be the most difficult to master. Although the foundational texts of the Catholic tradition are difficult enough, the scholastic commentaries of Desideri's day had subjected them to countless technical refinements. The chief points of the dogma might be summarized as follows: there is one God in essence or nature, but the Divine Nature does not subsist as a single person or hypostasis, but in three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are really distinct from one another, not in virtue of the nature they share, which is numerically the same in all three persons, but in virtue of the relative opposition by which the Father begets the Son, and the

Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.<sup>19</sup> Already we might note the highly technical philosophical language of this mystery. The Christian theologian who wishes to explain the Holy Trinity to a philosophically literate audience such as Tibetan scholastics must juggle terms such as essence, nature, person, subsistence, relation, identity, distinction, number, and so on—and this brief account leaves aside the intense logical speculations that accompanied scholastic reflection on the Trinitarian notions and processions. Add the requisite speculations about the capacities of the human intellect, linguistic speculations about metaphor, and scientific discussions about the nature of those phenomena that are commonly used in such metaphors, such as light, and one has a very heady brew indeed.

Desideri's first attempt to explain the Trinity in Tibetan can be found in his *Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda* (*The Allegory of the Dawn that Dispels Darkness*), which he composed in the final months of 1716 and presented to Lhazang Khan on 6 January 1717. Desideri says, "God is without birth or death, cause or condition; He is thoroughly perfect, always without origin or end; He is perfectly self-originating, self-producing, and self-achieving; He cannot change or be clothed with sin; He is one, and He is three; these very three being without separation and yet truly separate; this nature is one, without being distinguished, and the essence is perfectly one."<sup>20</sup> Desideri did not attempt to explain the Trinity further, nor did he offer any analogies that might assist Lhazang Khan and his court. He asserted that God is one and that God is three (*de yang gcig pu de yang nyid gsum 'dug*). At this relatively early stage in his mission—the missionary had been among Tibetan speaking peoples for about a year and a half—Desideri's Tibetan is far more awkward than in his later works. Still, he did not shy away from the technical terminology of Buddhist philosophy. In the quotation above, for example, he uses the terms *rang bzhin* for "nature" and *snying po* for "essence." His grammar (or lack thereof) makes it rather hard to discern whether he intended the term *nyid* to indicate the term "person," a problem that the missionary exacerbated by attempting to write in Tibetan verse. The works that Desideri began in Lhasa in the fall of 1717, but completed in Dakpo (*dwags po*) in mid 1718, such as *Sems can dang chos la sogs pa rnams kyi 'byung kbungs* (*On the Origin of Sentient Beings and Various Other Phenomena*) and the untitled manuscript that Giuseppe Toscano published under the title *Nges legs*, are more properly works of natural theology, and Desideri accordingly focuses on those attributes of God that would be accessible without faith, that is, by inferences that were possible to the powers of natural reason without the aid of supernatural revelation. The language of these works shows a marked exploration of Tibetan terminology, even though Desideri would later abandon or refine many of the terms he used in them. He calls God the "Most Holy" (*yu! mchog dam pa*) as well as the "base" or "ground" (*gzhi*) of all things.

Desideri's mature discussion of the Trinity occupies twelve folio sides of the *Chos lugs ky'i snying po*, which he wrote just before leaving Tibet in 1721. For the missionary, there is only one suitable object of refuge, namely, God, the "self-established Jewel" (*rang grub dkon mchog*), the one lord without rival (*'gran zla med par gcig pu rje gcig*), who is established as "three unsurpassable persons" (*bla med bdag nyid gsum*). To begin the catechetical instruction, Desideri has his imagined interlocutor say, "If the sun rises

