

18th-Century Gelug-pa Scholars' Grasp of Christianity and Islam

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Abstract

Tibetans, despite their conversion to Buddhism, are not unaware of religions of other people. Because of the geographical proximity and historical ties, they are certainly more familiar with Indian and Chinese religious cultures than others, such as Indian non-Buddhist religions and Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. Nevertheless, Tibetans acquired knowledge of Christianity and Islam, originated in more distant lands, through written description as well as several historical contacts, of which the most well-known example is their interaction with Central Asian Nestorianism and Islam through Mongolians in the Yuan Dynasty.

After the establishment of Qing dynasty by Manchurians in the seventeenth century, Beijing gradually became a centre of Sino-Western cultural exchange. In addition, as Manchurians believed in Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, a number of Mongolian and Tibetan monks were summoned to reside in Beijing where they were not only to be exposed to Chinese Buddhism but also have a grasp of Western religions through their encounters with the Western missionaries in Beijing.

Catholic religion is mentioned in the book “Rgya nag chos 'byung” covering mainly Chinese Buddhism in Tibetan language in 1736 by Mongolian mGon-po-skyabs, a.k.a. Gombojab. Later in the eighteenth century, in addition to referring to mGon-po-skyabs's, “Rgya nag chos 'byung”, Gelugpa monks Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-shes dpal-'byor (1704-1788), lchang-skyia Rol-pa'i-rdo-rje (1717-1786) and Thu'u-bkwan Blo-bzang chos-kyi nyi-ma (1737-1802), who had personal contact with foreign cultures during their frequent visits to or residency in Beijing, recorded their first-hand observations in their writings as well.

Based on the writings of the mentioned Mongolian and Tibetan scholars in the eighteenth century, this paper aims to explore how they understood and interpreted Christianity and Islam from the perspective of traditional Tibetan Buddhism.

Key words: Tibetan Buddhism, Gelug School, Christianity, Islam