

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the tri-state area • An affiliate of American Atheists

August 2003

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013

<http://nyc-atheists.org> info@nyc-atheists.org

Events

August Atheist Meetup

Casual dining or drinks with your fellow freethinkers.

Tuesday, August 19, 7–9 P.M.

Manhattan: Hallo Berlin, 402 W. 51st St. (near 9th Ave.; 1/9/C/E to 50th St., A to 42nd St., N/R/W to 49th St.)

Westchester: Barnes & Noble, 111 South Central Ave, Hartsdale

Long Island: Bagel Boss, 432 S. Oyster Bay Rd., Hicksville

August Meeting

Sunday, August 24, 1-4 P.M.

Source of Life Conf. Center
352 7th Ave., 16th flr.

(Between W. 29th-30th Sts., just south of Penn Station)

Donation requested

Street Fair Tabling

Saturday, August 30, 10 A.M.–6 P.M.

Annual Greenwich Ave. Festival
Near 6th Ave. and 12th St.

Visit our table, or e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794 to help volunteer.

Kimberly Blaker Readings/Signings

Author of *The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America*

Sunday, September 14

Blue Stockings Bookstore, 172 Allen St., Manhattan, 6-8 P.M. (F/V to 2nd Ave., 6 to Bleecker St.)

Barnes & Noble, 2245 Richmond Ave., Staten Island, 1-2 P.M.



September Atheist Meetup

Casual dining or drinks with your fellow freethinkers.

Tuesday, September 16, 7-9 P.M.

Manhattan location; call (212) 330-6794 to confirm.

Location chosen by registering and voting at <http://atheists.meetup.com>. Atheist Meetups in Westchester, Long Island, and northern NJ will be promoted in e-mail if enough people register.

September Meeting

Sunday, August 24, 1-4 P.M.

Source of Life Conf. Center
352 7th Ave., 16th flr.

(Between W. 29th-30th Sts., just south of Penn Station)

Donation requested

New York Times Features New York City Atheists

See the article "God? Loud Denials and a Few Shrugs," reprinted inside.

Limits of Science Argued at July Meeting

Twenty-eight members at July's meeting heard and heartily debated with Dr. Roger Foster, professor of philosophy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Borough of Manhattan Community College, during his challenging presentation "Do Atheists Risk Making a God Out of Science? Why Nonscientistic Critiques of Religion Are Preferable."

Our socio-cultural creation called science can't explain or understand everything, religion included, said Foster. People and their cultural creations are too complex. Instead of treating religion simply as a mistaken belief, a cognitive error, we must

NYC Atheists Awarded Tax-Exempt Status

NYC Atheists is now a 501(c) educational association. Donations are now tax deductible. See "Treasury Report" inside.

explore its role in society in order to understand it, he said.

Foster said that science's description of religion as a mistaken belief doesn't explain the most

important elements of religion, or its popularity and errors. Comparing patriotism, which invests flags with power beyond their qualities as patterned cloth, Foster said that religion includes basic beliefs that precede irrational belief in a supernatural deity.

Anchoring his thesis in the work of philosophers John Dewey and sociologist Emile Durkheim, Foster said that supernatural belief is a side effect of religion, not its cause. Because of that, atheists criticizing supernaturalism will not convince religionists of their irrationality. The social practice of religion creates the belief, not the other way around. And nonscientific critiques of religion would be more convincing, he said, because they would take religion more seriously.

There are good nonscientific reasons for atheism, said Foster. Atheists don't make evidence-based scientific judgments on everything they experience. Phenomena like love or enjoying a sunset, said Foster, would be better understood through art, such as poetry, than by reductionist science.

Contentious audience discussion during and toward the end of Foster's presentation favored more reductionist arguments, focused on religion associated with institutions and indoctrination, and brought up brain biochemistry, economics, etymology, esthetics, pantheism versus polytheism, and the definition of *religion*, especially in the context of Dewey's use of the term for life experience motivation or special meaning that can include the scientific, ethical, or political, and could exclude the supernatural. The discovery of DNA, for Dewey, would count as a religious experience, exclusive of supernatural belief. Would membership in New York City Atheists constitute a religious experience? asked an audience member. Yes, by Dewey's definition, said Foster, who recommended Dewey's *A Common Faith* (p. 27).

Foster also recommended



Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which attribute's religion's creation and popularity to

“the power of the collective,” in which sharing experiences gains transcendent strength in group experience, which then leads to the mistaken creation of gods to explain those experiences.