in a cloudless sky, the stars that twinkled so pleasantly at night disappear. So, too, when the unsurpassable virtue and infinite greatness of God (*rang grub dkon mchog*) is seen with the eyes of faith, false objects, which we thought to be jewels, cannot compare to His virtue. . . . Kindly teach me why you proclaim the mystery that God is established as three unsurpassable persons.”<sup>21</sup> To this, Desideri responds, “If you try to pour the ocean into a cup, you will be but a babbling child. And when I try to teach you about *rang grub dkon mchog*, who surpasses the lowly thoughts that proclaim that His reality is a mode of infinite being, even I am no different from such a child. But I will try to illuminate just a tad of the abode of faith, in order to quench the mind that yearns for *rang grub dkon mchog*.”<sup>22</sup> There is more than a little adventurous wit in the passage, although a fair deal of it would have been lost on his Tibetan readers without further conversation. The phrase that Desideri uses for “babbling child” (*brda la ma byang ba'i byis pa*), for example, appears occasionally in Tibetan polemical literature and generally connotes one who is ignorant of the laws of karma and rebirth. But Desideri also alludes here to a well-known legend about St. Augustine that is told in an apocryphal letter to St. Cyril of Jerusalem. One day, when walking along the seashore and meditating on the mystery of the Trinity, the saint encountering a child fetching water in a cup and dumping it into a little hole he had dug in the sand. When asked what he was doing, the child answered that he planned to fit the entire ocean into the hole. “Impossible!” exclaimed St. Augustine. “No more impossible,” the child answered, “than for thee, O Augustine, to solve the mystery of the Trinity.” And, as soon as the child answered—in some accounts he is an angel and in others the Christ—he vanished, leaving Augustine puzzled on the seashore.<sup>23</sup>

After this erudite opening, Desideri proceeds to describe *rang grub dkon mchog* as a “mystery” (*ya mtshan*) of three unsurpassable persons (*bla med bdag nyid*). The terms the missionary uses for the Father and the Son, *yab* and *sras*, are common in Tibetan Christian literature. His phrase for Holy Spirit, *bla med rnam dag yid*, is unique to him as far as I know, although it is similar to both Antonio Giorgi’s and Yoseb Gergen’s Tibetan translations.<sup>24</sup> That being said, Desideri’s description of the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit follow the general parameters of the Christian theological tradition. The three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one undifferentiated essence (*ngo bo tha dad med par gcig tu grub*) or undivided “nature” or “continuum” (*rgyud dbyer med*). Since God knows Himself, Desideri argues, He produces an image that is equal to Himself in every respect. This image is no mere mirror image, but such that the Father who knows Himself and the image generated by that knowledge are established as “one undivided essence and undifferentiated continuum.” The Father and the Son, then, are two different *bdag nyid* with a single *ngo bo*. Although the Son is generated or “begotten” (*bskrun*) by the Father, the two *bdag nyid* are not two *rang grub dkon mchog*, but rather one *rang grub dkon mchog* established as two unsurpassable *bdag nyid*. Desideri stresses, however, that the Father’s generation of the Son is eternal, from the very beginning, free of the three confines of past, present, and future, and that this eternal generation happens without the slightest loss to the Father, who together with His Son, delights infinitely in the Spirit they share in their single, undifferentiated essence. This Spirit is another *bdag nyid*, different from Father

and Son, which is nevertheless “mutually established” by the Father and the Son, and which shares their single, undifferentiated *ngo bo*. Desideri concludes, “The Father is *rang grub dkon mchog*; the Son is *rang grub dkon mchog*; the Holy Spirit is *rang grub dkon mchog*; but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, having been established as one undifferentiated essence in a single undivided continuum, are not three *rang grub dkon mchog*, but one *rang grub dkon mchog*, the one Lord without rival.”<sup>25</sup> To illustrate his point, Desideri makes use of an analogy common in Patristic writings on the Trinity: A stream arises from a fountain, he says, and a lake arises from the stream. The fountain, the stream, and the lake are three, but the water of the fountain, the water of the stream, and the water of the lake are one, indistinguishable water. Returning to his oceanic metaphor, Desideri has his imagined interlocutor exclaim, “Alas, it is a childish mind that grasps at the ocean as if it were a mere four or five cupfuls. . . . This *paṇḍita* is like a captain and his kindness is like a ship. Now we can find rest on the great ocean of that which passes beyond thought.”<sup>26</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Desideri did not fare too poorly in his translations; in fact, once we make allowances for his somewhat creative use of some Tibetan terms—which he presumably would have explained further to interested parties—he was relatively successful at communicating something of the density of Christian theological speculation on the mystery of Holy Trinity in the brief space of a few questions of a catechism. Although his discussion would have been thought highly idiosyncratic by any Tibetan who might have chanced upon it, Desideri’s vocabulary, especially in the *Chos lugs kyi snying po*, shows that he put a great deal of thought into his choice of terms. The missionary made a concerted effort to sketch the main outlines of the Christian doctrine in both its biblical and speculative forms. He also anticipated some pertinent philosophical objections, most likely hoping that his catechetical remarks would be as appealing to the learned as to simple.

