

Faith meets reason in a documentary about the Dalai Lama

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Unlike many religious leaders, the subject of Dawn Gifford Engle's enlightening **"The Dalai Lama — Scientist"** (2019) always has had a fascination with the nonsecular, experimental, and empirical pursuit of knowledge known as science. Born Tenzin Gyatso, in 1935, he was a kid who enjoyed taking apart mechanical toys and putting them back together — with a 50 percent success rate as he jovially recalls in the film. Had he not been chosen at 6 to be the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, the nation's unifying spiritual and political figure, he says he would probably have become an engineer or electrician.

Even as a youth while preparing for this daunting role, he pursued an interest in technology and science. A movie buff, he was frustrated by the antiquated projector at his disposal; it kept breaking down until he figured out how to repair it. A favorite hobby was studying the cosmos with his telescope, and he observed an effect of sunlight on a lunar mountain range that was unknown to his tutors.

Tragically, more mundane events intruded in 1950, when the People's Republic of China occupied Tibet. In 1959 it sent troops to seize the Dalai Lama and 300,000 Tibetans surrounded his residence to protect him. He narrowly escaped to Dharamsala, India, where he set up the government of Tibet in exile. Since then he has espoused nonviolent means to restore his country's independence and has been on the forefront of the fight for human rights — activities that in 1989 earned him the Nobel Peace Prize.

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His passion for science never abated. Starting in the 1980s, he conferred regularly with the world's greatest scientists, many of whom appear in the film, including psychologist Paul Ekman, mathematician and geneticist Eric Lander, neuroscientist Christof Koch, astrophysicist George Greenstein, professor of psychology and psychiatry Richard J. Davidson, and the neuroscientist Francisco Varela. They have debated profound questions on the nature of reality and human nature, and the footage of those meetings is often riveting.

The film breaks down this dialogue into five major areas of inquiry: cosmology; quantum physics; cognitive science; neuroscience; molecular biology and genetics. Each round of discussions concludes with a checklist comparing the findings of cutting-edge research with the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. They match up well — except the Buddhists got there about a millennium or two before the scientists.



Richard J. Davidson (left) and the the Dalai Lama in "The Dalai Lama — Scientist.Courtesy Peace Jam

Engle presents a beguiling and inspirational profile of the Dalai Lama, who is rivaled probably only by Pope Francis as the world's most popular religious figure. She also provides a lucid summary of the more challenging philosophical tenets of Tibetan Buddhism and the knottier concepts of modern science. A recurrent theme is the need to be open-minded; repeatedly the Dalai Lama rejects dogmatism and insists that all ideas and beliefs must be challenged in the search for truth. Unfortunately, the film doesn't follow that advice.

Does every scientist agree with the Dalai Lama? All of those in the film seem to. Several remark how they were skeptical before meeting him, expecting the stereotypical mystical holy man. But then they were quickly won over — converted you might say — by his curiosity, empathy, humility, and intelligence. Watching his charisma radiate on the screen, it's easy to see why. Nonetheless, for balance Engle might have brought in some dissenting voices — atheist gadfly Richard Dawkins, for example (who agrees with the Dalai Lama on many points), or the science writer John Horgan.

Impressive as he is in his scientific acumen, the Dalai Lama is more compelling in his sheer humanity. In one scene he meets with a girl who has state-of-the-art prosthetic arms. He admires them, uttering one of his favorite words, "Wonderful!" Then he speaks about those suffering in poor countries without access to such technological wonders and says, "Oh! The suffering is immense!" That is the real challenge for science and religion — alleviating the misery of the human condition.

"Dalai Lama — Scientist" can be streamed on Amazon Prime, Google Play, Kanopy, and other platforms, starting May 19.

Go to www.peacejam.org/the-dalai-lama-scientist.

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