Another member suggested Joseph Campbell's call for a “science of myth” to analyze religion.

After a social break, we reconvened for business. Bylaws revisions are being aired on the Yahoo discussion group nyc-atheists. NYC Atheists members who haven't yet joined nyc-atheists can e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org to request access.

We discussed possible titles for a book club, and for an atheist film festival. Suggestions, and offers to participate or help organize, are welcome at info@nyc-atheists.org or (212) 330-6794.

We are considering a support group for members suffering crises. Members could e-mail crisis@nyc-atheists.org to contact the organizers of the support group, all confidentially.

NYC Atheists member Onel has volunteered to be our historian, to announce at our meetings historic anniversaries. This may also become a newsletter feature.

We discussed trying weeknight instead of weekend membership meetings in October or November, and polling our membership in e-mail to learn its preferences (see “Weekend Meetings versus Weeknight Meetings” elsewhere in this issue.)

We discussed monitoring newspapers for opportunities to write activist letters to the editor. Ken gave several tips for writing letters to the editor and to elected

officials. Dan volunteered to cover the New York Sun and Wall Street Journal; Eileen volunteered to cover the New York

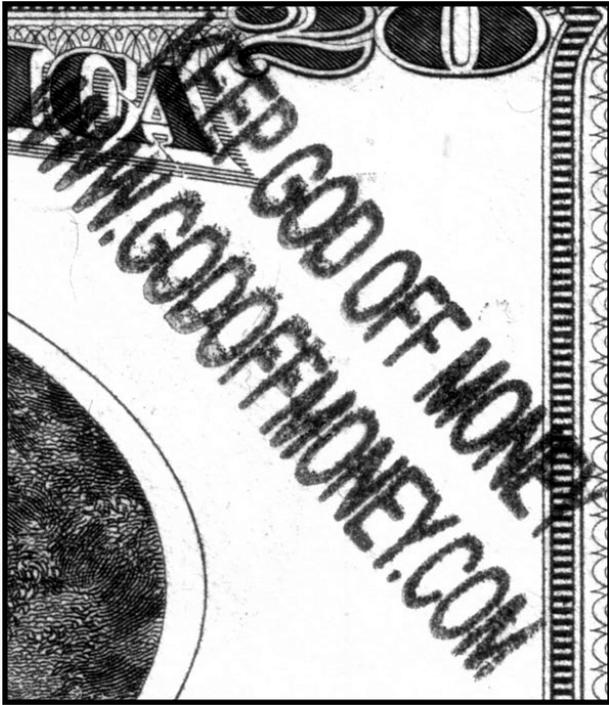
Post and Daily News; Roger volunteered to cover New York Times. They can discuss their findings in the Yahoo discussion group nyc-atheists. If you'd like to monitor an additional newspaper or a magazine, contact info@nyc-atheists.org or (212) 330-6794.

Harvey is monitoring the post-office box and voicemail; Mario is covering meeting refreshments. Several other members have also volunteered their services to help NYC Atheists grow.

Dennis, having restored the *Atheist Viewpoint* program on Manhattan public-access cable and having appeared on the show himself, said that Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists and cohost of the program is inviting members of NYC Atheists to be on the show to talk about current events and their own personal experiences relating to their atheism. If you're interested, email Ellen Johnson (ej@atheists.org) or call (908) 276-7300, and mention that you are a member of NYC Atheists.

Ken said he was pursuing street-fair tabling opportunities for August 30 and October 4 (see “Street Tabling on Saturday, August 30” elsewhere in this issue). We also discussed the New York Is Book Country fair. Ken also proposed placing ads for NYC Atheists in the “Religious Services” section of the Saturday *New York Times*. Dan suggested *Newsday's* “Religious Events” column.

We also discussed monthly press releases to media about our meetings, highway-cleaning sponsorship, and alternatives to the increasingly crowded and noisy Mustang Harry Atheist Meetup location.



Stamp out Religion?

“Some Atheists and separationists are taking pen in hand, and obliterating the 'In God We Trust' motto from the national currency,” says the Web site of the national group American Atheists, with which New York City Atheists is affiliated. “Others are using rubber stamps, or inserting their own messages like 'In Reason We Trust,' or 'Keep Church and State Separate.' Mention religious slogans in an Internet newsgroup or at a meeting and eyebrows are suddenly raised. Opinions are expressed. And there's a tame call to action, even if does only use the nearest ballpoint or magic marker.”