Desideri’s Trinitarian theology is generally Augustinian in character, rather than Greek or Victorine, inasmuch as he makes use of the Bishop of Hippo’s so-called psychological analogy, but the missionary, probably anticipating Tibetan objections to Augustine’s Neo-Platonic psychology, avoids explicitly comparing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to memory, intellect, and will. That being said, Desideri probably intended the phrase *bla na med pa’i bdag nyid* to unite the Victorine definition on the person as an incommunicable form—a particular emphasis of the Scotist tradition—and the Boethian definition of the person is a rational subsistence—a particular emphasis of the Thomist tradition. Desideri is here true to the generally synthetic scholasticism of the Society of Jesus. At a deeper level, Desideri also tries to respect the two dominant biblical traditions of Christology: the *Logos* Christology of the Gospel of John and the *imago* Christology of the Pauline epistles, taking special note that the Son is both an “explication” (*bshad*) of the Father and His “image” or “reflection” (*gzugs brnyan*). Finally, Desideri makes sure to include an account of the Spirit’s procession from both the Father and the Son, the infamous *filioque* of Latin theology, lest the

Tibetans fall into the Trinitarian heresy that many Catholic theologians during Desideri's day would have associated with the allegedly schismatic Greeks.

Desideri's account is also noteworthy for what it omits. As we have seen, the Jesuit chose "single Jewel" (*dkon mchog gcig*) rather than "buddha jewel" (*sangs rgyas dkon mchog*) to translate the word "God," often glossing the name with various philosophical qualifiers, such as "self-established" (*rang grub*).<sup>27</sup> He did not mind describing God in terms that might suggest Avalokiteśvara, such as "great compassion" (*rnying rje chen po*) or "measureless compassion" (*mtba' med par thugs rje*), or terms that might suggest the Primordial Buddha Samantabhadra (*kun tu bzang po*), such as "thoroughly good" (*kun tu bzang pa*), but he did not draw analogies between the Trinity and any number of well-known Buddhist triads. He did not, for example, compare the Trinity to the three bodies of the Buddha, and he tended to minimize the similarities between the Holy Trinity and the Three Jewels. The two manuscripts that he wrote in his early months in Dakpo, presumably when he would have been in contact with the Nyingma-Kagyü *gter ston* Chöjé Lingpa (*Chos rje gling pa*), do bear faint—very faint—traces of the philosophical vocabulary of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). In addition to the term *gzhi*, the *Nges legs* uses the words *ye shes* and *rig pa*, but such connotations are never developed in the triadic fashion typical in *rdzogs chen* texts. Interestingly enough, Desideri does say that God is "spontaneously established" (*lhun grub*) at the opening of the *Chos lugs*, although this later text consistently avoids other terms more traditionally associated with *rdzogs chen*.<sup>28</sup> Another line in the *Chos lugs* suggests possible Jonang influence: although Desideri does not say that God is empty of other, he does say that all existents other than God (*gzhan ci yod pa tham jad*) are excluded from Him.<sup>29</sup> The terminology in all of Desideri's texts bear remarkable similarities to terminology of the *Kun byed rgyal po'i mdo* (*Sutra of the All-Creating King*), which speaks of the King's *rang bzhin*, *ngo bo*, and *thugs rje*, all terms that remained consistent during Desideri's various attempts to explain the Christian understanding of God to his Tibetan interlocutors, although one wonders why Desideri did not call God the *Kun byed rgyal po* if he was influenced by that text.<sup>30</sup> I am almost inclined to think that the fact that missionary does not use this title suggests that he was influenced by the text, although I understand that such an anxiety of influence rests on an argument from absence. To be fair, these terms are also incredibly common, and such isolated instances cannot be made to bear too much of an interpretive burden until we have a better sense of the Tibetan texts he studied.

