



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>  
*Scholarly journals online*

# Jesus the World-Protector: Eighteenth-Century Gelukpa Historians View Christianity<sup>1</sup>

Michael J. Sweet  
*University of Wisconsin–Madison*

The assumption that religion was so seamlessly woven into non-Western and pre-industrial cultures that it was not even distinguished as a separate entity, let alone regarded as an object for study, has been a commonplace among Western scholars of religion for some decades.<sup>2</sup> From this point of view, which can be broadly characterized as postmodernist and postcolonialist, the concept of religion “is not a native category . . . it is a category imposed from outside . . . it is the other . . . colonialists who are solely responsible for the content of the term.”<sup>3</sup> This is a somewhat reductionistic and Eurocentric perspective that ignores the universal human capacity to empathically understand other belief systems.

One counterexample to this school of thought is found in the works of three eighteenth-century religious historians, all of whom were learned monks in the Gelukpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism: Gombojab (Mgon po Skyabs, late seventeenth century–after 1766),<sup>4</sup> Sumba Khembo (Sum pa Mkhan po Yes shes dpal 'byor, 1704–1776), and Tuken (Thu'u Bkwan Blo bzang Chos kyi Nyi ma, 1737–1802), authors of *The History of Buddhism in China*, *The Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree*,<sup>5</sup> and *The Crystal Mirror*,<sup>6</sup> respectively. These scholars had clear conceptions of their own and other religious systems (Tib.: *chos lugs*), and compared to earlier Tibetan accounts they present relatively tolerant evaluations of other religious philosophies—for example, Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, and the Literati Tradition (Ru jiao, “Confucianism”)—while asserting the superiority of the Gelukpa form of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

As a case in point, we will see how they describe and evaluate Christianity, a religion that was quite foreign to them and that they appear to have understood only imperfectly. Earlier Tibetan Buddhist religious histories, of which the best-known are the *Blue Annals* of 'Gos Lotsawa and Bu ston's “History of the Dharma,” are immensely valuable sources, but they are more parochial in their range of interest than those of the eighteenth-century Tibeto-Mongol scholars.<sup>8</sup> For the earlier historians Indo-Tibetan Buddhism was the only religious system worth serious consideration, and Chinese Buddhism, Indian non-Buddhist religious philosophies, Bon,

and Islam were dealt with in a polemical or (especially in the case of Islam) a frankly hostile fashion. Something changed in the eighteenth century that produced works closer to modern comparative religion than to medieval heresiography.

A major motive for this shift was surely the triumph of the Manchu Qing dynasty, which by the mid-eighteenth century had incorporated Tibet and Mongolia definitively into its sphere. Thus, the horizon of the Tibeto-Mongol intelligentsia widened to include the vast Manchu empire, whose leadership in its turn was becoming increasingly aware of other Asian societies and of the European colonial powers. I believe it is significant that Sumba Khembo, Tuken, and Gombojab were all of Mongol ethnicity, the first two from Amdo and the last from Mongolia; they were able to combine an encyclopedic mastery of Tibetan Buddhist texts and ritual with the greater objectivity available to people stemming from the geographical and cultural periphery of that tradition. All three of them were exposed to the cosmopolitan world of imperial Beijing, where they had ample opportunity to meet followers of non-Buddhist religions of a wide range of ethnicities.<sup>9</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century there were four Catholic churches in Beijing, serving thousands of Chinese Christian converts. Dozens of European priests were employed by the imperial court as well.<sup>10</sup> The prevailing syncretic view of the three major Chinese religious philosophies (*sanjiao*)—Buddhism, Daoism, and the Literati Tradition—as being mutually complementary,<sup>11</sup> prevailed in the capital. This is the view that is approvingly cited by Tuken: “there are three great traditions (*lugs srol*) which clarify the ultimate nature of things, the Literati Tradition, Daoism, and Buddhism.”<sup>12</sup>

