Religion: A Source of Division?
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I was taken aback recently when an old friend of mine argued the position that religion is a major divisive force in the world. In light of recent events, he argues that religion is virtually the only thing that is dividing people in Kashmir and the Middle East, just as it was religion that divided Ireland, not to mention Iran and Iraq.

My friend is the former Secretary of the Southeast Michigan Chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation of the United States. He firmly believes that religion must be culturally discouraged if we are ever to enjoy world peace.

My friend's position on religion is more widely shared than I had originally thought. Within the past year, there have been articles and editorials in the various media that underscore the same point. No one should be particularly surprised by the position of the media, for it functions on logical fallacies. But I expected more from my friend, who has a very thorough background in mathematics and engineering. Perhaps this only serves to highlight that fact that mathematical logic is qualitatively different from intentional logic; for this is precisely the problem with the above argument. It is a wonderful example of bad logic, in particular, the logical fallacy of false cause, which consists in assuming that when one event precedes another, it is the cause of the succeeding event. For example, it was once thought that yellow fever was spread by bodily contact because victims had been close to previous victims. The fact is, though, religion is no more divisive than politics or ethics. Let me explain.

Virtually everyone agrees with the most general principles of Natural Law, namely, that good is to be done, and evil avoided. We all agree, moreover, that one ought to be just and brave, self-controlled and prudent. The difficulty arises when we descend to the level of particulars. Is this particular action in these circumstances just or unjust? Reverent or irreverent? Brave or cowardly? We all agree, for example, that no one should go without food and shelter. But the Liberal and Conservative cannot seem to agree on the best means of achieving such an end. The Conservative wants to reduce taxes; the Liberal wants to increase them. Who is right? It is not always an easy thing to discover. In fact, sometimes it takes a lifetime of thought, experience and insight, and even these are not always enough.

Hence, divisions arise on the level of concrete particulars, and not, for the most part at least, on the level of generalities or universals. So, is ethics a divisive force? Perhaps it is. But what does this mean? Should ethics be culturally discouraged, if we are ever to enjoy world peace? Politics is a continuation of ethics, and so politics suffers the same fate. On the level of universals, both Liberal and Conservative can often agree, as was said. But on the level of particulars, there is division into left and right and all shades in between. So, is

politics a divisive force? Perhaps. But once again, what does this mean? That we must do away with politics in order to more quickly arrive at world peace?

Strictly speaking, it isn't politics, ethics, or religion that are divisive forces. Human beings are divisive. And man is essentially a political animal, a religious animal, and a moral agent. If there were no religions in the world, would we necessarily all agree with one another and live in complete harmony? One would have to be pretty naïve to think so.

Yet this is precisely what my friend is arguing. How can one hold to such a view? With regard to my friend, the answer is easy. He's an atheist, pure and simple. But he is not merely indifferent to religion. He is passionately anti-religious. We've all heard the expression "selective hearing". Ideology begets selective hearing, and that is why my friend has overlooked a number of important things in the 20th century. Consider Joseph Stalin in Russia, or Chairman Mao in China, or Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or even more recently, Slobodan Milosevic. All of these people were atheists, and all of them were responsible for immeasurable suffering and the deaths of millions. Is atheism a divisive force? And why didn't these non-religious ideologies bring about the peace that many people today believe is only just around the corner, held back only by religious zealots and outmoded dogma?

The fact is the conflict in the Middle East is not primarily about religion. In fact, very few of the conflicts throughout history are strictly about religion, despite the fact that they involve religious groups. I'm arguing that it's sin, not religion that's divisive. Injustice is divisive. Selfishness is divisive. Hatred is divisive. And being a member of a religion is no guarantee that one will have achieved a perfect love. If one does not, the cause of the ensuing division and conflict is not the religion, but the human person and his free decision to limit the degree to which God, who is Love, will influence and mould his heart.