

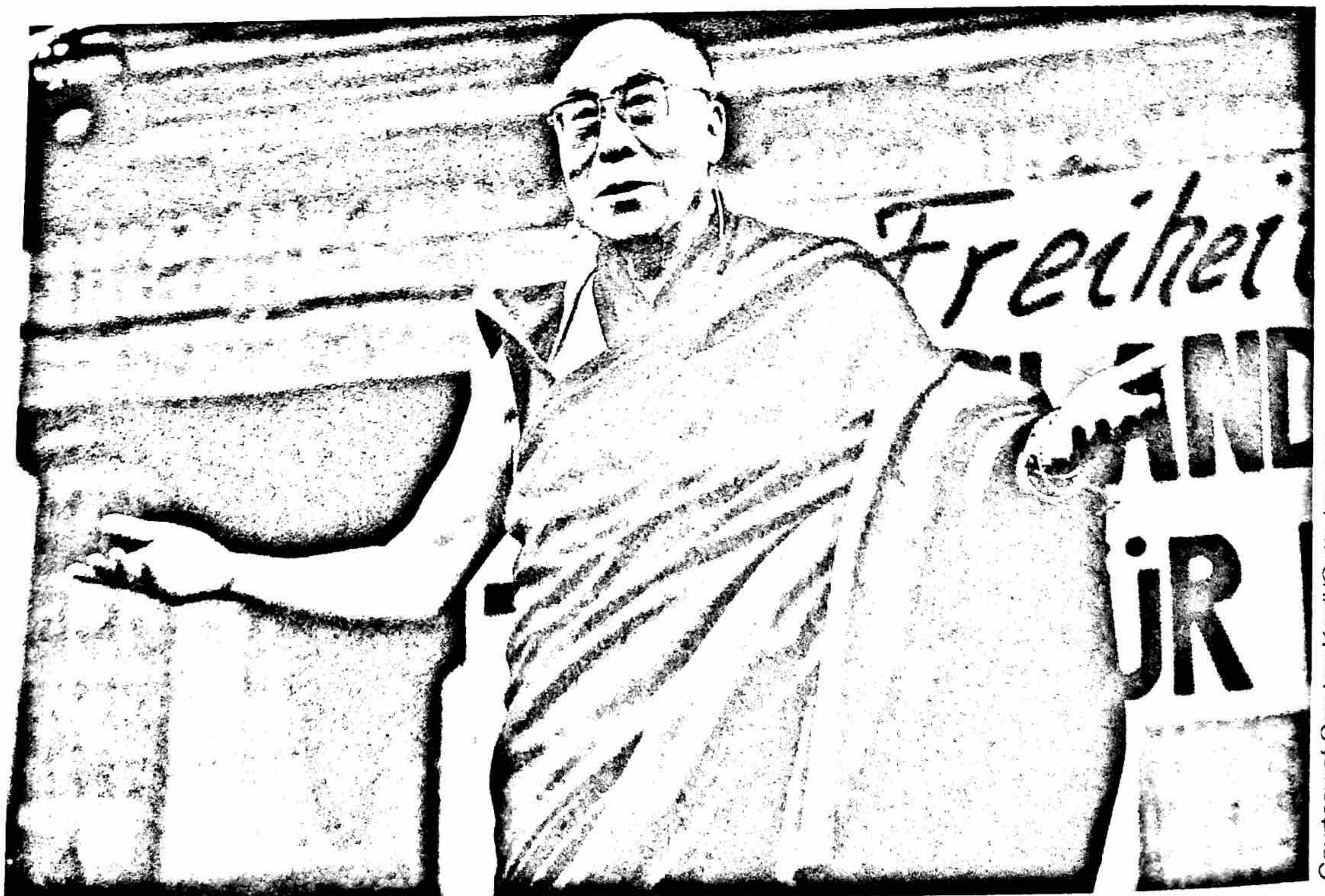
# Ethics without Religion?