“One of the first legal actions to challenge religious sloganeering of this type was made in 1978 by American Atheists founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair,” continues the article. “In the case of [*O'Hair v. Blumenthal*], the court opined: 'Its use is of a patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of religious exercise.' The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit reached a similar conclusion in the 1970 case *Aronow v. United States*. Subsequent cases also fell short....”

Is it legal to cross out “In God We Trust” or to add a contradicting

message? The American Atheists article (available in full at <http://www.atheists.org/flash.line/igwt1.htm>) cites the federal codes “Title 18 Section 333 of the U.S. Code” and “Ch. 25, Counterfeiting and Forgery 18-476,” which make liable to a \$500 fine anyone who “writes, prints, or otherwise impresses upon or attaches to . . . any obligation or security of the United States issued under or authorized by any Act of Congress . . . any business or professional card, notice, or advisement, or any

notice or advertisement whatever.” Continues American Atheists, “Should hundreds, then thousands of Atheists and separationists start crossing out 'In God We Trust,' there just might be a prosecution under the above mentioned statute. . . . At least consider the potential consequences; and realize money passes through our hands quite rapidly. We usually glance to check whether it's a \$1 bill, a sawbuck, or something bigger. One alternative to spending your time obliterating IGWT is to put the same effort into a letter to the editor of your local paper, or even your representative in Foggy Bottom. Either way, the choice is yours.”

The U.S. Department of the Treasury says, “We do not encourage the defacement of U.S. currency. If you choose to mark your bills, please do so in a reasonable and prudent manner. Basically the bill must not be 'unfit to be re-issued.' If you deface the bills in such a manner that renders the bills 'unfit to be re-issued,' you may violate the law.”

The Web site <http://www.godoffmoney.com> supports either crossing out the slogan or stamping an additional message. “Godoffmoney.com encourages people to place the phrase 'Keep Church and State Separate' on their bills,” says the

site. “Patriotic individuals all across the country are stamping their bills with this message. It is our hope that because of these efforts, the topic of church/state relations will be placed in the forefront of public discourse. . . . Every bill stamped is another brick placed in the wall of separation. “

Precisely citing the federal codes “Title 18, Sec. 333, Mutilation of national bank obligations, [which] states that altering a bill with the 'intent to render such [bill] unfit to be reissued' is illegal,” and “Title 18, Sec. 475, Imitating obligations or securities; advertisements, [which] states that it is illegal to advertise on money,” Godoffmoney.com says that the laws are “generally unenforced and we consider the stamping of money to be an act of civil disobedience in protest of the much greater wrong of having 'In God We Trust' printed on public property.” But the site has ceased selling “Keep Church and State Separate” stamps since the Department of the Treasury informed it that use of the stamps is illegal, but that the Treasury would not object to continued maintenance of the Web site or advocacy of civil disobedience.

Trying Weeknight Meetings

New York City Atheists will experiment with a weeknight instead of weekend meeting in October or November.

229 members — all NYC Atheists members with e-mail, excluding 112 who have not supplied e-mail addresses — were asked whether they preferred weeknight over weekend meetings. Out of 27 respondents (an unusually high rate), 8 favored weekend meetings, 12 favored weeknights, and 7 were indifferent or had impractical suggestions, such as alternating the days meetings and Meetups between Sunday afternoons and the third Tuesday evening of each month (Atheist Meetups are run by Meetup.com on a fixed schedule).

Some members added,

“I still prefer afternoons. I spend three hours just traveling to and from meetings and I'd rather do that during

the day.”

“Just like Steve Martin, 'I'm a wild and crazy guy'; I'm up for anything.”

“Weeknight meetings A MUST.”

“It makes no difference to me. I will get to meetings as often as possible whenever they are held.”

“[Evenings] sound great to me — however, might attendance slip for those with jobs that requires them to sometimes stay late? Might discussions become more muted because people are tired? . . . “

“[In favor of evenings] Hell, I'd finally be able to attend.”

“The truth is that I have been unable to make any of the meetings so far. If they were on weeknights I would definitely not be able to go since I'm a single, working mom.”

Please send your e-mail address to info@nyc-atheists.org to be added to our e-mail list if you're not already on it. It's the best way to get quick alerts about issues and events, and is low traffic. To have conversations between meetings and other events, NYC Atheists members may also join the Yahoo discussion group nyc-atheists; e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org to request access.

Treasury Report: We're Now 501(c)!