Desideri's final omission, which I believe quite deliberate, is of greater philosophical and theological importance. In his choice of the term *bdag nyid* to describe the Trinitarian persons, I believe the Jesuit deliberately avoided *gang zag*, the more common philosophical term for "person." I suspect Desideri had European controversies in mind as much as Tibetan ones when he made this choice, which seems designed to avoid the suggestion that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were merely imputed, and not genuine *hypostases*. In sum, they could not merely be nonassociative compositional factors, for they were not designated in dependence on form or consciousness. Nor in Desideri's mind would the Trinitarian persons be subject to the typical Madhyamaka refutation of the self of persons, for God, being utterly simple, had no



aggregates whatsoever. Of course, the phrase *bdag nyid* could hardly be free of similar connotations, and we must assume again that Desideri intended to explain away any of his interlocutors' difficulties. To some extent, this is unavoidable, and every Christian theologian is aware of this fact: the terms that they use to describe the Holy Trinity, namely, "person" and "nature" are predicated of God analogously; while we may understand their created instances, the primary truth of such terms is attributed to a God who transcends human understanding.

If Desideri hoped to convert the obscure symbols of Tibetan religion to the true symbols of Christian faith, he was still forced to confront the inherent weakness of human reason, which would be bound in most of its earthly acts to the humble exercises of the imagination. It is no small irony of Desideri's struggle to find appropriate Tibetan expressions for the Holy Trinity that the very terms he chose—*rang bzbin*, *bdag nyid*, *ngo bo*—mimic the very ambiguities of the Greek and Latin terms—*hypostasis*, *prosopon*, *ousia*, *natura*, *persona*—that led to the great Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. If such terms were hardly applied consistently in the West—even after their Conciliar definitions—we can hardly wonder why missionaries fought so valiantly to find equivalent expressions in Asian languages. We can only surmise that Desideri intended to explain his choices more fully to his Tibetan interlocutors, and bring them, if not into the arms of the Christian faith, at least into the task of clarifying the philosophical language both traditions use to express the paradoxical experiences of divine wisdom. Sadly, Desideri was prevented from engaging further in this shared hermeneutical adventure by Michelangelo Tamburini's orders, which called him out of Tibet, and aborted one of the most significant inter-religious conversations in early modern history.

#### NOTES

1. Missionaries were particularly interested whether Asian cultures believed in reincarnation, largely because it allowed them to relate Asian cultures to their own European antiquity through the analogous notion of *metempsychosis*, or the "transmigration of souls," associated with Pythagoras. Nicolaus Lancillortus reported on the belief in a letter to Ignatius Loyola himself as early as December 1550 (*Documenta Indica* [=DI] 2.128).

2. Desideri's account can be found in the final three volumes of Luciano Petech, *I Missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, 7 vols. (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1954–1956) [=MITN]. In the notes to follow, I will use the abbreviations established by Petech to refer to Desideri's account of his travels in Tibet [=DR] and letters [=DL] in this edition. This quotation is from DL 7 (MITN 5.36): "*Ils appellent dieu Konciok, & ils semblent avoir quelque idée de l'adorable Trinité; car tantost ils nomment Konciok-cik, Dieu un; & tantost Konciok-Sum, Dieu trin. Ils se servent d'une espèce de chapelle, sur lequel ils prononcent ces paroles: Om, ha, hum. Lorsqu'on leur en demande l'explication, ils répondent que Om signifie intelligence ou bras, c'est-à-dire, puissance; que ha est la parole; que hum est le coeur ou l'amour; & que ce trois mots signifient Dieu. Ils adorent encore un nommé Urgbien, qui naquit, à ce qu'ils disent, il ya a sept cens ans. Quand on leur demande s'il est dieu ou homme, quelques-un d'eux répondent qu'il est tout ensemble dieu & homme, qu'il n'a eu ny père ny mère, mais qu'il est né d'une fleur. Néanmoins leur statues représentent une femme qui a une fleur à la main, & ils disent que c'est la mère d'Urgbien. Ils adorent plusieurs autres personnes qu'ils regardent comme des saints. Dans leurs églises on voit un autel couvert d'une nappe avec un parement: au milieu de l'autel est une espèce de tabernacle, où, selon eux, Urgbien reside, quoique d'ailleurs ils assurent qu'il est dans le ciel.*"

