

July 2015

Media Review: *Beyond Religion* by His Holiness The Dalai Lama

Mark S. Hanson
Augsburg College

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Recommended Citation

Hanson, Mark S. (2015) "Media Review: *Beyond Religion* by His Holiness The Dalai Lama," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 9. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol2/iss1/9>



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MEDIA REVIEW

BEYOND RELIGION, by His Holiness The Dalai Lama
2011, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company
Reviewed by Rev. Mark S. Hanson.

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Although *Beyond Religion* is not a recent publication, His Holiness The Dalai Lama's wisdom is a welcome contribution to a world that knows all too well the consequences of religious extremism. The relentless acts of violence by those who use religion to intimidate, dominate, divide, and instill fear create a climate in which religion is rightfully criticized, and the desire to find an ethic that is beyond religion appears very attractive.

There is a growing body of research on organized religion in the United States indicating that the fastest-growing segment of the population comprises those who claim no religious affiliation. This is especially true among young adults. The distinction, "I am spiritual but not religious", has become a defining characteristic of the Millennials. Such a context raises the question: How shall ethics for living responsibly in an ever-changing and often conflicted world be formed if not out of a religious framework? The Dalai Lama offers a helpful response to such an undertaking.

In so many respects The Dalai Lama's life has become a living witness to the ethic he offers the world. A year ago I heard him address a packed auditorium at the Nobel Peace Prize Forum hosted by Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Throughout his presentation and response to questions, it was so evident that in his very being he embodies a "genuine compassion - the determination to alleviate the suffering of others" (p.53).

Who can argue with his description of compassion as the foundation of well-being? As is often noted, the root word of compassion, *pathos*, also belongs to words such as empathy, passion, and patience. So compassion defines how we live in the world, orienting our lives toward those places where people are suffering and where the very creation is groaning in travail under the weight of our consumptive living.

His Holiness makes a helpful distinction between compassion and empathy. He writes,

Empathy is characterized by a kind of emotional resonance - feeling with the other person. Compassion, in contrast, is not just sharing experience with others, but also wishing to see them relieved of their suffering...Compassion means wanting to do something to relieve the hardships of others, and this desire to help, far from dragging us further into suffering ourselves, actually gives us energy and a sense of purpose and direction. When we act upon this motivation both we and those around us benefit still more. (p.55)

Would that such compassion could be the defining ethic of those who deem themselves to be spiritual or religious or “beyond religion”!

The Dalai Lama rightfully argues that upon the foundation of compassion are built the practices of forgiveness, generosity, justice, and service. Although we often think of those terms as descriptive of individual actions, he includes disarmament, science, economies, and the environment as being shaped by an ethic of compassion. What a marked contrast to the cycles of violence, revenge/retribution, incarceration, consumption, and xenophobia that too often characterize the actions of both those who claim to be religious and those who reject religion.

It is not only The Dalai Lama’s ethical principles but also the practices of mindfulness, awareness, and heedfulness that are being embraced - rehearsed - daily by increasing numbers of people. It is a bit ironic that such practices are being encouraged by corporations, thus helping employees to become more centered and, one would

assume, more productive, thus making the company more profitable and competitive. Regrettably, The Dalai Lama does not spend enough time exploring the complex intersections and conflicts between ethics as they shape personal actions and ethics as they shape corporate actions. Mindfulness should lead to more than dealing with individuals' destructive emotions; mindfulness needs to be applied to policies and practices that perpetuate the domination of the privileged and that are destructive to the environment. I would like to see these themes developed further.

There are many more positive things to say about *Beyond Religion*. However, I would honestly say that the book is not as helpful as I had hoped. I offer my critique in the hope that it will contribute not only to a lively engagement with the book but, more importantly, will inspire communal conversations between those who define themselves as religious or spiritual and those who claim no religious affiliation. In our polarized, fragmented culture, so often characterized by a mean-spirited denunciation of those with whom one disagrees, we need sustained and often difficult conversations across those differences. In fact, when these conversations occur, they would become signs of the world The Dalai Lama seeks to have us shape. In that hope and commitment, I offer these more critical reflections on *Beyond Religion*.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that His Holiness writes of an ethic that is beyond religion, yet he continually draws upon the insights and practices of Buddhism to illustrate his points. Please do not misunderstand me. I am grateful that he has, and would not expect him to do otherwise. In fact, I wonder if it would have been possible for him to articulate an ethic for the whole world that was not shaped by his life as a Buddhist. Yet in so doing, he gives testimony to the fact that religious people and their sacred texts, practices, traditions, and communities need not be (and I would argue, should not be) separated from the ethical principles and practices that shape us for living responsibly and respectfully in a complex, diverse, and often conflicted world. What The Dalai Lama has done in his book is in fact to show how deeply spiritual people, their practices and partnership, can serve the common good

of all humankind and the whole creation. Thus his life and his proposal are hardly “beyond religion”!

Secondly, I find the term “religious pluralism” a much more helpful description of the world than “beyond religion”. Several scholars are developing theories of religious pluralism. I find very insightful the work of Dr. Diana L. Eck, professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and founding director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. She has developed a working description of religious pluralism that includes four primary points:

- Pluralism is not diversity alone but the energetic engagement with diversity.
- Pluralism is not just tolerance but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.
- Pluralism is not relativism but the encounter of commitments.
- Pluralism is based on dialogue.