New York City Atheists is now a 501(c), tax-exempt educational organization, thanks to the hard work of members Ken and Mel. Fiscally, this new federal status means that we can apply for grants, and that contributions are now tax deductible. Soon we will also be exempt from paying state sales tax. We have opened a new organizational bank account.

Please consider donating to New York City Atheists. Membership and our monthly newsletter are currently free, but we depend on donations to maintain events and mailings. Donations, which are tax-deductible, are reported in this monthly treasury report, anonymously unless requested otherwise. Make your check payable to

“NYC Atheists” and send it to NYC Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.

Early June's treasury balance was \$126.66. We spent \$195.53 to print the June newsletter and promotional flyers (extra copies for tabling on June 22), \$27.75 to mail the June newsletter, \$23.84 on photography, and \$20 for tapes for *Equal Time for Freethought*. \$15 was credited to our balance by Frank's conversion to a gift of his sale to NYC Atheists of street-fair tabling chairs. Members donated \$222 at the June meeting and \$1,510 by mail. As of mid-July, the treasury balance is \$1,506.54, excluding the cost of this newsletter. The treasury balance has been transferred to our new organizational account.

Summer Excursions

Members of New York City Atheists, alerted by e-mail, took evening field trips to a free opera concert starring Marcelo Álvarez and Salvatore Licitra on the Central Park Great Lawn on Saturday, July 19; and attended faith “healer” Benny Hinn's show at Madison Square Garden on Friday, August 8.

If you'd like to propose and lead an excursion of interest to members, e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794 two weeks in advance of the event, to allow time for feedback and e-mail promotion.

Call for T-Shirts

By Kirsten

I'd like to try to find someone, or a few people, who might be able to help with the T-shirt venture.

As some of you may know by now, I am no longer able to iron the slogan-transfers onto T-shirts because my hands/wrists are injured due to a combination of many factors, one of which was that just before and after the Godless March I made and sold 27 shirts, and the humongous banner I made for the march (Atheists Bless America, plus stars) was equivalent in labor to about 30 shirts. Also I was working too much at the piano and the computer during that same period, and I have other health problems - all of

which have led to this sorry state of affairs with my hands.

So anyone who would volunteer to help out should be aware that there is some risk involved. But if someone ironed only 5 shirts a month (less than 8 minutes per week), as opposed to my ridiculous 11.4 times that amount, I doubt any harm could come of it, unless that person were also working long hours a day at a job stressful to his hands or wrists or had other problems that could predispose one to injury. Men would probably be less at risk than women because they're stronger.

Here is some interesting marketing information regarding the sales of the T-shirts based on the records I've kept since last summer. The number of shirts that have been sold as a result of people actually seeing the shirts (at picnics, meetings, GAMOW, and street fairs) is 4.2 times greater than the number sold via the web page - 63 as opposed to 15, for a total of 78 shirts sold in the course of this last year. It may be that some people who've seen the web page are simply making their own shirts, which is fine, but there's no way to tell. In any case, given those figures I think it's worth it for us to make a bunch of shirts just to sell at street fairs, picnics, and marches. I'd like to make (I can do all the work except the ironing) about 5 of my favorite shirts, including “NYC Atheists” ones, and build up an inventory of about 40 shirts (2 shirts per each favorite slogan-pair, in each of 4 different sizes). If 4 people volunteered, we could have 20 shirts inside of a month. I'd also like to try “NYC Atheists” *sweatshirts* at some point.

I haven't kept people apprised of the kinds of reactions I've been getting this summer when I've worn my shirts, but there have been many that really made me feel terrific and hopeful. I guess the best one was from a woman who looked to be in her eighties. She came up to me breathless and smiling and said in a heavy Slavic accent, “You are like suffragette.”

In Response to the “Brights”

by Conrad F. Goeringer
AANEWS, 8/3/2003

Beginning with this edition [of AANEWS, American Atheists' e-mail news service; to subscribe send a blank message to aanews-on@atheists.org], Number 1115, we will include a quote made by the noted British freethinker Chapman Cohen. It reads:

“ATHEIST is really a thoroughly honest, unambiguous term, it admits of no paltering and of no evasion, and the need of the world, now as ever, is for clear-cut issues and unambiguous speech.”

