

Identification and Criticism: Tibetan Religion from the Perspective of Christian Culture from the 16th to 18th Century

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ABSTRACT. *From the 16th to the 18th century, Western European missionaries continued to enter Tibet to preach, which was the beginning of direct contact between the West and Tibet in China. While missionaries brought Christianity to Tibet, they also planted seeds for the fierce collision between Christian culture and Tibetan Buddhist culture. While recognizing some similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, the missionaries could not avoid the heterogeneity of Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. Therefore, they inevitably had to conflict with the local traditional religious forces, and almost without exception showed their cultural superiority as "God electors". The works of the missionaries in this period provided rare historical materials for westerners to understand Tibet, but behind these narratives, there was an image of a writer who was close to and distant from Tibet.*

KEYWORDS: *Identification, Criticism, Christian Culture, Tibetan Religion*

From the 16th century to the middle of the 18th century, along with the eastward expansion of Western European colonial forces, more than ten groups of missionaries of the Roman Catholic Jesuit Church and the Kapu Puritanism entered Ali, Xigaze, Lhasa and other places in Tibet from northern India to preach, which was the beginning of direct contact between the West and Tibet. In this process, the missionaries played the role of "discoverers". They brought the legendary Tibet back to the real world, and made the life and belief of Tibetan people enclosed in the snowy plateau gradually known to Europe. As a religious holy land on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, Tibet has gradually appeared in the western vision. Through the illusory world full of Oriental legends in various travel notes of Medieval Europe., Tibet finally presented itself to the Europeans as an entity during this period.

These missionaries' trip to Tibet objectively promoted the cultural exchanges between China and the West. Some of them came for the purpose of expanding the colonies of Spain and Portugal. Similarly, "some of them entered Tibet out of belief

in God and spread "Gospel of God" ¹ This way of spreading the Gospel of God is different from colonial expansion with economic plunder as the direct purpose. What they represent is the external expansion of Christian culture.

1. Missionaries' Eastward Exploration under the Background of the Great Geographical Discovery

Before the 15th century, the limited European narration of Tibet mainly came from the introduction of Tibet by Marco Polo, Franciscans and other explorers. These introductions are mainly derived from legends, indirect materials, or peripheral travel, so the premise of "listening to others" is often added. In the vision of ancient Europeans, Tibet and its surrounding areas have always been a looming, phantom mirage-like unknown place in the East. Elder John, the land of gold, the land of spices and the description full of fantastic content became the mainstream of imagination. Among these legends, the most influential and lasting one is the aforementioned legend of Elder John. In the 15th century, it was quite popular and accepted that there were many people who believed in Christianity completely or almost completely in Europe. It is believed that this statement is based on the news from medieval travelers and missionaries, especially Marco Polo's travels, which made people mistakenly believe that Asia was full of Nestorians. Therefore, many missionaries hoped to find and help the forgotten faithful in this place.

The great plague of the Middle Ages in Europe² and the Great Split of Christianity³ in Europe greatly weakened the power of Christianity. In order to regain its dominant position, the Roman Church took the opportunity of opening up a new channel to turn its expanding sight to overseas. The Roman Church played a very important role in the exploration of new channels and the search for colonies.

In the 15th century, the pope had great authority, and was consulted on any small-scale activities. The affirmation of the Pope is the guarantee of the legitimacy of an action. The expansion of Christianity in the world is based on a complete theoretical system. One of the most influential is the theory of colonial rights put forward by the Spanish theologian Francois de Vittoria (1486-1546) in the 15th century. Vittoria believed that the colonial rights of the West were mainly based on two reasons: First, God created the world for all living beings in the universe, so the wealth in the world can be enjoyed by all living beings and no one has the right to

¹ Wu Kunming: "History of Early Missionaries' Activities in Tibet", Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 1992, p. 3.

² The great plague of the Middle Ages, also known as the Black Death, was a plague that swept across Europe from 1347 to 1353. The plague claimed the lives of 25 million Europeans, accounting for 1/3 of the total European population at that time.

