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Nonbelievers offer us a challenge to live up to our faith. Some nonbelievers seem to have noticed that there is something good about regularly coming together as a community on the basis of shared commitments and ideals. Atheists in London recently began to hold weekly gatherings for the sake of mutual support, inspiration, encouragement, assistance and service. In other words, a sort of nonbelievers' church. Now, a CNN blog has reported that the movement is already experiencing schism. How very Churchlike!

Christianity and atheism actually have a lot in common. One of the charges against Christians during the Roman persecutions was that we were atheists, people who denied the gods. Atheists today deny only one more than we do. Agnostics have not made a definitive decision, but often don't consider the matter important.

Certainly, atheism has its fundamentalists whose obnoxious, in-your-face closed-minded smugness mimics well that of some who identify themselves as believers.

But, the majority of nonbelievers whom I have met are not of that ilk. There are atheists and agnostics who certainly fulfill the requirements for a truly human life set forth in Matthew's Gospel, serving Christ without recognizing him. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide for the needy, join (and often lead) the struggle for justice and peace.

They refuse to live in any realm except the world around us. But, that is also the message we Christians draw from the Incarnation. In the life and ministry of Jesus the Jewish carpenter-turned-teacher, God

has shown that the place to encounter the divine is precisely in the workshops, villages and crowds of this world.

Nonbelievers challenge us to live up to our Christian commitment. And when they critique us, it is, in fact, on our own terms: the facts, needs, wisdom and opportunities of the world around us.

Having unbelieving friends who challenge us to live our professed ideals and who point out with sometimes cringe-inducing accuracy our failures, hypocrisies and betrayals is a blessing. It is too easy for us believers to create a world of our own where science, wisdom and even common sense get short shrift. Atheists and agnostics can force us to obey the First Epistle of Peter (1 Peter 3:15), “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

In my own case, it was such friends in my youth who helped me to examine my faith to see how much of it was just habit and how much was, or could be, a real commitment. More than catechisms or homilies, it was they who led me to confirm my faith.

My missionary vocation is a debt of gratitude, repaying them, as it were, by living among unbelievers in the hope that I might help them come to know God and giving myself the blessing of having them remind me and challenge me to be a thinking and acting Christian.

So, it is somehow sad to see that opportunities for Christians to encounter nonbelievers are apparently diminishing. Recent statistical research shows that the percentage of the world’s population that declares itself to be nonreligious is declining.

In 1970, 19.2 percent of the world’s people were atheists or agnostic. The number of nonbelievers will probably grow, but that growth will not keep pace with the growth in world population. The projection by researchers at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity is that in 2020, only 10.7 percent will be atheists or agnostics. Christians, incidentally, are expected to remain at approximately one third of the world’s population throughout the next half century.

In light of that decline, we Christians are going to have to be in some way “atheists” for one another, challenging our own and each other’s beliefs in order to make them more credible for a world that

needs and has a right to know the truth about our loving Father.

We need to resist our tendency to settle into intellectual and even physical ghettos, cutting ourselves off from the voices that may give us hints of what the world actually looks for as good news. Otherwise, we are in danger of making ourselves and our message irrelevant and even ridiculous to those most in need of knowing God.

If atheists are right, neither they nor we will know it. That seems a bit unfair, and another reason to pray they be wrong. And another reason to be among them as respectful fellow searchers for true wisdom.

Fr William Grimm is publisher of ucanews.com, based in Tokyo.

Fr William Grimm MM