Cohen, who lived from 1868-1954, was editor of the Freethinker magazine and president of the National Secular Society in Great Britain. He authored a number of works, and a two-volume collection of his writings, “Essays in Freethinking,” is available through The American Atheist Press. Our web site also has some of his musings, including “Morality Without God.” The late Madalyn O’Hair lauded Cohen as a champion of honest, forthright Atheism, and included references and quotes from him in her landmark article, “See The Tree? A Review of The Agnostic Position.” Cohen, as many Atheists have done, used various interchangeable terms like “Rationalist” and “Freethinker” to denote a particular intellectual disposition. Asked if he was an Atheist, though, Cohen bluntly responded in the affirmative. The term for him was “thoroughly honest” and “unambiguous.”

So, why do we now include his particular quote on our masthead?

One clue comes from a series of photographs carried by Associated Press and Reuters in the wake of the Vatican's condemnation of gay marriage. Members of the Radical Party of Italy, energized by the recent declaration of political warfare emanating from the Catholic Church and joined by other nonbelievers, poured into the street in front of Vatican City proudly waving signs declaring their Atheism openly and proudly.

“No, God,” read some of the banners. “Ateismo e' Liberta.”

“Democrazia Si, Teocrazia No!” announced others.

If the Radical Party and Italian citizens who lived under the boot of fascism and clerical oppression for so long can announce to the world “Ateismo é Liberta,” perhaps nonbelievers in the United States can take inspiration.

Not all of those who disbelieve in a deity might use the term Atheist. Some are more comfortable with appellations like Freethinker, Rationalist, Secular Humanist. While these terms carry a good deal of historical baggage (often those who employ the words are unaware of their context and meaning), we certainly defend the right of any individual or group to use labels which they find to be effective and appropriate.

There is, however, the persistent, indeed chronic debate over “offending” others by using the dreaded “A-word.” Some prefer terms that are less revealing, perhaps less honest and more pliable and ambiguous. “Separationist” covers a good deal of linguistic terrain; it is even camouflage for those of a religious bent. “Humanists” seem to inspire endless debate over several labels, fretting over the nuances that distinguish one “flavor” of Humanist from another. Are you a “Religious Humanist,” a “Secular Humanist,” something else?

Ironically, in this quest for popular acceptance, the term “Humanist” — especially when coupled with “Secular” — seems to particularly incite the wrath of the religious right. Might we see the day when an Atheist can calm the irrational fears of a fundamentalist by proclaiming, “Wait, wait, I'm an Atheist, not a Secular Humanist. Please like me!”

We doubt it.

In truth, the cultural bugaboo now surrounding the term “Humanist” might suggest that switching labels, hiding behind new or old terms, and playing a game of linguistic Musical Chairs does

little to rescue the Atheist (or, other nonbeliever) from a degree of social opprobrium. The feckless debate over what to call ourselves has also given us a near-terminal case of the “While Rome Burns” syndrome. While *we* engage in such verbal angst, the religious right is busy putting its agenda into practice, electing its candidates to office, and shaping the future.

A good example of this took place last November at the Godless Americans March on Washington. Imagine it ... nearly 2,500 “nonbelievers” with all of our different labels and clubs and cliques and organizations hopefully marching down the Mall in Washington, DC We were, as the GAMOW slogan suggested, “free, proud and on the move.” For a brief period, we managed to set aside personal and organizational differences. Folks who resented the “A-word” stood next to comrades holding signs like those that greeted the papacy last week in Italy, declaring proudly and unambiguously their Atheism. Atheists, even the most blustery, generally behaved themselves. Everyone was encouraged to set aside the petty disputes, especially over labels, and concentrate on issues. The whole purpose of GAMOW was not so much to attract media buzz, but to begin building bridges and fostering a climate of respect and tolerance within our movement. The GAMOW Task Force even went “the extra mile” when it defended the right of nonbeliever individuals and organizations to NOT participate. We respected that decision, though we may not have agreed with it, as a matter of personal conscience or internal group policy.

We still have a long way to go. But taking our first steps as a “movement” seeking to realize its cultural and political potential must not involve marginalizing ourselves. We do this in two ways. We cannot and should not demand that other groups/individuals conform to a particular style of organization, especially over monikers. And we must treat one another with mutual respect. For Atheists, that means not conforming to demands that we camouflage our convictions behind

obscure, misleading or dissembling terminology, even if it is the fashion d'jour. We have every right to call ourselves Atheists, to speak out on Atheism and related issues.

Finally, a good word needs to be said about the person responsible for the inspiration of our masthead addition — besides, of course, Chapman Cohen.