3. António de Andrade, *Novo descobrimento do gram Cathayo, ou Reinos de Tibet* (Lisbon, 1626). For a modern edition, see Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, ed., *O descobrimento do Tibet* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1921). Important secondary literature includes L. B. Barrett, "António de Andrade and the Discovery of Tibet," *Journal of Indian History* 2 (1922–1923): 241–246; August Hermann Francke, "Die Jesuitenmission von Tsaparang im Lichte der tibetischen Urkunden," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 15 (1925): 269–276; Jürgen Aschoff, *Tsaparang-Königsstadt in Westtibet: Die vollständigen Berichte des Jesuitenpaters António de Andrade und eine Beschreibung vom heutigen Zustand der Klöster* (Munich, 1989); Hughes Didier, *Les Portugais au Tibet: les premières relations jésuites (1624–1635)* (Paris: Editions Chandeigne 1996). For a summary of early Jesuit knowledge of Tibet, see Giuseppe Toscano, SX, *La prima missione cattolica nel Tibet* (Parma: Istituto Missioni Estere, 1951). On Godinho, see Henri Hosten, SJ, "A Letter of Father Francisco Godinho, S.J., from Western Tibet," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, n.s. 21 (1925): 49–73.

4. António de Andrade, *O descobrimento do Tibet*, 71–72, 83, 93.

5. *Ibid.*, 83: "Pintão aos Anjos, a que chamão Lãs, de uarias maneiras; huns muito fermosos como mancebos; outros em figuras horrendas pelejando contra os demonios; e dizem, que os representão nesta forma, não porque a tenhão; mas pera exprimir os uarios efeitos que tem contra os Espiritos malignos."

6. Hosten, "Fr. Francisco Godinho," 66: "Les peuples de ce grand Thibeth ne sont pas idolatres: car nous avons trouvé qu'ils reconnoissent l'Unité & Trinité adorable du vray Dieu, ils sçavent qu'il y a trois Hierarchies d'Esprits Angeliques, divisés en neuf choeurs, selon differences de leurs excellences & dignitez, Qu'il il ya un Enfer qui attend les les meschans, & un Paradis pour la recompense des bons. Mais parmi ces vertez, il s'est meslé tant de nuages d'erreur, que le voisinage des Payens leur a faict prendre par contagion."

7. I have discussed the technical meaning of these terms, and their larger theological context in a previous article for this journal. Interested readers, may consult Trent Pomplun, "Divine Grace and the Play of Opposites," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 159–172.

8. Pico della Mirandola could remark that the one who comprehended the unity of Venus and the trinity of the graces knows the *modus procedendi* of "Orphic" theology. Franciscans such as Arcangelo da Borgonuova followed Pico in their own speculations on the pre-Christian knowledge of the Trinity, and the Dominican Antonio of Florence quoted pagan authors favorably under the rubric *testimonia Trinitatis in doctrinis ethnicorum*. Another Franciscan, Francesco Giorgio, declared the Chaldean trinity Ohrmazd-Mithra-Ahriman to be *superexcelsae trinitatis vestigium*. Marsilio Ficino believed that Orpheus, Plato, and Zoroaster had foreknowledge of the Trinity, and Gyraldus hailed Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus as "prophets" of the Trinity, much in the same way that Augustine celebrated the Sybil's prophecy of the Incarnation. This Neo-Platonic mania for sacred triads so inspired the philosophers of the Renaissance that they discovered (or invented) unheard of triads in Christian history, such as the infamous *trinubium Annae*, the belief that the three Marys mentioned in the New Testament were daughters of Anne by three different husbands, Joachim, Cleophas, and Salomas. Indeed, it is hard to find a Renaissance philosopher who did not find traces of the trinity in the religions of antiquity. The hegemony of the biblical chronology also led Renaissance writers to identify figures from classical myths with characters from the ancient biblical narratives. Thus Giles of Viterbo and Sir Thomas Browne, among others, identified the Roman god Janus with Noah on the basis of their shared penchant for seafaring. E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

