

"Our ignorance is God; what we know is science."
— Robert Green Ingersoll

Critical Thinker

The Bimonthly Newsletter of United States Atheists | September / October 2004

Another Bright Idea

by Kendall Auel Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

Paul Geisert of Sacramento, California decided in 2002 that non-religious people needed a new word to describe themselves. He particularly disliked the term "godless" because it has the connotation that godless people are "less" than others, while implying the existence of God. He wanted to create a new, more positive word. He liked the way homosexuals turned a positive-sounding adjective, "gay," into a new noun.

The adjective chosen by Geisert is "Bright," and he has created a new noun with the following definition: "A Bright is an individual whose world view is naturalistic (free from supernatural and mystical elements)." Geisert and his wife, Mynga Futrell, have started a Web site (www.the-brights.net) to promote the idea. They have attracted some famous people to join them, including Richard Dawkins, James Randi, and a few Nobel Laureates.

The idea of creating an umbrella group that includes atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, freethinkers, non-believers, etc., is excellent. The purpose is to have a civic identity, thus giving all of us a stronger influence in the making of public policy.

The complaint of many, however, is simply the word chosen by Geisert. Perhaps "Bright" is too positive, because it sends a message of superiority and arrogance. On the Bright's Web site, much of the content is devoted to explaining and defending the term. We can expect the religious right to treat the idea with scorn, but even left-wing media and publications have been

reluctant to embrace the idea.

Meanwhile, the Godless Americans Political Action Committee (www.godlessamericans.org) appears to be enjoying a fair amount of success. This is the organization that grew out of the November 2, 2002 Godless Americans March on Washington. And it was this same event that sparked Paul Geisert's dislike of the term "godless."

So is "godless" a negative term? Absolutely. It requires a good sense of humor to use a derogatory term and embrace it. Atheists and non-believers did not invent the word "godless." It has been used for centuries to slight and deride those of us who have wandered away from the flock. By using the term ourselves, we show pride and confidence in our opinions.

The efforts to create a positive umbrella term to describe non-believers has a long history. We have the freethinkers and secular humanists as the best examples of those efforts. Many non-believers find the word "atheist" to be overly negative, and are uncomfortable giving themselves that label.

This is the essential difficulty of uniting behind any cause. Among God-believing people, some do not like being called "religious." Some church-goers are happy to call themselves "God-fearing," while others find the label to be negative and inaccurate. So the challenge facing atheists politically is to find a way to unite the largest number of like-minded people and therefore provide the most protection and influence.

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Weekly Meetings

Every Tuesday, 7:30 PM Join us at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Guests and the public are always welcome to attend.

September 7, 14, 21, 28

October 5, 12, 19, 26

"Bunk Busters"

"Bunk Busters" is the cable TV show produced by USA and co-hosted by Jerry Billings and Kendall Auel. It is cablecast through Portland Cable Access. Contact: Alfredo Torrejon at bunkbusters@unitedstatesatheists.com.

Schedule (subject to change):

Tuesdays 7:30 PM Ch. 22

Saturdays 1:30 PM Ch. 23

Sundays 5:30 PM Ch. 11

For an up-to-date program schedule: www.pcatv.org/programming/tab.htm#m2681_

Web Site

Check our Web site for the latest info: www.unitedstatesatheists.com

Dial-An-Atheist

For a weekly message of common sense, dial 503-ATHEIST (284-3478).

Critical Thinker

Deadline for next issue: October 15, 2004. Submission guidelines at: www.unitedstatesatheists.com/criticalthinker. Send submissions to the editor at criticalthinker@unitedstatesatheists.com, or mail in care of the USA address.

*Join us for lively discussions
and good times at our weekly
meetings, held every Tuesday
night, 7:30 PM at the Atheist
Community Center, 6514 SE
Foster Road in Portland.*

Don't Forget to Register to Vote!

United States Atheists encourages all citizens 18 years and older to vote in the November 2 election. But to vote, you must first register. If you have moved since you last registered, you will need to re-register. If you are registering in Oregon for the first time, your completed voter registration form must be postmarked by the 21st day before an election in order to vote in that election (October 12). Drop by the Atheist Community Center during any of our Tuesday night meetings to pick up a voter registration form. Forms may also be obtained at most public libraries. Oregon voters may view instructions and download the voter registration form at www.oregonvotes.org. ■

Brights

...continued from front cover

Unfortunately, the Brights do not seem to be meeting that challenge. They exist alongside other groups such as the American Atheists, the Skeptics Society, the Council for Secular Humanism, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and others. Individual atheists often support several of these organizations, and each group has their own particular strength and focus. But as a whole, there is still no label that we are all comfortable with.

And so the biggest problem facing the Brights in my opinion is simply their unfortunate choice of a name. Perhaps they should consider coining a new noun to describe people whose world view does not include supernatural or mystical elements. I think the word should be a completely new one, thus freeing itself of any prejudice. Something like, oh, I don't know, "bleft"? ■

USA Pizza Night

Words and photos by James A. Smith Critical Thinker Editor, United States Atheists

On July 20th, USA hosted a Pizza Night at the Atheist Community Center in Portland. Many people came and enjoyed pizza and good conversation. The gathering brought out a number of USA members who don't often come to meetings, as well as some first-time attendees.