His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (b. 1935) is the spiritual leader of Tibet. He received a monastic education and earned the Geshe Lharampa degree, which is equivalent to a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy. After Tibet was invaded by China in 1949/50, the Dalai Lama held peace talks with Chinese leaders. He escaped into exile when a Tibetan uprising against the Chinese was harshly put down by Chinese troops in 1959.

Since then, the Dalai Lama has been living in Dharamsala in northern India. As a political leader, he has peacefully campaigned for the freedom of Tibet; this has led to three United Nations resolutions on Tibet, in 1959, 1961, and 1965, respectively. In 1989, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for these efforts.

As a spiritual teacher, the Dalai Lama has travelled to and lectured in at least 67 countries and has written or co-written more than 110 books. In his speeches and writings he has advocated peace, non-violence, inter-religious understanding, and universal responsibility. In *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (2011), he argues that in today's globalized world, no single religion, not even his own Buddhism, will be able to provide an ethical foundation that will be acceptable to all people. Instead, he proposes and explains a new, "secular" ethical framework.

—Lora Hobbs & Austra Reinis



Excerpts from *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole New World*,  
His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
Excerpts from Chapter 1 (Rethinking Secularism)  
pp. 3-6, 8-9, 11-17, 19

## Inner Values in an Age of Science

I am a man of religion, but religion alone cannot answer all our problems. . . .

In light of our growing mastery over so many aspects of the physical world in the past two hundred years or so, it is not surprising that many people today question whether we have any need for religion at all. Things which in the past were only dreamt about – the elimination of diseases, space travel, computers—have become reality through science. So it is not surprising that many have come to place all their hopes in science, and even to believe that happiness can be achieved by means of what material science can deliver.

But while I can understand how science has undermined faith in some aspects of traditional religion, I see no reason why advances in science should have the same effect on the notion of inner or spiritual values. Indeed, the need for inner values is more pressing in this age of science than ever before.

In the attempt to make a compelling case for inner values and ethical living in an age of science, it would be ideal to make that case in wholly scientific terms. Although it is not yet possible to do so purely on the basis of scientific research, I am confident that as time goes on, a more and more secure scientific case for the benefits of inner ethical values will gradually emerge. . . .

Fortunately, there is now a reasonably substantial body of evidence in evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and other fields suggesting that, even from the most rigorous scientific perspectives, unselfishness and concern for others are not only in our own interests but also, in a sense, innate to our biological nature. Such evidence, when combined with reflection on our personal experiences and coupled with simple common sense, can, I believe, offer a strong case for the benefits of cultivating basic human values that does not rely on religious principles or faith at all. And this I welcome.

## Approaching Secularism

This then is the basis of what I call “secular ethics.” I am aware that for some people, in particular for some Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters, my use of the word “secular” raises difficulties. To some, the very word suggests a firm rejection of, or even hostility toward, religion. It may seem to them that, in using this word, I am advocating the exclusion of religion from ethical systems, or even from all areas of public life. This is not at all what I have in mind. Instead, my understanding of the word “secular” comes from the way it is commonly used in India.

Modern India has a secular constitution and prides itself on being a secular country. In Indian usage, “secular,” far from implying antagonism toward religion or toward people of faith, actually implies a profound respect for and tolerance toward all religions. It also implies an inclusive and impartial attitude which includes nonbelievers. . . .

## Secularism in India

For me, then, the word “secular” holds no fear. Instead, I am mindful of the founders of India’s secular constitution, such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the latter of whom I had the honor to know personally. Their intention in promoting secularism was not to do away with religion, but rather to recognize formally the religious diversity of Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi, the inspiration behind the constitution,

was himself a deeply religious man. In his daily prayer meetings, he included readings and hymns from all the country's major faith traditions. This remarkable example is followed in Indian public ceremonies to this day.

The kind of religious tolerance Gandhi personified is nothing new in India. It has ancient roots, stretching back more than two thousand years. It is revealed, for example, on inscribed pillars dating from the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE. One inscription contains the exhortation to "honor another's religion, for doing so strengthens both one's own and that of the other."

