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# Not Such a Bright Idea: Atheists Try a New Name

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The central point of Dennett's strategy is to get rid of the word "atheist." It's too, well, negative. After all, it identifies an individual by what he or she does not believe—in this case the individual does not believe in God. A more positive approach would be helpful to advance the atheist anti-supernatural agenda.

Dennett, joined by Richard Dawkins, thinks he has found the perfect plan. Two atheists in California have suggested that the anti-supernatural crowd should take a page from the homosexual rights movement's handbook. Homosexuals renamed themselves "gays" and changed the terms of the debate, they argue.

As Richard Dawkins explains, "A triumph of consciousness-raising has been the homosexual hijacking of the word 'gay' . . . . Gay is succinct, uplifting, positive: an 'up' word, where homosexual is a down word and queer [and] faggot . . . are insults. Those of us who subscribe to no religion; those of us who rejoice in the real and scorn the false comfort of the unreal, we need a word of our own, a word like 'gay'."

The word chosen to be the atheists' version of 'gay' is bright. That's right, they want unbelievers to call themselves brights. Give them an "A" for arrogance.

Of course, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins are already specialists in the highest form of intellectual snobbery. Dennett, a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, and Dawkins, a scientist at Oxford University, are well known for their condescending dismissal of all belief in the supernatural. Both address their scorn to anyone who believes in God or dares to question naturalistic evolution.

Their plan, if successful, would put believers in God in the unenviable position of being opposed to "brights" who deny belief in God. This is, no pun avoidable, a diabolically brilliant public relations strategy. The real question is: Will it work?

In "The Bright Stuff," an op-ed column published in The New York Times, Dennett simply declared, "It's time for us brights to come out of the closet." Now, that's an invitation sure to get attention.

He continued, "What is a bright? A bright is a person with a naturalist as opposed to a supernaturalist world view. We brights don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny—or God. We disagree about many things, and hold a variety of views about morality, politics and the meaning of life, but we share a disbelief in black magic—and life after death."

Brights are all around us, Dennett claims. Brights are "doctors, nurses, police officers, schoolteachers, crossing guards and men and women serving in the military. We are your sons and daughters, your brothers and sisters. Our colleges and universities teem with brights. Among scientists, we are a commanding majority." Had enough?

Dennett wants to be the Moses of the atheist cause, leading his people out of bondage to theists and into the promised land of atheistic cultural influence—a land flowing with skepticism and unbelief.

The most absurd argument offered by Dennett is that brights “just want to be treated with the same respect accorded to Baptists and Hindus and Catholics, no more and no less.” Those familiar with the work of Dennett and Dawkins will be waiting for the laughter after that claim. The same respect? These two militant secularists show no respect for religious belief.

Philosopher Michael Rea of the University of Notre Dame couldn't let Dennett and Dawkins get away with such hogwash. “The fact is,” he asserts, “the likes of Dennett and Dawkins aren't the least bit interested in mutual respect.” Dennett has suggested that serious religious believers should be isolated from society in a “cultural zoo.” Dawkins has argued that persons who reject naturalistic evolution are “ignorant, stupid or insane.” Well, now—is that their vision of “mutual respect?”

As for the anti-supernaturalists calling themselves “brights,” Rea argues, “The genuinely tolerant atheist will refuse the label; for the very respect and humility that characterize her tolerance will also help her to see that in fact there are bright people on both sides of the theist/atheist divide.” [See Rea's exchange with Dennett]

Timothy K. Beal, professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University, notes that the brights demonstrate “an evangelical tone” in their writings. Beal perceptively notes that, in their determination to be irreligious, these atheists have just established a new anti-religious religion. But what they really want is not only respect, but cultural influence.

Dennett's New York Times column decried “the role of religious organizations in daily life,” contrasted with no such public role for secularists. Of course, this claim is sheer nonsense. Dennett and Dawkins boast that most scientists and intellectuals are atheists. They are without influence?

G. K. Chesterton once identified atheism as “the most daring of all dogmas,” since it is the “assertion of a universal negative.” As he explained; “for a man to say that there is no God in the universe is like saying that there are no insects in any of the stars.”

The Psalmist agreed, and spoke in even more dramatic terms: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’.” [Psalm 14:1] The atheists are caught in a difficult position. They reject belief in God, but draw attention to God even as they shout their unbelief. In the end, they look more foolish than dangerous.

This call for a new public relations strategy will likely backfire. Hijacking the term bright shows insecurity more than anything else. A movement of secure egos would not resort to calling itself “brights.”

Atheism may try to change its name, but it cannot succeed in changing its nature. This bright idea doesn't look so bright after all.

