

# The Bright Stuff

The time has come for us brights to come out of the closet. 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.

The term "bright" is a recent coinage by two brights in Sacramento, Calif., who thought our social group -- which has a history stretching back to the Enlightenment, if not before -- could stand an image-buffing and that a fresh name might help. Don't confuse the noun with the adjective: "I'm a bright" is not a boast but a proud avowal of an inquisitive world view.

You may well be a bright. If not, you certainly deal with brights daily. That's because we are all around you: we're 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. Wanting to preserve and transmit a great culture, we even teach Sunday school and Hebrew classes. Many of the nation's clergy members are closet brights, I suspect. We are, in fact, the moral backbone of the nation: brights take their civic duties seriously precisely because they don't trust God to save humanity from its follies.

As an adult white married male with financial security, I am not in the habit of considering myself a member of any minority in need of protection. If anybody is in the driver's seat, I've thought, it's people like me. But now I'm beginning to feel some heat, and although it's not uncomfortable yet, I've come to realize it's time to sound the alarm.

Whether we brights are a minority or, as I am inclined to believe, a silent majority, our deepest convictions are increasingly dismissed, belittled and condemned by those in power -- by politicians who go out of their way to invoke God and to stand, self-righteously preening, on what they call "the side of the angels."

A 2002 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life suggests that 27 million Americans are atheist or agnostic or have no religious preference. That figure may well be too low, since many nonbelievers are reluctant to admit that their religious observance is more a civic or social duty than a religious one -- more a matter of protective coloration than conviction.

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Most brights don't play the "aggressive atheist" role. We don't want to turn every conversation into a debate about religion, and we don't want to offend our friends and neighbors, and so we maintain a diplomatic silence.

But the price is political impotence. Politicians don't think they even have to pay us lip service, and leaders who wouldn't be caught dead making religious or ethnic slurs don't hesitate to disparage the "godless" among us.

From the White House down, bright-bashing is seen as a low-risk vote-getter. And, of course, the assault isn't only rhetorical: the Bush administration has advocated changes in government rules and policies to increase the role of religious organizations in daily life, a serious subversion of the Constitution. It is time to halt this erosion and to take a stand: the United States is not a religious state, it is a secular state that tolerates all religions and -- yes -- all manner of nonreligious ethical beliefs as well.

I recently took part in a conference in Seattle that brought together leading scientists, artists and authors to talk candidly and informally about their lives to a group of very smart high school students. Toward the end of my allotted 15 minutes, I tried a little experiment. I came out as a bright.

Now, my identity would come as no surprise to anybody with the slightest knowledge of my work. Nevertheless, the result was electrifying.

Many students came up to me afterwards to thank me, with considerable passion, for "liberating" them. I hadn't realized how lonely and insecure these thoughtful teenagers felt. They'd never heard a respected adult say, in an entirely matter of fact way, that he didn't believe in God. I had calmly broken a taboo and shown how easy it was.

In addition, many of the later speakers, including several Nobel laureates, were inspired to say that they, too, were brights. In each case the remark drew applause. Even more gratifying were the comments of adults and students alike who sought me out afterward to tell me that, while they themselves were not brights, they supported bright rights. And that is what we want most of all: to be treated with the same respect accorded to Baptists and Hindus and Catholics, no more and no less.

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 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."

But there's no reason all Americans can't support bright rights. I am neither gay nor African-American, but nobody can use a slur against blacks or homosexuals in my hearing and get away with it. Whatever your theology, you can firmly object when you hear family or friends sneer at atheists or agnostics or other godless folk.

And you can ask your political candidates these questions: Would you vote for an otherwise qualified candidate for public office who was a bright? Would you support a nominee for the Supreme Court who was a bright? Do you think brights should be allowed to be high school teachers? Or chiefs of police?

Let's get America's candidates thinking about how to respond to a swelling chorus of brights. With any luck, we'll soon hear some squirming politician trying to get off the hot seat with the feeble comment that "some of my best friends are brights."