## Tolerance in an Age of Globalization

Sometimes I describe myself as a modern-day messenger of ancient Indian thought. Two of the most important ideas I share wherever I travel – the principles of non-violence and interreligious harmony—are both drawn from ancient Indian heritage. Though I am of course a Tibetan, I also consider myself to be, in a sense, a son of India. Since childhood my mind has been nourished by the classics of Indian thought. From the age of six, when I began my studies as a monk, the majority of the texts I read and memorized were by Indian Buddhist masters, many of whom were from the ancient university of Nalanda in central India. And since early adulthood my body, too, has been nourished by Indian fare: rice and *dal* (lentils).

So I am very happy to share and promote this Indian understanding of secularism, as I believe it can be of great value to all humanity. In today's interconnected and globalized world, it is not commonplace for people of dissimilar world views, faiths, and races to live side by side. I am often struck by this on my travels, especially in the West. For a considerable portion of humanity today, it is possible and indeed likely that one's neighbor, one's colleague, or one's employer will have a different mother tongue, eat different food, and follow a different religion than oneself.

It is a matter of great urgency, therefore, that we find ways to cooperate with one another in a spirit of mutual acceptance and respect. For while to many people it is a source of joy to live in a cosmopolitan environment where they can experience a wide spectrum of different cultures, there is no doubt that, for others, living in close proximity with those who do not share their language or culture can pose difficulties. It can create confusion, fear, and resentment, leading in the worst cases to open hostility and new ideologies of exclusion based on race, nationality, or religion. Unfortunately, as we look around the world, we see that social tensions are actually quite common. Furthermore, it seems likely that, as economic migration continues, such difficulties may even increase.

In such a world, I feel, it is vital for us to find a genuinely sustainable and universal approach to ethics, inner values, and personal integrity—an approach that can transcend religious, cultural, and racial differences and appeal to people at a fundamental human level. This search for a sustainable, universal approach is what I call the project of secular ethics.

## Religion and Ethics

Though this book is not primarily about religion, in the interest of mutual understanding and respect between those with faith and those without it, I think it is worth spending a little time considering the relationship between religion and ethics.

For thousands of years, religion has been at the heart of human civilization. It is little wonder, then, that a concern for others and the basic inner values that emerge from this concern, such as kindness, honesty, patience, and forgiveness, have long been largely formulated in religious terms. In all of the world's major faith traditions, both theistic and non-theistic, these values, as well as those of self-discipline, contentment, and generosity, are celebrated as the keys to living a meaningful and worthwhile life. There is no surprise in this. Since religion's primary concern is with the human spirit,

it is entirely natural that the practice of these inner values—which brings such rewards in terms of our own spiritual well-being and of those around us—should be integral to any religious practice.

The systems of belief with which the world's religions ground and support inner values can, generally speaking, be grouped into two categories.

On the one hand are the theistic religions, which include Hinduism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these traditions, ethics is ultimately grounded in some understanding of God—as a creator and as the absolute ground of all that is. From a theistic point of view, the entire universe is part of a divine creation and plan, so the very fabric of that universe is sacred. And since God is infinite love or infinite compassion, loving others is part of loving and serving God. Also in many theistic traditions there is the belief that after death we will face divine judgment, and this provides a further strong incentive for behaving with restraint and due caution while here on Earth. When undertaken seriously, submission to God can have a powerful effect in reducing self-centeredness, and can thereby lay the foundation for a very secure ethical and even altruistic outlook.

On the other hand, in the non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and a branch of the ancient Indian Samkhya school, there is no belief in a divine creator. Instead, there is the core principle of causality, while the universe is regarded as beginningless. Without a creator figure in which to ground inner values and an ethical life, the non-theistic religions instead ground ethics in the idea of karma. The Sanskrit word *karma* simply means "action." So when we talk about our karma, we are referring to all our intentional acts of body, speech, and mind, and when we talk about the *fruits* of our karma, we are talking about the consequences of these acts. The doctrine of karma is grounded in the observation of causality as a law of nature. Every intended action, word, or thought we have has a potentially unending stream of consequences. When combined with the idea of rebirth and successive lives, this understanding becomes a powerful basis for ethics and the cultivation of inner values. For example, a key Buddhist teaching on the cultivation of compassion involves, as part of establishing a deep empathetic connection with all beings, viewing all beings as having been one's mother at some stage in one's countless previous lives. . . .