³ The Great Split of Christianity refers to the two splits of Christianity. The first Great Split of Eastern and Western Churches in the 11th century separated the Greek Orthodox (Orthodox Church of the East) and the Roman Catholic Church (Ecumenical Roman Church). In the second great schism (or Reformation) of the old and new churches in the 16th century, Lutheranism (Lutheranism), Anglicanism (Anglicanism), and Reformed religion (Calvinism) were split from Roman Catholicism. And then split this small sect again from the tribe. These two great schisms had a major impact on the entire European Christian world.

hinder them; Second, the Bible calls on Christians to "teach the nations of the world". Therefore, no one may hinder the dissemination of doctrine. The theoretical basis of "the use of human wealth is determined by heaven" and "the right to spread the gospel" were the reasons for Christianity to expand and exercise its colonial rights.⁴

The theory of "the use of human wealth is determined by heaven" was used by the church to explain the expansion of Christian churches in European countries at that time. Taking the colonial expansion of Spanish America as an example, they believed that "The Spanish, like the barbarians, are human beings. All men should love their own kind as much as they love themselves. Therefore, there is no justification for the barbarians to exclude the Spanish." In short, "the Spanish can trade and share public wealth."⁵

Theologians from the "right to spread the gospel" have also extended many reasons, These reasons are similar to the above statement: "Christians have the right to preach in the place of barbarians, because if Christians can't spread the gospel to unbelievers, the soul of the latter can't be saved.... Brotherly punishment, like fraternity (discipline is out of fraternity), is one of the natural rights. However, barbarians not only live in sin, but also in a state of being unable to be saved. Therefore, It is the duty of Christians to impose brotherly punishment on them so that they can escape their sins."⁶

In the European society dominated by Christian culture at that time, the exploration of new channels, the search for overseas colonies and the division of colonies were all rationalized by the Christian Church and guaranteed its religious legitimacy. Therefore, the church, especially the Pope, played a very important role in the activities of searching for and dividing up the overseas colonies.

As early as 1452 and 1456 in the middle of the 15th century, Pope Nicolas V and Calicott III granted the Portuguese the right to occupy the newly discovered land, which was the so-called "sovereignty" granted by the Pope to the king of Portugal. The Pope "rewarded" the newly discovered land in the region as his own to the Portuguese to encourage them to seek colonies. This shows that the Pope played an important role in the local overseas colonial activities.

In fact, at that time, Portugal, Spain and other Western European countries were actually the integration of the church and the state. Their monarchs carried out overseas expansion under the banner of religion. Monarchs have put on a cloak of total price for themselves, claiming to be "Defender of Christianity", "King of Christianity", "eldest son of the Church", "King of Catholicism" and so on. The kings put on the Christian coat and carried the banner of spreading Christian civilization. Their purpose was to obtain the support of the Vatican to expand the

⁴ Jacques Arnault: *The Trial of Colonialism*, translated by Yue Jin, Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1962, p.118.

⁵ Jacques Arnault: "The Trial of Colonialism", translated by Yue Jin, Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1962, pp. 119-120.

⁶ Jacques Arnault: "The Trial of Colonialism", translated by Yue Jin, Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1962, p. 120.

overseas colonies and use the tool of Christianity to encourage the majority of believers and support their search for colonies.

When the Portuguese occupied Goa, the Portuguese governor minted and issued currency with Christian Cross patterns there, and applied to the Pope to send missionaries to use religion to serve its expansion and consolidation of the colony. In 1541, the missionaries went to Goa with the new governor. The Jesuits sent the missionary Francis Xavier to India as a "Envoy to the Far East of the Vatican.". Since then, Christian missionaries have once again been active in the countries of the Far East. During their missionary process, they left a large number of records, letters, diaries, etc., which opened the real experience of Europeans to write the history of Tibet.

2. Missionaries' Recognition of Tibetan Buddhism in the Aftermath of the Legend of Elder John

In the 16th century, Christian missionaries stepped into Tibet, our country. They came to Snowland Tibet with great enthusiasm and overcame many difficulties. First of all, they were to confirm all kinds of rumors about the existence of Christian countries in the northern foothills of the Himalayas. If this news is true, then they should make their misconstrued Christianity return to the modern Christian family, that is, Roman Catholicism. If the place does not believe in Christianity, then go there to spread the gospel.

The legend of Elder John made the western missionaries and Tibetans connected in a wonderful way. The expansion of Christian culture in Tibet turned into a story about the reunion of brothers of a Christian family. Westerners came to Tibet to preach, not to plunder wealth, not to expand the colony. They were to bring the descendants of ancient Christians in remote areas back to the embrace of the modern Christian church, so that they could find their correct place in the religious order of this world. Therefore, under the influence of the legend of Elder John, the missionaries in this period deliberately emphasized the common ground of the two religions and tended to identify with Tibetan Buddhism.