(Eck, D. (n.d.). http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism

Religious pluralism as a description of the ever-changing and often conflicted religious landscape of the world needs to include those who define themselves as atheist, agnostic, secularist, or humanist. I acknowledge that this is a challenge, because too often such persons are defined by what they lack (e.g. “non-religious”, “non-believers”) rather than by who they are and what they offer in terms of an ethic for living responsibly in the world.

Yes, we must continue to critique religion - or more accurately, those who use religion as justification for exploitation, aggression, domination, and the perpetuation of power and privilege. Yet I believe, and have witnessed in many contexts, that engaging in interfaith understanding and service cultivates hope instead of hatred, reconciliation rather than division, cooperation not conflict, and growing trust in, rather than fear of, “The Other”. In the United States that is especially true in the context of communities of higher education. The work of the Interfaith Youth Core

under the leadership of Eboo Patel is an invaluable catalyst and resource in this movement.

Third, I believe that His Holiness significantly understates the role of community in the formation of “ethics for a whole world”. Yes, the communal dimension in moral formation is implied, but it needs far greater development. It is valuable to describe “our common humanity”, but where does that commonality become a lived reality? Is it not in community, whether familial, tribal, neighborhood, social, virtual, and, yes, religious?

As a human being, I do not, and I would argue I cannot, come on my own to the realization and actualization of the ethics to which The Dalai Lama calls us. I learn the meaning of compassion, generosity, forgiveness, happiness, contentment, and suffering as I experience them in relationship with others. As a Christian I experience those relationships often but not solely in Christian community. The narrative, rituals, beliefs, and practices of the Christian community call me out of my self-preoccupation, and place my life’s meaning in the context of serving my neighbor, seeking the common good by working for justice and peace and caring for the creation. As Lutheran Christians we talk about that meaning as our varied vocations (callings) from God. Such a communal perspective means that together we will always be asking, “Who is my neighbor?” and “What serves the common good?”

When these questions become life-long, then my life will be oriented beyond myself. It will be shaped not only by dialogue but by “dia-praxis”. Dia-praxis is a life marked by the rhythms of communal engagement in the world (praxis) and critical reflection on that engagement (dialogue) from the perspective of various truth claims/ethics that then shape our further engagement serving the common good. Such dia-praxis does not call for moving beyond religion to compassion, generosity, and justice. Rather, it frees one to reflect upon how one’s most deeply held truth claims inform our compassion, generosity, peacemaking, and justice-seeking in serving the common good. A commitment to such a communal practice implies at least the hope that, over

time, sufficient trust will develop so that we can challenge one another's truth claims and hold each other accountable when our actions become more serving of self than serving the common good.

Dia-praxis also assumes a commitment to forming communities that reflect the religious pluralism of our world. It does not mean setting aside those convictions or moving beyond them. Nor does it mean reducing our differences to some lowest common denominator, or making tolerance of differences our highest virtue. These are limitations of relativism that we need to avoid.

Just as The Dalai Lama often refers to the teachings of Buddhism, so I will share a paraphrase of Martin Luther to illustrate my point from a Christian perspective. Luther described faith as a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that I can stake my life on it a thousand times. Such faith, said Luther, frees us to serve everyone, suffering everything out of love and praise to God who shows us such grace.

The life of faith is marked by *agape* - self-giving love - and by serving the neighbor and together working for justice and peace.

Fourth, I appreciate the emphasis His Holiness places upon cultivating personal ("inner") values. In a culture seemingly enslaved to consuming and competing, marked by fear of others, and possessive of what we deem to be "ours", he calls us to a richer and more disciplined way of life. However, I believe that inseparable from disciplined attentiveness to such inner values are the communal practices of lament, repentance, discernment, and reconciliation. For through such communal acts, we are naming suffering, crying out for mercy (lament), and confessing that the road we are on is life-diminishing (repentance) rather than life-giving. In such a context we then engage in communal discernment, asking what will serve the common good, respecting the dignity of every human being and the whole creation. Such discernment will place us with those who are forced to live on the margins of society - too often ignored, despised, rejected, and feared by those who claim to be religious and by those who deem themselves to be "beyond religion".

A few weeks ago the Muslim Student Association and the Christian Campus Ministry students at Augsburg College invited the community to an evening of conversation on “Merciful God, Merciless Actions.” For two hours an equal number of Muslims and Christians reflected on what the Qur’an and the Hebrew and Christian scriptures say about God’s mercy, and on how they portray humanity’s merciless actions. We also discussed the far too frequent contemporary signs of such merciless actions and how together we can respond to them. From within our religious traditions, not from beyond them, we were committing ourselves to the same values to which His Holiness The Dalai Lama calls us. I can only assume that he would have been a joyful participant in our conversations and that he would have valued our contributing to ethics for a whole world. And it was from within and not beyond religion that we made our modest contribution!

Rev. Mark S. Hanson is Presiding Bishop Emeritus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2001-2013) and a Distinguished Fellow at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was President of the Lutheran World Federation from 2003 to 2010.

[hansonms@augsborg.edu/](mailto:hansonms@augsborg.edu)