9. See the triple-sun motif on the title page of Paul Aler, *Annus secularis Archi-Episcopatus Coloniensis* (Cologne: Peter Wilhelm Alstorff, 1683); Claude-François Menestrier, *La philosophie des images* (Paris: Robert J. B. de la Calle, 1682). For an eye in the triangle, see the *ubique centrum* emblem from Paulus Baranyal, *Viaticum spirituale peregrinationis animae* (Claudiopolis, 1695).

10. One of the most renowned authors of Jesuit emblem books, Jeremias Drexel, depicted Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical pagan magician who was thought by many to have been blessed with prophetic foreknowledge of the Holy Trinity, in just this fashion. See Jeremias Drexel, *Trismegistus Christianus* (Munich: Nikolaus Heinrich, 1625). Drexel's work was published

in several editions, including an Italian edition published in Rome: *Il trismegisto christiano ouere Tre sorti di culto della coscienza de santi del corpo* (Rome: H. Scheus, 1643).

11. Philip Johan Tabbert von Stralenberg compared the three-headed deity on the *tsba tsba* he published in *Das Nord- und Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia* (Stockholm, 1730) with the “idol Pussae” depicted by Kircher in *China illustrata*, since this deity does not have three heads at all, but is seated on a lotus. On Stralenberg, see Braham Norwick, “The First *Tsba-Tsba* Published in Europe,” 77.

12. *Della Entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina* (Fonti Ricciane 1.10, n. 193), 128: “*Ambedue queste sette [i.e., Buddhism and Daoism] finsero il suo ternario, acciocchè si veggia chiaro esser il padre della bugia autore di tutte queste, il quale non ha anco lasciato la superba pretensione di voler essere simile al suo Creatore.*” For the discussion of the Buddhist “Trinity,” see *Fonti Ricciane* 1.10, n. 183, 123–124.

13. Athanasius Kircher, *China monumentis qua sacris profanis nec non variis naturae & artis spectaculis alicarum rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (Amsterdam: Jacobus van Meurs 1667), 133: “*Porque en la Provincia de Paquin entre los otros Idolos, que alli tienen, ay una figura del hombre, que tiene tres cabezas, y se miran la una à la otra, y dizen los Chinas, que significa aquello, que todos tres non tienen mas de un solo querer y voluntad.*” Kircher also discussed whether the Egyptians had a knowledge of the Trinity in *Qedipus Aegyptiacus* II (2), 506–510; II (3), 575–577.

14. Joachim Bouvet’s *Idea generalis doctrinae libri Ye Kim seu brevis expositio totius systematis philosophiae ieroglyphicae in antiquissimis Sinarum libris contentae* (ARSI *Jap. Sin* 174) was perplexed about similarities to the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the creation and redemption of the world, and the sacrifice of the Mass. Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare was similarly concerned by the miraculous birth of Hou Ji. On Bouvet, see David Mungello, *Curious Land*, 300–328. On Prémare, see Knud Lundbaek, *Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736), S.J.—Chinese Philology and Figurism* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1991), and “Joseph de Prémare and the Name of God in China,” in David Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994), 129–145. Also see David E. Mungello, “The Reconciliation of Neo-Confucianism with Christianity in the Writings of Joseph de Prémare, S.J.,” *Philosophy East and West* 26 (1976): 389–410, and “Sinological Torque: The Influence of Cultural Preoccupations on Seventeenth-Century Missionary Interpretations of Confucius,” *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978): 123–142. For Foucquet, see John W. Witek, SJ, *Controversial Ideas in China and In Europe: A Biography of Jean-François Foucquet, S.J. (1665–1741)* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1982).

15. Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 312. In light of the persistent association of demons and celestial troubles in the seventeenth century, it is worth noting that Desideri judged Samyé to be situated in a “quite horrible place” (*il sito molt’orrido*) that is “continually beset by the fiercest winds” (*continuamente dominata da rigidissimi venti*). One can only imagine how he would have felt about the various forms of weather magic in Tibet.

16. Missionaries in India consistently remarked on the Hindu “Trinity.” Gaspar Barzaeus seemed particularly fascinated by the subject (DI 1.505, 629, 698; DI 2.254), Melchior Gonçalves mentions it in a letter from January 1551 (DI 2.184), Melchior Diaz remarks on the *trimūrti* again in 1565 (DI 6.579), and Pedro Páez Xamarillo alludes to it in his description of the idol with three heads in the Great Cave at Elephanta (Ghārāpuri) (DI 15.263–264).

17. I have used the translation found in *The Travels of Several Learned Missionaries of the Society of Jesus into Divers Parts of the Archipelago, India, China, and America* (London: R. Gosling, 1714), 21–22. Bouchet’s letter to Huet is a digest of missionary theology: the Jesuit denies that Hindus are atheists, describes the Hindu Trinity, explains the errors of Hinduism in terms of pagan fables, and defends the primogeniture of Moses.

18. On the imaginative aspect of human knowing in St. Thomas Aquinas, see Serge-Thomas Bonino, OP, “Le role de l’image dans la connaissance prophetique d’après saint Thomas,” *Revue thomiste* 89 (1989): 533–568. I am grateful to Frederick Bauerschmidt for pointing this article

out to me. I have also learned quite a bit from his unpublished paper, "Imaginatio, Theology, and Imagination."

19. The basic texts of Trinitarian theology in the Western Church are St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*; St. Anselm, *Monologium*; Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate*; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* IV, 1–26; *Summa theologiae* Ia, qu. 27–43. We can be reasonably certain that Desideri would have known these texts in outline, if not in detail.

20. *Tho rangs* 4. Cf. Giuseppe Toscano, ed., *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* [=OT] (Rome, 1981), 1.90: *dkon mchog skye shi mi mnga' rgyu rkyen medl yongs rdzogs rgyun tu 'go med mjug yang medl yongs rdzogs rang byung rang cbags rang gis grubl skedon gyis ma gos 'gyur ba mi mnga' bal de yang gcig pu de yang nyid gsum 'dugl gsum kyang bral med gsum nyid bral ba ngesl so sor bral gsum gsum yang rang bzbin gcigl brgyud rigs bral med snying po rdzogs bar gcig*. This passage should be indication enough of the difficulties attendant upon translating one set of scholastic terms into another, especially at such an early stage in the dialogue. The last line could conceivably be rendered "These relations are one, without being distinguished, and their essence is perfectly one." Desideri's Tibetan is admittedly obscure.

21. *Chos lugs* 15v (OT 2.82): *sprin med nam mkbar nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor sbar na nilmtshan mo'i dus su yid 'ong bzbin du snang bas kbyab pa'i skar ma ma lus thams cad 'ong na lhag med dang 'dra bar mi snang bar 'gyur bal de bzbin du rang grub dkon mchog 'gran zla med bar gcig pu rje de'i bla na med pa'i yon tan dang cbe ba tshad med pa rnam dad pa'i mig la sbar byung stel snga mar rmongs shing yongs su bstus pa'i yid keyi 'dzin stongs kyis dkon mchog lta bur 'dzin pa'i sgyu ma dang 'dra bar yul brdzun pa rnam kyis ni yon tan nam cbe ba lhag med bzbin du mi snag bar 'gyur te . . . da lta bla med bdag nyid gsum du grub tshul ya mtshan pa zhes gsungs pa'i rgyu mtshan par yang nas yang du sku drin gnang bar mdzod*. As the reader can see, I have simplified Desideri's Tibetan in my translations. Although the Tibetan in Desideri's later works is far clearer than the Tibetan in the *Tho rangs*, it is still quite wordy, especially in the missionary's abundant use of auxiliary verbs.