In turning to these scholars’ treatment of Christianity, we find the earliest notice of this religion in Gombojab’s *History of Buddhism in China*,<sup>13</sup> written around the mid-1730s.<sup>14</sup> Gombojab renders the name of Jesus in its traditional Chinese form of Yesu; he is called the World-Protector (*’jig rten mgon po*), thus homologizing him with the Tibetan Buddhist savior, Avalokiteshvara, and Gombojab relates that Jesus was miraculously born from the womb of a virgin named Ma li ya [=Maria], whose name is glossed as “star of the sea” (*rgyam tso’i skar ma*). His teaching comprises “10 vows,” (*sdom pa*), that is, the decalogue, such as “not to take human life,” as well as the doctrine that the fruit of virtue is to be born in the place of God and experience eternal happiness, and that result of nonvirtue is perpetual suffering in hell, an accurate rendering of basic Christian belief. Gombojab also states that the teaching of Jesus includes the belief in certain consciously committed sins (*she bzhin du byas pa’i kha na ma tho pa rnams*) that cannot be absolved by confession. He alludes to his sources, although unfortunately not by name, saying modestly that he had seen a few treatises on the subject, but had not looked into the others.

Gombojab’s knowledge of Christianity, such as it was, clearly derived from Catholic sources, as indicated by his gloss of Mary’s name as “star of the sea,” from the Latin “*stella maris*” an epithet used only by Roman Catholic Christians.<sup>15</sup> He refers to the ten commandments, but in a generic sense, characterizing them in terms of the Buddhist vows of abstention from nonvirtuous behavior and ignoring their injunctions to theological exclusivity. Gombojab mentions the reward of heaven and pun-

ishment of hell, quite similar to Buddhist concepts except in their eternal duration, but ignores other key Christian tenets such as Jesus' incarnation and resurrection, his expiation of the sins of humanity, the transubstantiation of the eucharistic elements, and the Trinity. The sin that cannot be expiated may allude to "the sin against the Holy Spirit," (cf. Matt 12:31–32) expounded in Catholic moral theology.<sup>16</sup> Gombojab had complete mastery of Chinese, and his sources may have included works on elementary Catholic theology composed in Chinese by Jesuits and Chinese converts from the early seventeenth century onward, as well as polemical treatments by Buddhist and Literati opponents of Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Sumba's brief description of Christianity, which sticks very closely to that of Gombojab,<sup>18</sup> follows that of various foreign theologies antecedent to Buddhism, with the exception of the Chinese systems of Daoism and the Literati tradition, to which, like Gombojab, he devotes a separate section and gives a privileged if subordinate position as the "moon and stars" in contrast to the sun of Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> In addition Sumba directly expresses a largely favorable attitude toward Christianity, stating that it furthers moral conduct and for the most part is in agreement with Buddhism, bolstering his position with a well-known quotation from the *Samādhirāja-Sūtra*: "There is no doubt that any well-explained teaching one may hear was taught by the Buddhas."<sup>20</sup>

Tuken's account of Christianity derives from that of his predecessors, and he is the least likely to have had direct experience with Christians, owing to the late date of his sojourns in Beijing, when the influence of the Jesuits had waned, their society itself having been officially suppressed by Rome in 1773, and Chinese Christians had gone virtually underground. This lack of firsthand familiarity with European Christians may account for his curiously putting Jesus in the section devoted to Chinese non-Buddhist teachers and not among foreign teachers, as Sumba and Gombojab had. This led the distinguished scholar Giuseppe Toscano to assert that Tuken believed Jesus to be a Buddhist patriarch,<sup>21</sup> although this claim is not found anywhere in Tuken's work. Neither Sumba nor Gombojab, with whose accounts Tuken was quite familiar, would have doubted that "Master Yesu" was a foreigner, as the characters used for his name are exclusively used to transliterate non-Chinese names. Tuken, who acknowledged his own scanty knowledge of the Chinese written language,<sup>22</sup> may not have been aware of this, although he surely knew that Christianity had been brought to China by Westerners.