The USA board wishes to thank Bret Palma for organizing the event. Thanks also go out to everyone who donated money to buy the pizza. Check future issues of the *Critical Thinker* and our Web site www.unitedstatesatheists.com for more information on upcoming USA events. ■



What Would Jerry Do?

by **Jerry Billings** Treasurer & Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

*Hello, Mr. Atheist Man,
I am not an Atheist. I am an Agnostic. The difference is that you are so sure of yourself and your beliefs while I am willing to admit that I do not know the answer as to whether there is a god or not. Agnosticism, is simply admitting that you don't hold the absolute truth, and that you might be wrong. That is something everyone should try to do.*

— A Modest Woman in
Astoria, Oregon

Dear Modest,

In my opinion, calling yourself an agnostic is simply belittling yourself. The very name, agnostic, implies that you accept that the question of "God or No God" is simply unanswerable rather than to try to find the answer. My answer to every agnostic is, "If you don't know about what may well be the most important question that you will face in life, then I suggest that you take the time to learn something about the question instead of simply pleading ignorance as a substitute."

In the limited space that I have here, I cannot go into an in-depth answer as to why I am an atheist. Rather, I will limit this answer to the agnostic's claim that absolute truths are unknowable. If you really believe that, then you must admit that the pagan gods and goddesses of ancient history are equally as probable as the current ones. You cannot disprove the existence of Zeus, Eros, Mars or Aphrodite nor of Thor, Freya, Odin, Isis or Krishna. The agnostic must admit that the three-in-one god of the Christian belief is no more or less improbable that any other folk legend creator. Sometimes I imagine a conversation between an agnostic and a Christian door-to-door missionary. It goes like this...

Christian: "How would you describe yourself with reference to your religious beliefs?"

Agnostic: "I don't know what I believe since I do not hold any absolute truths."

Christian: "Let me tell you about the resurrected Jesus because it is an absolute truth that he offers you the hope of eternal life in paradise."

Agnostic: "Well, I suppose that Jesus is as likely to be the answer as anything else so tell me more. My mind is open; I have no strong beliefs and belief in one god, three gods, a hundred gods or no god seem equally possible. My observation of the known world and the universe have utterly failed to convince me that stories of gods, magic, resurrection and superstition are anything more than ancient myths and the tale of the gods who created the entire universe and all life therein just might be true."

It is too bad that the agnostic feels obliged to take such a weak position. Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, would have called agnosticism, "a featherbed to catch a falling Christian," although he actually used that to describe a Unitarian. Agnosticism is okay as a temporary retreat from religion but surely it is no answer — it is a non-answer. It is about the same as saying to all concerned, "I'll be damned if I know."

I really hope that you look at your beliefs and opinions a little more critically so that you can be as confident in your position as you now are that you have no position. Finally, if you are ever in Portland on a Tuesday evening, I personally invite you to come to our meeting of United States Atheists at 7:30 p.m., 6514 SE Foster Road.

— Jerry

Adopt-a-Highway Cleanup Program

As you are probably aware, United States Atheists maintains a section of highway near the airport as part of Oregon's Adopt-a-Highway program; perhaps you have seen our highway sign. This program has given USA valuable public exposure and contributes to USA's goal of improving the image of atheists.

This project was initiated by one of our members, Nan Steinebach, who has worked diligently for over a year in support of the project. The success of the program was one of the major accomplishments of USA last year. Thank you, Nan!

However, due to increased job responsibilities, Nan is no longer able to coordinate this program. We need your help! I need someone to step forward and take on the responsibilities of coordinating this program. Basic responsibilities are:

- To renew our charter with the State
- To plan four or more cleanups a year
- To organize transportation, tools, etc for each cleanup
- To coordinate each cleanup
- To plan the post-cleanup party at the Atheist Community Center
- To have fun!

Those who have participated in the past will tell you how much fun they had working with fellow atheists to make a better (or at least a cleaner) world.

If you have any questions, let me know. Please consider taking on this task. It's fun and it's easy. This is your chance to make USA a model of atheist action. And when a Christian asks what USA has done for others, we will continue to have an easy answer.

Watch the *Critical Thinker* for future cleanup dates.

— James E. Archer
President, United States Atheists

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www.unitedstatesatheists.com

I am an Atheist and would like to join United States Atheists.

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If you provide your e-mail address we will add you to our e-mail list to keep you updated on USA news and events. If you do **not** wish to be added to the list, please check this box:

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I would like to help out financially. Enclosed is a charitable donation:

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Please make check or money order payable to United States Atheists and mail to:

United States Atheists

6514 SE Foster Rd.

Portland, OR 97206-4659

You may also join at any of our regular meetings, held every Tuesday evening at 7:30 at the above address. Contributions are also gratefully accepted at our meetings.

United States Atheists is a 501(c)(3) educational charity run by volunteers. Donations are tax-deductible. Consult a licensed tax expert for details on how it would apply in your tax situation.

Critical Thinker September/October 2004

Don't forget
to vote in
November!

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