22. *Chos lugs* 15v–16 (OT 2.82–83): *do thung ba zbig tu rgya mtsho chen po'i chu nams thams cad blugs par bya'o snyam na brda' (=brda) la ma byang ba'i byis pa dang kbyad par med pal de bzbin du rang bzbin gyis grub pa gcig pu rje de nyid keyi yin lugs tshad med pa brjod keyis mi lang ba bsam las 'das pa da nyid bstan par bya'o snyam na de 'dra'i byis pa dang kbyad bar med dol 'on kyang kbyod keyi sems tshim par byed pa'i pbyir du dad pa'i gnas 'di cung zad tsam zbig gsal bar bya'o*.

23. A fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli depicting this legend can be found in Tuscany, in the Augustinian monastery of San Gimignano. See Diane Cole Ahl, "Benozzo Gozzoli's Frescoes of the Life of St. Augustine in San Gimignano: Their Meaning in Context," *Artibus et Historiae* 7 (1986): 35–53.

24. Yoseb Gergan, for example, translated Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as *yab dang sras dang dam pa'i thugs nyid*, but used the phrase *bla med* to translate "Most High" as in his translation of Luke 1:35: *pho nyas lan dul kbyed la dam pa'i thugs nyid 'babl bla med mtbu yis bsil grib pasl kbyed la bltam pa'i dam pa la' dkon mchog nyid keyi sras gsol 'gyur*. Desideri's vocabulary might also be fruitfully compared to that learned by Antonio Giorgi from the Capuchin fathers. Giorgi usually translates Holy Spirit as *sangs rgyas rnam dag* or *sangs rgyas rnam dag sems*, which certainly allows more favorable comparisons between Christianity and Buddhism, since he equates saintliness and buddhahood. In fact, he translates *sanctorum omnium communionem* from the Apostles' Creed as *sangs rgyas thams cad keyi sngos po*. In his longer discussion of the Trinity Giorgi draws more explicit comparisons to the Three Jewels than Desideri, but then attempts to refute the Tibetan "Trinity" as a Manichaean heresy with passages from the writings of St. Augustine. See *Alphabetum Tibetanum* (Rome, 1762), 272–279, 643, 647–648. Finally, one might also compare Desideri's vocabulary with the Tibetan translation of the Apostles' Creed discussed in Josef Kolmas, "The Symbolum Fidei in Tibetan (Text, Translation, Glossary)," *Studia Tibetica: Quellen und Studien zur tibetischen Lexikographie, Band II*, Herbert Franke, ed. (Munich: Kommission für zentralasiatische Studien bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften 1988), 223–230.

25. *Chos lugs* 17 (OT 2.85): *tha mar yab ni dkon mchog yin zbingl sras kyang dkon mchog yin pasl bla med rnam dag yin ni dkon mchog yid nol 'on kyang yab dang sras dang bla med rnam dag yid gsum*

*rgyud dbyer med gcig tu ngo bo tha dad med par gcig tu grub pa yin pas/ yab sras bla med rnam dag yid gsum rang grub dkon mchog gsum ma yin par/ rang grub dkon mchog 'gran zla med par gcig pu rje tsam yin pa la ni yid ches kyi dad pa skyed par bya dgos so.*

26. *Chos lugs* 17v (OT 2.86): *kye'e e ma'ol dpag tshad bzhi lngar 'kbyil ba'i mtsho shin tu rgya cbe bar 'dzin pa'i byis pa'i yid . . . ded dpon lta bu'i pandita khyod kyi sku drin la gru rdzings lta bur brten nas . . . bsam las 'das pa rnams kyi rgya mtsho chen po'i lam zbugs par bzung ste.*

27. For a long explanation, see *Chos lugs* 14v–15 (OT 2.80–81).

28. *Chos lugs* 1 (OT 2.53).

29. *Chos lugs* 15 (OT 2.81).

30. I would like to thank Janet Gyatso for first pointing this out to me. Consider the passage from the third and fourth folios that begins: *nyid kyi rang bzhin dang/ nyid kyi ngo bo dang/ nyid kyi thugs rje dang ye shes mngon du pbyung ba'i 'khor 'di lta ste.*