What stands out in reading these brief accounts is what the authors have chosen to include and to exclude. Jesus's resurrection, his crucifixion as atonement for original sin, and the belief in transubstantiation of the host, to cite just a few of the key Catholic teachings that are not mentioned, may have been so alien to these Tibetan Buddhists as to be unintelligible. In contrast, they did include the concepts of an inexorable moral law, of heaven and hell, and of ethical precepts that had close analogues in Buddhism. The brevity of their treatment suggests that they did not take Christianity seriously as a rival and were not even interested enough in its theology to point out its obvious similarities to the Brahmanical theistic philosophies that were a staple of Buddhist scholastic refutations.<sup>23</sup> Their relatively benign valuation

of Christianity may also have stemmed from its lack of threat to the interests of the Gelukpa establishment, in contrast to the Bonpo-s and Nyingmapa-s for example, whose views *were* criticized by Tuken, as well as Islam, the historic rival of Buddhism and still a potent competitor, which Tuken attacks in the strongest terms.<sup>24</sup> Finally, throughout the period in which these scholars wrote, the emperors continued to employ Jesuits in highly responsible offices, although following the Rites Controversy (1715–1742) they severely restricted Christian missionary activity. That being the case, for Buddhist historians to have violently attacked the religion of the emperor's trusted servants could easily have been construed as an instance of *lèse majesté*.

There were of course strict limits to the Gelukpa historians' tolerance, which in no way corresponds to a relativistic acceptance of the equal value of all religious paths so common among the more liberal-minded in the contemporary West. These Buddhist writers had no doubt that the highest levels of spirituality could be attained only by those with correct (i.e., Mahāyāna Buddhist) views and practice, that the Gelukpa school presented the most efficacious synthesis of the Mahāyāna, and that other Tibetan Buddhist schools were lacking in some respects, although one could still attain emancipation through them.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the Buddhadharma had commonalities with other religions, and that Christianity was at least "not-harmful" because it taught virtuous behavior. Although they had little or no direct contact with European currents of thought, these Mongol polymaths seem to have imbibed a bit of the Enlightenment *zeitgeist* of their century, displaying an openness to foreign cultures, a more objective and encyclopedic recording of religious phenomena, and an inclusiveness that conceded at least the lower reaches of spiritual attainment to those of other traditions. In this they are closer to modern than to medieval ways of looking at religion. Their writings are evidence that the industrial-imperial West did not invent the study of religions *ex nihilo* and that discourses on other religions have not been monolithically hegemonic—in the eighteenth century there were at least a few individuals able to view others' belief systems with a considerable degree of empathy and fairness.

#### NOTES

1. This article is partially based on a paper delivered at the Wisconsin Conference on South Asia, October 2003. I am grateful to fellow panel participants John Dunne, Roger Jackson, and Leonard Zwilling for their responses and suggestions.

2. The classic statement of this position is found in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1963). An authoritative definition of the contemporary view is Jonathan Z. Smith's "Religion, Religions, Religious," in Mark C. Taylor, ed. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 269–284.

3. J. Z. Smith "Religion," 269. See also Richard A. Horseley, "Religion and Other Products of Empire," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 1 (March 2003): 13–44.

4. His work the *History of Religion in China* (*Rgya nag chos 'byung*; Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1983), is the earliest of the three Tibetan accounts considered here (ca. 1730s). He was born into a noble Mongolian family and carried out high religious and scholarly offices in the Tibetan Buddhist establishment in Beijing under emperors Yongzheng and

Qianlong. See Walther Heissig, *Die Familien- und Kirchengeschichtsschreibung der Mongolen, Teil I: 16–18 Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959): 114–115, and A. I. Vostrikov, *Tibetan Historical Literature*, trans. Harish Chandra Gupta (Calcutta: Indian Studies Past and Present, 1970): 166–167.

5. The full title of this work, completed in 1746, is *History of the Holy Religion in India, Great China, Tibet and Mongolia [or] the Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree* (*‘Phags yul rgya nag chen po bod dang sog yul du dam pa’i chos byung tshul dpag bsam ljon bzang*), published as *Dpag-Bsam Ljon Bzani*, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi, International Academy of Indian Culture). On Sumba Khembo’s life and work see Luciano Petech’s preface to this book, xiii–xv.