He is Larry Darby, the Alabama State Director for American Atheists. He recently began including Mr. Cohen's illuminating quote in his correspondence and public statements. For years, Mr. Darby, a disarmingly friendly and polite activist and attorney, has represented our organization in what some of us jokingly refer to as "the belly of the beast." With apologies to the author of Revelation or Tim LaHaye, Alabama is a bastion of fundamentalist Christianity and theopolitical intolerance. Into this swamp of constitutional violation and hostility to reason comes Mr. Darby, who has slowly been winning his own culture war in that state, and with the help of other individuals and groups, organized pickets, letter-writing campaigns, meetings and so much more. He has won the respect of a diverse swath of non-believers and state-church separation activists there, and even the grudging admiration (or at least recognition) of his opponents. And he has done all of this without camouflaging his Atheism, proof that effective and positive Atheism is possible when you are politically savvy, informed, polite and issue-oriented.

Atheism is not something we should fear, or dispose of like some old coat while we put on some other term that, we are told, is a placebo for our cultural ills. If others want to use different labels, fine. We respect their right to do so. The use of terms, whether Atheist, Freethinker, Humanist, Rationalist, or any other label is ultimately a matter of choice. American Atheists never presumes to order anyone, including our fellow nonbelievers, to use a particular label. We hope, no, insist, on the same level of respect. Fads, often fueled by the Internet, come and go with frantic

speed. Changing labels, we think, is not a magical solution for winning a cultural-political struggle.

So, inspired by Larry Darby, Chapman Cohen, and our friends thousands of miles away in Italy who boldly told world media and the Pope "Ateismo é Liberta," be strong, and be proud to call yourself an Atheist.

Another View of the "Bright" Idea

*By Jon Nelson
Atheists United, June 2003*

In our last newsletter, Mynga Futrell wrote of a new idea that she and Dr. Paul Geisert have been working on for some time and which they presented at the Atheist Alliance convention in Florida. They have coined the word "bright" as an umbrella term to describe all freethinkers and to give us some civic clout. They hope that this word, since it sounds positive, will enable the movement to grow and prosper. I have some serious reservations about all this.

First of all, I should state that I have the greatest amount of respect for Mynga and Paul. Both of them have made invaluable contributions within the atheist movement and they are to be commended for seeking a positive solution to a perennial atheist problem; i.e., that of the negativism often associated with the word "atheist".

However, after examining the issue, I am convinced that this idea, while noble in intent, will not alter anything in any significant way. Indeed, I believe that it is potentially dangerous to our cause.

One of the key issues involves the issue of honesty. If atheists describe themselves as brights this will be seen by many as an effort to avoid the "a" word. This definitely puts us in a defensive posture. If someone asks us what a bright actually is, we will be forced to define the term, and, since the "bright" community includes the atheist community (in addition to those who choose to call themselves agnostics, humanists, or some other appellation), we will then be asked if we are atheists. If we are honest (and I hope we all

would be at that point), we would have to answer in the affirmative. The questioner could then rightfully ask us why we are trying to avoid the word "atheist" if that is what we are. This is why I view this as an honesty issue, first and foremost.

In my correspondence with Mynga, she discussed our differences. She pointed out that her purpose in doing this is to enable the freethought community to extend beyond its present borders. She is excited about the fact that the number of people this idea could reach could be as high as thirty million. This would include religionists who detest the religious right and who support the principle of separation between church and state.

I frankly see it as quite naive to assume that the adoption of this single word will enable us to "build a national constituency." We will encounter exactly the same problems we have now. Those who choose to call themselves "brights" will be the same people we have as allies right now: The "movement" will consist of atheists, humanists, rationalists, skeptics, the nonreligious, and so on, exactly the same people who are today grouped under the unifying term "freethinker." And even if the word does somehow attract national media attention, few people outside of the community will want to join up when they find out who the core members are. I predict that the net total will be almost exactly the same as the net total of today's activist freethinkers.

This leads to the next point. The only positive thing that I can see from all this work is that it might get us some initial press coverage, and positive press coverage is always a good thing. However, if the movement does not grow in the way its originators envision, we will wind up looking rather silly. We will have gained nothing except a word that does us no practical good.

Mynga rightly pointed out to me that humanists have spent years defining the differences between a "secular" humanist and the other humanists. Likewise, the atheist community has spent far too much energy defining what

atheism is. We do need to act; the religious right constitutes the single gravest threat to our liberties in America today. Let us not waste our valuable time philosophizing and reinventing the wheel; our resources are too limited. If we want to grow, we have to take our message to others — we must speak clearly, forcefully, and without equivocation about who we are. Anything less is unworthy of us.