The Portuguese missionary, Andode, stated in his letter entitled "Discovery of the Great Aurora as the Kingdom of Tibet" the reason for his entry into Tibet, "I explained to the king the purpose of my trip. I told him that in order to achieve this goal, I went to his court with great difficulty to verify what I had heard about him as a Christian and about him and his people following the true teachings of Jesus."⁷

Andode hopes to verify whether the nation on the other side of the Himalayas are countries where the West has been searching for descendants of Elder John for centuries, or a country that is not the country of Elder John, but is a country of ancient Christian descent. Therefore, in his description, there are many similarities

⁷ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p. 86.

between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism, showing the missionaries' identification with Tibetan Buddhism during the expansion of Christian culture.

It seemed that Andode had found some common things among Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Trinity of God, confession, the division of heaven and hell, and even some similar names, such as the cross, which is called "cruca" in Tibetans and "Cruz" in Christians. As a result, Andode believed that Tibetans "should not be pagans. In fact, they are very different from idolaters as we know ." ⁸ Father Casella also believed that "the light of the gospel has been shining here in some way. Some of the rituals and ways of consecration used here are roughly the same as those of Christianity, but there are also many strange things." ⁹

Desidili, who went to Lhasa to preach, summed up the character of "Tibetans' industrious, kind-hearted, upright and devout" in seven aspects. This affirmation of Tibetan character is based on Christian values. These seven aspects are: serious and enthusiastic about faith; extremely respect for their lamas and monks; never forget to pray. They spend a lot of time reading books about religion and moral cultivation; they turn scriptures and pray in a single and devout manner; they always stir their rosary beads and mumble their prayers; they are willing to give alms. ¹⁰

As missionaries, the "view of God's elect" and "the view of mission" are the basis for the firm beliefs of priests such as Andode and Desidili. The ultimate goal of their struggle was to seek for the lost Christian brothers to return to the church or convert the pagans to Christians. Under the influence of the legend of Elder John, the missionaries set foot on the road to Tibet. In their eyes, Tibetan religion seemed to be a copy or adaptation of Christianity, devout and charitable believers, similar stories of holy sites, ceremonies, organizational structures, church hierarchy, and similar religious laws and moral principles. All these made the missionaries excited, and they seemed to find a hot land suitable for spreading Christian faith in the expansion of Christian culture. Therefore, Andode declared optimistically that "Because of the good nature of the Tibetan people and the vast territory of their kingdom, our Lord seems to have opened another door for the spread of the gospel" ¹¹

3. Criticism of Tibetan Buddhism by Missionaries from the Standpoint of Christianity

While missionaries brought Christianity to Tibet, they also planted seeds for the fierce collision between Christian culture and Tibetan Buddhist culture. While recognizing some similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, the

⁸ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.157.

⁹ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.276.

¹⁰ [Germany] Ipolido Desidili: "Desidili Tibet Travel", edited by Wang Qilong, edited by Philip Felibi, translated by Yang Min, Lhasa: Tibet People's Publishing House, 2004, p.172.

¹¹ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.93.

missionaries could not avoid the heterogeneity of Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. Therefore, they inevitably had to conflict with the local traditional religious forces. At the same time and there is almost no exception, almost all of them showed their cultural superiority as "God's elect". In a sense, the arrogance of the missionaries who thought the truth was in hands was also one of the reasons for the failure of missionary work.

The rather strong sense of cultural superiority possessed by Father Andode was clearly expressed in one of his letters:

"I explained to the king the purpose of my trip. If the king allows me, I am willing to point out to him at any time what is wrong with their religion. I also told him that it was precisely because of the king's desire to save his soul that I stayed far away from the motherland, saying goodbye to my brothers and friends and coming here through all kinds of hardships. Therefore, I hope that he will take advantage of the opportunity given to him by God. In the past, God has not given such an opportunity to his ancestors, so I hope the king will live up to the grace God has given him."¹²

Here, Andode was eager to point out the "religious mistakes" of Tibetans before he could understand the local religion of Tibet. He regarded his trip to Tibet as a grace given by God to the king Guge of Tibet. Not long after father Desidili arrived in Lhasa, a Tatar official entertained him and asked him about his purpose of coming to Tibet. He said, "I am a priest, and my profession is a Lama. My religion and duty are to guide people into the right path, prevent them from committing crimes, and teach them our faith. Only in this way can they get eternal salvation."¹³ Desidili defined his duty as "guiding people on the right path." In their view, truth is in the hands of Christians, and the world is in the dark except for them. Light and darkness, heaven and cliffs form the fundamental differences between them and non-Christians. As "God's elect", their sense of cultural superiority was deeply rooted.