6. Its full title is *The Crystal Mirror of Good Explanation Showing the History and Positions of All Religious Philosophies*. See *Grub mtha’ thams cad kyi khungs dang ‘dog tsul ston pa legs bshad shel gyi me long* in *Collected Works of Thu’u-Bkwan Blo-Bzang-Chos-Kyi-Nyi-Ma*, vol. 2, ed. Ngawang Gelek Demo (Delhi: Jayed Press, 1969). A modern typeset edition was published under the title of *Thu’u-bkwan grub mtha’* (Lanzhou: Kan-su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984). This work was completed in 1802, not long before the author’s death. The first complete English translation of the *Crystal Mirror* is by Geshe Lhundub Sopa, ed. Roger Jackson (Wisdom Publications, forthcoming). Leonard Zwilling and the present author translated the chapters on Chinese Buddhism and non-Buddhist religions.

7. See the chapters on Chinese Buddhism and non-Buddhist Chinese religions in *The Crystal Mirror* (391–448, in the Lanzhou edition), and in Sopa and Jackson, forthcoming.

8. See Vostrikov, 139–179.

9. Knowledge of the non-East Asian world had greatly expanded under the Qing; Sumba, for example, discussed Constantinople, Germany, and Mecca among other places in his correspondence with the Panchen Lama. See Sh. Bira, *Mongolian Historical Literature of the XII–XIX Centuries Written in Tibetan*, ed. Ts. Damdinsüren, trans. Stanley N. Frye, Mongolia Society Occasional Papers, no. 7 (Bloomington, IN: Mongolia Society, 1970): 28–30.

10. Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 575–584. The Beitang (North Hall) was completed in 1713; the Kangxi emperor permitted French missionaries to build it in 1703 in gratitude for their curing him of malaria. See Arthur W. Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period* (ECCP: 1933; rpt. Taipei: Ch’eng Wen Publishing Co., 1970): 330. An earlier church, the Nantang (South Hall), was attended by the first Qing emperor, Fulin. There were certainly contacts between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Christians; one documented example were the two monks who were trained by the Jesuits and sent to Tibet in 1717 for the cartographic survey of the empire; the anti-Jesuit missionary Matteo Ripa describes these monks as his personal friends (*“due lama, da me tutti due conosciuti e miei amici”*). See Matteo Ripa, *Giornale* (1705–1724), ed. Michele Fatica, 2 vols. (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1966), 2:27.

11. The Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–1736), who patronized Lamaism although he personally favored Chan Buddhism, may have had the ambition, similar to the project of Akbar, to unite the three religions into one (see ECCP: 918). The view that “the Three Teachings are really one,” was popular from the late Ming onward; see Donald E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999): 16.

12. *Gnas lugs kyi don gsal ba byed pai’ lugs srol chen po ni gsum ste / she’u / to’u / jing rnamso’* in *Collected Works*, 2:422.1.

13. Gombojab was especially knowledgeable in Chinese sources and used the Chinese dynastic histories and biographies of the monks (see Bira, *Mongolian Historical Literature*: 33–40).

14. The description of Christianity follows an account of the religion of the “Tocharians,” perhaps a garbled account of Islam, and that of a mysterious man from the Western regions (Xiyang), who brought the teaching of “The Lord of Heaven” (*nam mkha’i bdag po*). This translates the Chinese *tianzhu*, a term that was adopted by Michele Ruggieri and used by Ricci and other early missionaries in China; see Knud Lundbæk “Joseph de Prémare and the

Name of God in China” in *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, ed. D. E. Mungello (Nettetal, Germany: Styler Verlag, 1995), 132.

