

The Dalai Lama and ethics beyond religion



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

My first year in seminary, the Dalai Lama of Tibet came to campus to open a new library of Buddhist literature. This caused quite a stir, since he's a head of state, a world figure and of course Buddhist. He was welcomed graciously and many of us got to see and hear him up close.

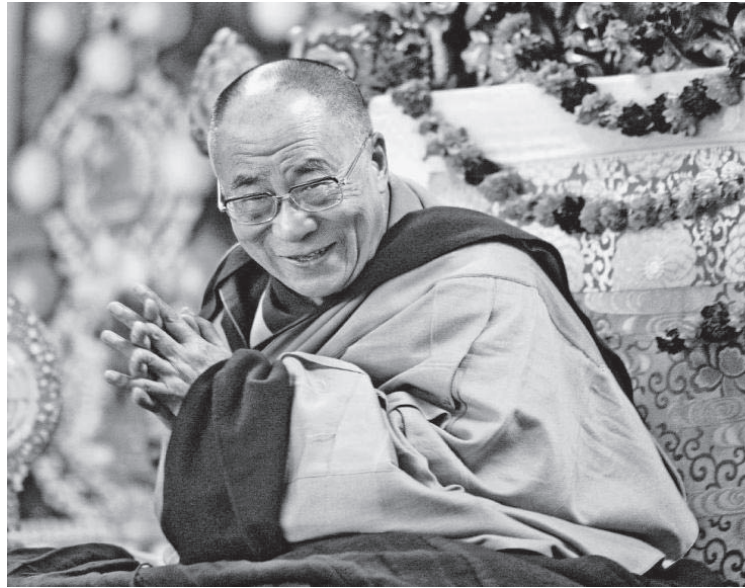
In our yearbook, my roommate Tom, a professional photographer, secretly slipped in a photo of this great man of peace under the name, "Ocean of Wisdom." Some of us would have enjoyed having him remain as a professor, sit with us in class, or sneak up to play ping pong in the bell-tower (a favorite past-time for some of us). We would have loved to knock around our theologies.

As a refugee from his homeland of Tibet for almost 60 years now, he calls himself "India's longest-staying guest." Millions of followers make pilgrimage to "be in his presence" and the 83-year-old travels the globe with his message of lovingkindness and compassion, all the more meaningful coming from someone never allowed to return to his homeland.

It would be remarkable if a world faith leader published a book entitled "Beyond Religion" but that's just what the Dalai Lama did in 2011. I found my copy and was impressed and inspired once again by one of the great voices of reason in our world today.

The very first line in his first chapter, "Rethinking Secularism," presents his amazing perspective: "I am a man of religion, but religion alone cannot answer all our problems." His reasonable honesty is a welcome refreshment.

Prayerful meditation is important to him, of course, and he was grateful to know people were praying for him when



Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, smiles at media persons after a prayer session in Dharmasala, India in 2009. ALTAF QADRI/AP

he was hospitalized, but he admits it was more comforting to know the doctors and hospital staff were well equipped to respond to his illness.

Then he presents the heart of the book:

"What we need today is an approach to ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without: a secular ethics."

"I am of the firm opinion that we have within our grasp a way, and a means, to ground inner values without contradicting any religion and yet, crucially, without depending on religion."

He uses a very natural and common analogy to describe what he means by "secular ethics." Ethics without religion are like water. Ethics with religion are

like tea-flavoring has been added. But, he says, "While we can live without tea, we cannot live without water."

That is something to sip and savor. On the central practice of compassion, he writes,

"Those with religious faith have rich resources for the cultivation of compassion, and religious approaches can also be great resources for humanity as a whole. But religion is not necessary for cultivating compassion. In fact, secular techniques for compassion training are already in use, and their effectiveness has even been scientifically demonstrated."

Regarding attachment to one religion or another he offers this guidance:

"[As] a Buddhist, I should strive not to develop excessive attachment toward

Buddhism. For to do so would hinder my ability to see the value of other faith traditions."

The wise Tibetan monk offers a curative model for our culture's OCD-like religious attachments.

Much of what "His Holiness" teaches may seem simplistic. He responds:

"To some, this idea of universal compassion may sound too idealistic and possibly even religious. As for its being too idealistic, I don't think it is. Many things that we now take for granted, such as the notion of universal education, would have sounded too idealistic in the past, but now are thought of as entirely practical and indeed necessary. As for the suggestion that the idea of universal compassion is religious, I disagree. Certainly, some people's selflessness and service to others are rooted in their religious devotion, such as serving God. But at the same time, there are countless others in the world today who are concerned for all humanity, and yet who do not have religion."

I've seen the Dalai Lama in person several other times through the years—once with Bishop Desmond Tutu. He always makes you think-and laugh. His contagious sense of humor invites listeners to see him as a human being while seriously considering the truth of his teachings.

One gift of Buddhism is that while you are gently nudged to calm your mind and be mindful, the teachings always make you think more! Quiet your head, but use it. Maybe this is a way to recharge our mental faculties.

We can't all be an "ocean" of wisdom. Yet perhaps all we need is a cupful, a handful or a drop.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chhighland.com.