Atheists and "*Echthrosists*"

By Wayne Northey

I live in a world of functional *atheists* and operative "*echthrosists*".

What is the latter you ask? In a moment.

The secular world has no functional place for God. Not even a "god of the gaps" is needed any longer in our superabundantly technologized world, though before technology set in with a vengeance the late eighteenth century French *Philosophes* were already celebrating God's absence.

The Western secular world however, thankfully, imbibed deeply from the Gospels that every human has an inherent right and dignity, and consequently there must be no more victims. True, there is significant distortion of this profoundly biblically rooted doctrine. As has been pointed out by some, the new Western *cogito* (metonymy for Descartes' famous formula) is: "I am a *victim*, therefore I am.", and political correctness runs at times amok in our culture. All cultural truths have their ineluctable detracting corollaries.

So the Western secular world thinks it can somehow embrace neighbour and victims without reference to God. This is unsustainable philosophically as has been pointed out repeatedly. (In the end, why bother, without God?) And the bank from which otherwise is drawn in the West such wonderful capital of "love thy neighbour" and "do unto others" is of course God-soaked Scripture. (A classic statement of this is *The Atlantic Monthly* article (December, 1989, Volume 264, Number 6; pages 69-85), "Can We Be Good Without God?", http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/religion/goodgod.htm.)

But Western Christians cannot remotely be smug about secularists' impossible functional atheism. For we are largely operative *echthrosists*. What's that?, you say.

An *atheist* is *one who denies [the existence of] God*, from the Greek meaning literally "without God". In my linguistic word play, an *echthrosist* is *one who denies [right of existence to] enemies*, from the Greek meaning "without enemy".

The enemy in the New Testament is *extreme test case of neighbour*: what assesses the pluck of our vaunted neighbour love, which Jesus said in turn assays the mettle of our exalted God-talk. When asked for the Greatest Command, he gave two for the price of one, implying the first is predicated upon, and nonexistent without, the second (Matt. 22:40). And in case we missed the implication of Jesus, the rest of the New Testament telescopes The Two Greatest into One, "Love your neighbour as yourself (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8)". Though Christians for two millennia have hidden behind the "God-of-violence" escape theory of the Old Testament, Jesus says God's entire revelation to the ancient Hebrews is ethically summed up in two simple dictums: *Love God, Love neighbour*. Not much room for a God of violence in either!

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For Christians, the heat is on. Since not only have Christians for two thousand years endlessly tried to dodge this "two-for-the-price-of-one" deal from Jesus, and the "one-law-for-all" metonymy of the New Testament, they categorically toss out the window any reference to love of enemies. (C.S. Lewis' essay, "Why I Am Not a Pacifist", *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses,* edited by Walter Hooper, (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1949, pp. 33 – 53), is representative example of excising "love of enemies" from "dominical sayings" to consider.) Like their secular counterparts, functional *atheists* (whatever their protested *belief* in God), the vast majority of Christians are operative *echthrosists* (whatever their protested *belief* in God, Christ and Scripture) when push comes to shove, as it invariably does, in response to domestic and international enemies. (Lewis wrote his infamous essay in support of Britain at war.)

Put differently, while John 3:16 for two thousand years by Christians has been the most loved and quoted text of the Bible, it has also been the most heavily footnoted with exception clauses. After "world", "whosoever", "perish", and "everlasting life" (in the beloved King James Version), the vast majority of Christians from Augustine (and before!) to Billy Graham, and in turn the huge preponderance of modern-day self-designated "Keepers of the Book" – "Evangelicals", have inserted "except our enemies", and even further, "and they must die", and "and they can go to hell!" after "perish" and "everlasting life". Additionally, they have tended to relegate this verse and all biblical revelation to an ethereal other-worldly, spiritual, no-earthly-good application that denies legitimacy to politics or universal application to "neighbour" as surely as it does substance to Incarnation.

When I consider "secular humanists" (to use the popular vilifying expression of Evangelicals), or "fundamentalist Christians" (to use the popular vilifying expression of secular humanists) I see a mirror-image phenomenon that denies frontally New Testament witness: they assert, together, *no God, no enemies*; both of which in the end merge into one and the same.

Hence my claim: I live in the secular world amongst functional atheists. I live in the Christian world amongst operative *echthrosists.*

And I? Too much of the Pharisee in me for my own good! So I will leave my observations at that before I hear again Jesus' words, "*Woe to you!* (Matthew 23)".