15. This epithet of Mary, beautiful as it is, may be a misreading of a mistaken etymology of her name by St. Jerome, *stillā maris*, or “drop of the sea.” Cf. A. J. Maas, “Name of Mary,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1914 ed., vol. 15. It is found in the well-known Marian antiphon, *Alma redemptoris mater*.

16. This is a somewhat recondite concept in Christian theology. If this is indeed what is being referred to, it may have been included because of its resemblance to the Buddhist concept of the five cardinal sins—matricide, patricide, killing an Arhat, etc.—whose consequences are immediate and therefore inexpiable; see H. A. Jäschke, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1881; rpt. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), s.v., and *Mahāvīyutpatti*, 4th ed., R. Sasaki, ed. (Tokyo: Tokyo Bunkyo, 1971): 2323–2338.

17. On early Christian writing in China and anti-Christian polemics see Xiaochao Wang, *Christianity and Imperial Culture: Chinese Christian Apologetics in the Seventeenth Century and Their Latin Patristic Equivalents* (Leiden: Brill, 1998): 79–191; Wenchao Li, *Die christliche China-Mission im 17. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 152–198; and Mungello, *The Great Encounter*, 17–18, 31–33, 42–46.

18. *Dpag bsam ljon bzang*, op. cit., 108–109.

19. *Ibid.*, 109–110.

20. *Ibid.*, 108–109. “*Legs par bshad pa'i chos ni gang thos kyang / sangs rgyas dag gyis gsungs par the tshoms med.*”

21. See Giuseppe Toscano, Appendix II, in *“Byuñ Khuis”: L’Origine degli esseri viventi e di tutte le cose*. Introduction, translation and notes by Giuseppe Toscano SX (Roma: ISMEO, 1984): 330–332. He goes so far as to note “The concordance of the name of this patriarch of Buddhism with the name of the founder of Christianity” [*sic*]: 331.

22. “Since I, who had not studied Chinese literature, did not have the eye for attending to the texts, I had to listen to what others read, so that I have just a partial view of the origins and doctrines of the Literati Tradition and Daoism, and dare not write more than just this,” in *Collected Works*, 447.5–6.

23. For example, see Śāntideva’s refutation of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theism in chapter 9 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāna*, ed. V. Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1960), 118–125.

24. He states that the Muslims lack any reasoned philosophy and thus are to be considered barbarians (*kla klo*); their religion will soon be swept away by the Buddhist army of Shambala which will convert all barbarians to the Buddhadharmā (Thu’u-bkwan grub mtha’, Lanzhou ed., 417). On the main textual source for the Tibetan Buddhist attitude toward Islam see John Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1998): 311–371.

25. For example, Sumba was quite vehemently anti-Nyingma, strongly attacking the authenticity of their crucial treasure texts (*gter ma*, terma); see Matthew Kapstein, “The Purificatory Gem and Its Cleansing: A Late Tibetan Discussion of Apocryphal Texts,” *History of Religion* 28, no. 3 (1989): 217–244. While Tuken was considered a moderate on the Nyingmas, even he makes a strongly denigrating comment about them, stating that they have lost the essentials of their teaching and now merely make an outward show of religion with bogus chanting, tantric feasts, and practice of black magic: “*de dag tu mdo sgyu sems gsum sogz chos gyi rnying po rnams ni ka dag gdod ma’i klong du thims nas ring zhig lon pas / de lta’i rnying ma ba rnams las byang gyer ba dang / tshogs ‘byor gyi yo long dang / mnan sreg ‘phang gsum sogz las spyor gyi gzugs bryan va snying por byed ba tsams mo.*” Thu’u-bkwan grub mtha’, Lanzhou ed., 80. Tuken asserts the superiority of the Gelukpa teaching while acknowledging that one can attain enlightenment through any of the lesser Buddhist schools and views, see *ibid.*, 375–376. On the broad issue of Tuken’s attitude toward other religious systems see Roger Jackson, “Triumphalism and Ecumenism in Thu’u bkwan’s *Crystal Mirror*,” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* (August 2006): 1–23. [www.thdl.org?id=T2720](http://www.thdl.org?id=T2720)