In the context of religion, these understandings—whether theistic or non-theistic—are of immense importance, since they provide the foundations not only for the determination to live ethically, but also for salvation or liberation itself. As such, for religious practitioners, the pursuit of an ethical life and their ultimate spiritual aspirations are inseparable.

I am not among those who think that humans will soon be ready to dispense with religion altogether. On the contrary, in my view, faith is a force for good and can be tremendously beneficial. In offering and understanding of human life which transcends our temporary physical existence, religion gives hope and strength to those facing adversity. The value of the world's great faith traditions is a subject I have discussed at some length in a previous book, *Toward a Kinship of Faiths*. For all its benefits, however—in bringing people together, giving guidance and solace, and offering a vision of the good life which people can strive to emulate—I do not think that religion is indispensable to the spiritual life.

But where does this leave us with regard to grounding ethics and nurturing inner values? Today, in a scientific age in which religion strikes many as meaningless, what basis for such values is left to us? How can we find a way to motivating ourselves ethically without recourse to traditional beliefs?

To my mind, although humans can manage without religion, they cannot manage without inner values. So my argument for the independence of ethics from religion is quite simple. As I see it, spirituality has two dimensions. The first dimension, that of basic spiritual well-being—by which I mean inner mental and emotional strength and balance—does not depend on religion but comes from our innate human nature as

beings with a natural disposition toward compassion, kindness, and caring for others. The second dimension is what may be considered religion-based spirituality, which is acquired from our upbringing and culture and is tied to particular beliefs and practices. The difference between the two is something like the difference between water and tea. Ethics and inner values without religious content are like water, something we *need* every day for health and survival. Ethics and inner values based on a religious context are more like tea. The tea we drink is mostly composed of water, but it also contains some other ingredients—tea leaves, spices, perhaps some sugar or, at least in Tibet, salt—and this makes it more nutritious and sustaining and something we want every day. But however the tea is prepared, the primary ingredient is always water. While we can live without tea, we can't live without water. Likewise we are born free of religion, but we are not born free of the need for compassion. . . .

## Two Pillars for Secular Ethics

I believe that an inclusive approach to secular ethics, one with the potential to be universally accepted, requires recognition of only two basic principles. Both of these can easily be grasped on the basis of our common experience as humans and our common sense, and both are supported by findings of contemporary research, particularly in fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and the clinical sciences. The first principle is the recognition of our *shared humanity* and our shared aspiration to happiness and the avoidance of suffering; the second is the understanding of *interdependence* as a key feature of human reality, including our biological reality as social animals. From these two principles we can learn to appreciate the inextricable connection between our own well-being and that of others, and we can develop a genuine concern for others' welfare. Together, I believe, they constitute an adequate basis for establishing ethical awareness and the cultivation of inner values. It is through such values that we gain a sense of connection with others, and it is by moving beyond narrow self-interest that we find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life.



## Study and Critical Thinking Questions

1. a. In an age of science, why does the Dalai Lama believe religion is still needed? What does religion provide that science doesn't?  
b. On what issue do science and religion agree?
2. What does the Dalai Lama say he means by "secularism", drawing from its role in India? And what does he want to make sure the reader understands he does NOT mean by "secularism?"
3. What quote of Emperor Ashoka did the Dalai Lama mention?  
What do you think of this approach to other religions?
4. What does the Dalai Lama say are two of the most important ideas he shares wherever he travels?
5. What does he mean by "the project of secular ethics?"
6. List the values the Dalai Lama asserts are shared by all the major faith traditions.
7. The Dalai Lama discusses the foundation or grounding of ethics in theistic traditions and in non-theistic traditions.  
What does he say constitutes the foundation for ethics in the theistic traditions? In other words, how does belief lead to good or bad actions?  
What constitutes the foundation for ethics in the non-theistic traditions? In other words, how does belief lead to good or bad actions?
8. What does the Dalai Lama say are the two pillars for secular ethics?