In the report of Father Godynion, who came to Tibet during the same period, although there were many references to the similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, he still arbitrarily believed that before the arrival of Western missionaries, Tibetans did not understand the meaning of prayer words. Only missionaries from the west can make them understand the true meaning of prayers. They use Christian words to explain Tibetan Buddhism. Western missionaries were regarded as disseminators of truth. Before they came to Tibet, although Buddhism was prevalent and the believers were devout, they were all in the dark, and even the meaning of the most basic prayers remained unknown. Therefore, when Tibetan Buddhism encountered Christianity, it was doomed to be criticized.

In fact, at the beginning of missionaries' preaching in Tibet, "The Buddhists received them with their usual generosity."¹⁴ However, the missionaries from the

¹² [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p. 86.

¹³ [Germany] Ipolido Desidili: "Desidili Tibet Travel", edited by Wang Qilong, edited by Philip Felibi, translated by Yang Min, Lhasa: Tibet People's Publishing House, 2004, p.53.

¹⁴ Wu Kunming: "History of Early Missionaries' Activities in Tibet", China Tibetology Press, 1992.

West lacked the tolerant spirit of Buddhists. Although they did not have a basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, this did not prevent them from making many rash inferences and even distorting their subjective assumptions about the concepts and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. Especially during the debates with lamas, the status of Christianity was raised everywhere, and tried to belittle Tibetan Buddhism and vilified the lamas who debated with him.

It is precisely under the control of this extremely exclusive religious consciousness that in the letters and reports of the missionaries, you can see their hostile and contemptuous comments on Tibetan Buddhism. "I had a discussion with the lamas in front of the king, and their ignorance led them into endless chaos. This ignorance has been confirmed by the king, and it is this ignorance that can liberate the king from their trap. But when they had no answer to our questions, they were unreasonable and put themselves in this kind of teasing." ¹⁵ In this description of "I" and "the other", Christianity as the main body represented light, while Tibetan Buddhism on the opposite side could only be the embodiment of ignorance and ignorance.

When Father Desidili's report mentioned religious objects such as Guanyin Bodhisattva, Padmasambhava, and Dalai Lama that were believed and worshipped by followers of Tibetan Buddhism, he undisguisedly used some Christian terms with denouncing color without concealment. In his opinion, "the abominable belief in reincarnation of the soul is the source of all the fallacies of the false Tibetan religion" ¹⁶ "Tibetan religion denies the existence of an absolutely eternal God, and denies the fundamental reason for the existence of all things, which is the main mistake of Tibetan religion." ¹⁷ "These ignorant people unconsciously admit, and at the same time, vaguely recognize the god they firmly deny in words." ¹⁸ In the eyes of missionaries, Christianity is the standard to measure all religions. What is different is wrong and needs to be improved. From the very beginning, this arrogant and arrogant attitude doomed their missionary activities in Tibet to failure.

Although the missionaries' description of Tibet was mixed with many subjective factors, both identity and criticism, as witnesses who entered Tibet, they did provide rare historical materials for Westerners to understand Tibet. At the same time, in order to avoid the readers' doubt of their texts, they put more emphasis on the authenticity of the records. As Desidili wrote in the preface of his works, "no matter how I write, whether I succeed or fail, the readers do not have to worry about the lack of facts in my writing; the readers will only read what I have seen and observed with my own eyes, except for my senses Cheated me, otherwise I would not cheat

p.258.

¹⁵ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads to the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.169.

¹⁶ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.344.

¹⁷ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.344.

¹⁸ [Italian] G.M. Toscano: "The Soul Leads the Snow-The Earliest Catholic Mission in Tibet", translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.344.

him. However, readers must put aside the influence of stereotyped prejudice, and do not think that things beyond common sense are necessarily false. The vicissitudes of life, Our clothes, ways of life and customs are completely different from before that even our ancestors would not recognize us; similarly, it is difficult for us to recognize them. If the reader himself is not biased, then I believe that he will realize that these albums are true.”¹⁹

Therefore, under the guidance of the legend of Elder John, Western missionaries in the 16th and 18th centuries risked their lives to enter Tibet. In the process of preaching, they undoubtedly undertook the task of cultural disseminators. But their contradictory attitude towards Tibetan Buddhism is both recognized and criticized. Behind these narratives, there is an image of a writer who is close to and distant from Tibet.

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¹⁹ [Germany] Ipolido Desidili: "Desidili Tibet Travel", edited by Wang Qilong, edited by Philip Felibi, translated by Yang Min, Lhasa: Tibet People's Publishing House, 2004, p. 4.