I also think it is a false analogy to compare antihomosexual terms like *faggot* and *queer* with the word *atheist*. Only bigots refer to homosexuals in this way. Likewise, only bigots refer to atheists as being *evil*, *immoral*, or any other such derogatory term. Such people are not about to join us, nor would we want them to. Those who would be receptive to our message and who might consider joining our movement would not employ such terminology. However, they might well resist doing so if we hide behind a term that could be seen as hiding our “real” agenda. Thus, however well-intended, this idea could have very definite negative repercussions for the atheist movement.

It is for these reasons that I am opposed to this idea. Mynga, Paul, and anyone else interested in pursuing it further are of course welcome to do so, and, given what I have heard so far, I am certain that they will. If what they say will happen actually does happen, and the word *bright* somehow gives us increased membership and activism, I will cheerfully admit my error. Until then, however, I fail to see this idea as anything other than an atheistic utopia.

How Bright Is This Idea?

By John Rafferty
Pique, July 2003

In “A Bright Idea” in a June 11 e-newsletter, the Institute for Humanist Studies reports favorably on a new movement: The Brights.

According to the movement Web site (<http://www.the-brights.net>), Brights are people “with a naturalistic worldview,” and such luminaries as Richard Dawkins, James Randi, and Michael Shermer have already signed

on and now identify themselves as Brights. A two-sentence homepage definition of a Bright says simply: “A Bright’s worldview is free of supernatural and mystical elements. The ethics and actions of a Bright are based on a naturalistic worldview.”

Okay, how does that differ from humanism? Well, it doesn’t. The “bright” idea is that it includes humanism, along with atheism, agnosticism, freethought, rationalism, secularism, skepticism, “and those who are nonreligious and are not associated with any formal group.” And the movement’s goal is greater political and social influence for all the above-named groups under the new umbrella term Brights. To quote:

“The primary focus of the Brights Movement is the marginalized situation of Brights in the political and cultural landscape of the United States. . . . If Brights are candid about their personal perspective on ultimate beliefs, nature of and origins of the universe and life, and so on . . . they may find themselves considerably less welcome at the civic table where decisions are made. Brights are hampered by existing labels [‘atheist,’ ‘skeptic,’ etc.] loaded with cultural and historical baggage. . . . If we are successful with this movement, then before we are done everyone (politicians, media, do-gooders, religionists, clergy, friends and family, acquaintances and employers, etc.) ill acknowledge and justly attend to the voices of the many and diverse Brights.

“The Brights — all the varied persons whose worldview is naturalistic — can speak out within our society. They can combine voices and, like the gays in the 1970s and 80s, begin candidly to self-identify and thus foster a social climate that allows and encourages religious individuals to similarly identify the nonreligious as Brights.”

Well, maybe. On the positive side: the simplicity of the idea is appealing; a two-sentence, 23-word definition is a refreshing change from the usual two-page slop-bucket of PC blather; and the goal of unity is laudable. But why . . . “Bright”? Can you imagine yourself

saying, “I’m a Bright” in ordinary conversation? If you can, can you also imagine how many times you’ll be answered, “Well, you look like a Dim to me”? What motivated the movement founders to bypass possibilities like *reasoner* or *natural* in favor of *bright*?

Not that they’re not aware of the problems, first and foremost “I’m a Bright” coming off as “I’m bright,” a real conversation-killer outside Mensa circles. But, they argue, just as the word “gay” became an all-inclusive term for homosexuals in just twenty years, so “bright” can become an umbrella term for all “naturalistic worldview” thinkers.

But is that what we want? Leaving aside the (I think) tortured comparison of homosexual/gay and naturalistic/Bright, is a Popular Front name a bright idea? While atheists, agnostics, and humanists all have “naturalistic worldviews,” they (we) also have some serious philosophical differences; the difference between, say, doubt (agnosticism) and certainty (atheism) is important to a lot of people. For another (if extreme) instance, while many humanists are atheists, not all atheists (Stalin, Mao) are humanists.

But we “naturalistic worldviewers” do have common enemies (take a bow, Reverend Falwell), and many common goals. Is what now sounds a little like a silly name a small risk to take for possible long-term unity and increased political clout? Is Bright a bright idea? Will I go back to the Web site and sign on? I don’t know.

