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# Not Yet The Majority But No Longer Silent

Re-branding secularism: what it means to be a public atheist in American discourse today.

*by Daniel C. Dennett*

**T**here are many more atheists and agnostics in the country than is generally recognized. For instance, we atheists and agnostics are as numerous as Southern Baptists, and we are also the fastest *growing* category—faster even than the Mormons and the evangelicals.

Why, then, are we atheists in general so unnoticed, and why is this changing? Since atheists, in general, think there are much more important and interesting topics to discuss than whether or not God — which God? — exists, we seldom raise the issue.

But recent trends in America have suggested to many of us that this diplomatic reticence has been exploited by sectarian ideologues, evangelists, politicians, and others intent on maintaining the illusion that we are a negligible fringe community, so we are encouraging those who agree with us to *come out of the closet* .

I use the idiom advisedly. A few decades ago, homosexuality was looked upon as so shameful that few dared declare themselves, and as a result, most homosexuals had to lie their way through life, for fear of losing their jobs, their reputations, their friends and family.

How times have changed — and for the better! It is now possible for homosexuals to be elected to Congress, to star in television shows, to be honored for their accomplishments and treasured by their friends. Could an atheist be elected to Congress? Probably not now, but if we can just raise the consciousness of Americans to the fact that some of their best friends are atheists, this will change.

In July, 2003, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* entitled “[The Bright Stuff](http://www.the-brights.net/vision/essays/dennett_nyt_article.html)” ([http://www.the-brights.net/vision/essays/dennett\\_nyt\\_article.html](http://www.the-brights.net/vision/essays/dennett_nyt_article.html)), where I drew attention to a budding movement among atheists intent on copying an idea from the homosexuals’ excellent campaign: the hijacking of a perfectly good word with an established meaning, *gay*, and putting it to use with a new meaning, as a consciousness-raiser.

The term “bright” was chosen by two brights in Sacramento — Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell — who thought we freethinkers (atheists, agnostics, *et al* — needed a fresh name. In the aftermath of my op-ed piece, I’ve read quite a few articles and thousands of messages about the term “bright.”

Most people who bother writing don’t like the term — including many brights (as I persist in calling them). It’s rude, disrespectful, antagonizing, they say. In other words, it’s just like “gay” (hey, you heteros, how do you like the implication that you’re glum and gloomy?).

I am still not convinced that it was a mistake to go with *bright*. These things take time. Had Geisert and Futrell chosen some bland, mealy-mouthed term most would have forgotten it by now. The “in your face” quality of the term is, in my opinion, a piquant, but mild, antidote to the prevailing practice of hyper-deference paid to religions but to no other institution in the country. And I have reminded those who find the term objectionable that just as the antonym of *gay* isn’t *glum*, but *straight* — another happy word — they are free to choose a peppy antonym for bright. I recommend *super*, since, unlike us brights, they believe in the supernatural.

Of course when *gay* was first promoted in its current use, many in the gay community loathed the term, and some still do. But eventually it won, and it created a way of talking that was vivid and healthy. Gay pride. Gay rights. Gays were encouraged to come out of the closet, and the nation was amazed to discover how many of its favorite sons and daughters were gay. That changed everything. It’s probably impossible to gauge how big a role the term played in the benign revolution in American attitudes towards homosexuality, but it certainly didn’t hurt.

Whether or not the term *bright* catches on over the years, I think the movement to encourage brights to identify themselves (in whatever terms they like) is on a roll. Young people and old people write to me about their joy and relief when they discover that they are not alone.

It is still too early, probably, to elect a bright to Congress. Candidates will continue to grit their teeth and tell their fibs about their “faith” in order to get elected, and many who see through this but recognize a good candidate when they see one will continue to button their lips and vote for these tellers of white lies — including many who are themselves deeply religious but don’t believe you have to be religious to be good!

It would be better if we could simply wade through all this hypocrisy and acknowledge that there is simply *no truth at all* in the standard myth that without religion a person cannot be a good and honest citizen. We have discovered that Catholics and Jews (and gays and lesbians) can be excellent guardians of the public trust, and in due course we will recognize that not only are brights electable but that we have already elected, and honored, many thousands of closeted brights to high office — including the Presidency — in our past.

In my op-ed piece, I included some advice:

*“If you’re a bright, what can you do? First, we can be a powerful force in American political life if we simply identify ourselves. (The founding brights maintain a [Web site \(http://www.the-brights.net\)](http://www.the-brights.net) on which you can stand up and be counted.) I appreciate, however, that while coming out of the closet was easy for an academic like me — or for my colleague Richard Dawkins, who has issued a similar call in England — in some parts of the country admitting you’re a bright could lead to social calamity. So please: no ‘outing.’ “*

I do think this is very important. I have received many anguished messages from brights living in red states who believe (correctly, I surmise, but I don’t know) that if they were to come out of the closet, they would be driven out of business if not out of town. So we must be patient, and gentle, and let people keep their faith — or lack of it — to themselves.

In the meantime, can we public atheists have productive conversations with believers? Certainly. We can discuss every issue under the sun, and particularly the great questions of ethics and public policy, respecting each other as citizens with honest disagreements about fundamental matters that can be

subjected to reasonable, open inquiry and mutual persuasion. As I said in my first posting to On Faith, we all need to agree to live by the principles of rational discourse. That, and common courtesy, is the only rule we need — just as in science.

As long as those who are believers will acknowledge that their allegiance gives them no privilege, no direct line to the absolute truth, no advantage in moral insight, we should be able to get along just fine.

*Lead image courtesy of Jeff Ruane (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eioual/>).*

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