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March 28, 2009: The Dalai Lama and Secular Ethics

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Title: The Dalai Lama and Secular Ethics

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3/28/2009--In an important article about Chinese repression in Tibet, published in the New York Review of Books' April 9, 2009 issue, Pico Iyer mentions the favorite lecture topic of the Dalai Lama: "secular ethics"—the logical basis for thinking of others, whether or not you have a religion. This reference raises the question of how we will think about ethics in a future, secular world. This question is not unrelated, in the mind of the Dalai Lama, to the issue of Tibet's future. In his view, China will eventually face the same spiritual emptiness that the West faces now: "the Dalai Lama has seen one country after another—in the West and more recently in places like Japan and Taiwan—gain prosperity and modern institutions and then come to him asking what to do with their sense of emptiness, their broken families. At some point, he suggested, China is going to have to find something to support it at some level deeper than just growth rates." That something could very well be, not Tibetan Buddhism as such, but the Buddhist tone that might lead China away from its burgeoning materialism back to its own spiritual roots. This is not a matter of the separation of church and state. The Dalai Lama says that he supports such separation in the political sense. There should not be in Tibet any merger of religion and government. That would mean the end of the institution of the figure of the Dalai Lama as such. But of course that political separation does not mean spiritual separation. This is a mistake that American courts are prone to make. Public references to religious values are not a violation of the separation of church and state. That separation should be an institutional separation only. I'm sure the Dalai Lama hopes that all government leaders, and voters too, will be motivated by the deepest spiritual values and that public policy will promote such religious and spiritual values.