Street Tabling on Saturday, August 30

Our next tabling will be on Saturday, August 30, at the Annual Greenwich Ave. Festival near 6th Ave. and 12th St., 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. E-mail info@nyc-atheists.org if you’d like to help volunteer in the morning or afternoon shifts. See several photos of our earlier tablings at <http://nyc-atheists.org/tabling.html>. It’s fun!



God? Loud Denials and a Few Shrugs

By Erin Chan

New York Times, 8/10/03

Sitting in on a social meeting of the New York City Atheists can be like walking through Times Square for the very first time.

A flurry of philosophical ideas assaults your senses. Arguments and theories dart into your cerebrum, voices swirl through the inner ear. When it's over, you need to blink hard, breathe deep and tell yourself to go to bed. You'll relive it later.

Two things, though, become clear about this fusion of unbelievers: they may not need God, but they need each other. And they need each other to disagree.

With the New York City Atheists, "you have concerns, but you're not excluded," said Roger Foster, a professor of philosophy at the Borough of Manhattan Community College-CUNY. "You have a platform where people can share news and information and develop a community awareness."

Debate and discussion make up the crux of conversation when the group gathers for one of its "meet-ups," regular gatherings that revolve around guest speakers, coffee, food and jazz. Founded in March 2001 by Josh Karpf, a book editor who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, the group began as a cadre of mostly retired people but in recent

months has grown to encompass a younger set of financial planners and

systems analysts.

At street fairs where the group advertises, yellow banners reading "Total Separation of Church and State" have generated

shouting matches with strolling passers-by, but they have lured people, too. Each new meet-up brings a few more people, who need only dial 212-330-6794 to reach the group's recorded schedule, which begins: "You can join your fellow heretics at. . ."

On a recent Tuesday at a corner table at the back of Mustang Harry's, 352 Seventh Avenue in the garment district, 4 women and 14 men gathered.

Under a framed excerpt from Joyce's "Ulysses" (which bore three references to God), Kevin Jones, a computer systems analyst from Long Island who looked more like an ex-football player, had drifted into a debate with Kirsten Sorteberg and Jack Schweitzer, a feisty retired couple from the Upper West Side who looked more like they had tumbled in from a New Hampshire farm. Ms. Sorteberg wore a red, white and blue patchwork skirt and a T-shirt reading "Democracy Not Theocracy."

"I'm sure I don't believe in God," Mr. Jones said. "I'm not sure I like the term 'atheists.'"

"We could battle over this," Ms. Sorteberg replied.

"It gives into the fact that it's natural to believe in God."

"That's deep. That doesn't make sense to me."

"I like my term."

"What's that?"

"Healthy."

Ms. Sorteberg shrugged.

On the other end of the table, three separate discussions crisscrossed six people like a twisted telephone cord: How has religion devolved in Europe? Is Americans' belief in God increasing or decreasing? And, perhaps most important: What is the purpose of life for atheists?

Appear on *Atheist Viewpoint*

Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists and cohost of the TV program *Atheist Viewpoint*, is inviting members of NYC Atheists to be on the show to talk about current events and their own personal experiences relating to their atheism.

If you're interested, e-mail Ellen Johnson (ej@atheists.org) and mention that you are a member of NYC Atheists.

Atheist Viewpoint may be seen on Sundays at 1:30 P.M. on channel 56 on Manhattan Neighborhood Network, Saturdays at 4 P.M. and Sundays at 6 P.M. on channel 35 on Staten Island, and Mondays and Tuesdays at 7 P.M. on channel 20 on Long Island's Hauppauge and Brookhaven Cablevision. See the Web site <http://atheistviewpoint.tv>.

Also on the Air

Equal Time for Freethought. Sunday evenings at 6:30 P.M. EST on WBAL-FM (99.5). A radio show produced by members of NYC area freethought groups. For audio and text notes, see the Web site <http://foody.org/freethoughtradio.html>.

Humanist Perspective. Hosted by Joe Beck and aired on Cablevision Public Access, it can be seen on Wednesdays at 6:30 P.M. on channel 71 of the Woodbury system, and on Wednesdays at 7:00 P.M. on channel 70 of the Hauppauge and Brookhaven systems.

What Is Secular Humanism? Produced by Long Island Secular Humanists and aired on Cablevision Public Access, it can be seen on Tuesdays at 6:30 P.M. on channel 71 of the Woodbury system, and on Sundays at 2:00 P.M. on the Hauppauge and Brookhaven systems.