

# AOK|ATHÉE OKIE

THE NEWSLETTER FOR FREETHINKING OKLAHOMANS

Volume 3, Issue 7

July 2003

## BRIGHT RIGHTS

[Leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org](mailto:Leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org)

On July 4, 1946, one Richard Phillip Deviate, an undaunted would-be U.S. Senator, sauntered down the streets of his new hometown, Whitehaven, South Carolina, to gather signatures door to door for a petition to place a newly formed political party dubbed the *Sodomite Party* on the ballot in time for that year's general election. A pink logo announcing "Sodomite Rights" emblazoned on his briefcase, the intrepid Deviate greeted the townsfolk earnestly: "I'm canvassing for the Sodomite Party because men of my ilk demand more power. *Now!* If we can get on the ballot, I hope to be your Senator." Thus one (fictional) gay rights movement died without ever being born. A new rational-thought movement called "The Brights" uses terminology with positive connotations to avoid that same fate.

Slandorous press campaigns against *queers* in the 1930's and 1940's leveled

charges that bloodthirsty "sex deviates" threatened the lives of the nation's women and children. Homosexuals tried but failed to rehabilitate the word *queer*. Their next approach was to seek to *queerness*. Transforming into a noun an adjective used for decades as code and slang, and used to connote joyfulness, i.e. *gay*, homosexuals adopted a new identity—an identity that helped them gain wider acceptance in society at large.

In the second half of the twentieth century, identity politics coined many new tropes to replace epithets—tropes designed to humanize the historically dehumanized. Can and should that approach be extended to help achieve wider social acceptance for those who subscribe to the very humanist Enlightenment principles that fairly animated identity politics? And is it not well-trained minds—minds guided by illuminating principles, by well-reasoned judgments—that constitute our greatest resource, or is it our diversity, i.e., how we construe the expression of our multiform and divergent genetic traits across clusters of humanity? Just as our society frowns on slurs, should it not also frown on anti-secularist vilification? As legatees of the Enlightenment, we have inherited the boon of liberty. It's time we honor that legacy.

## **BRIGHT RIGHTS** (continued from front page)

The minting of identifying terms that are palatable to society at-large, terms like gay—represented “[a] triumph of consciousness-raising,” Richard Dawkins observes in the *Guardian* (7/21/03). “Gay is succinct, uplifting, positive: an ‘up’ word where homosexual is a down word, and queer, faggot, and poofah are insults.” Dawkins credits feminists (who draw strength from Enlightenment principles when they assert rights for women) for teaching us about consciousness-raising. “[B]ecause they raise consciousness” words matter. To encourage individuals with a naturalistic worldview to articulate the same, former biology professor Paul Geisert coined a singular macro-label, a new “gay”—“a noun hijacked from an adjective, with its original meaning changed but not too much.... Like gay, it should be positive, warm, cheerful, bright.” The term? Bright. In an article appearing in the Summer 2003 issue of *Secular Nation*, Geisert and fellow freethought activist Mynga Futrell write that Bright “is quite fresh and free-feeling” because its adjectival senses include connotations like luminous, clear, shining. “It trips off the tongue, too, at least in English speaking places.” It could well become “a meme that could ultimately pervade society.” Geisert and Futrell warn against a self-congratulating invocation of another adjectival sense, intelligent. Being a Bright does not connote mental keenness; indeed, dullards can call themselves Brights provided their worldview is free of mystical and supernatural elements.

Geisert and Futrell stress the civic value of an umbrella term: It could extend over the very many unaffiliated “religion-free folks” and those found “in affiliations of atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, rationalists, skeptics, secular humanists, naturalists, existentialists, materialists, igtheists, objectivists, etc.” who labor under terms that are “[in]adequate as an umbrella term over all of us” and that are used pejoratively in the vernacular. Coalitions of freethinking organizations are floundering in their efforts to inspire reticent nonbelievers. Geisert believes his umbrella (not substitute) approach might succeed in breaking the taboos that restrains silent nonbelievers in civic life, paving the way for them to constructively “put forth what [they] stand for, rather than continuously wrestle with [potential] disapprobation.” Once emboldened, heretofore diplomatically silent unbelievers might then speak out on in the public square when our supernatural- and mystical-free values are at stake, values such as strict separation of church and state and a commitment to secularism.

Fearing reprisals, many unbelievers maintain a low profile socially and politically. Now many unbelievers say they feel at ease using this neologism in a scenario like this, as presented on [www.The-Brights.net](http://www.The-Brights.net) :

Suppose you are in a discussion with someone and the question of religion comes up. If someone inquires about your own religion, you can pop up with “Well, actually, I am a Bright.” The other person’s curiosity will probably take hold: “A Bright? What is that?”

One of the advantages of the word “Bright” is that it allows a really simple and straightforward assertion. You state—“A Bright is a person whose worldview is naturalistic (free of supernatural and mystical elements).” Then, if your listener is truly interested in learning more, you can always proceed to extend the discussion and to explain more fully any philosophical basis behind your particular or favored category label(s).

“The time has come,” proclaimed Daniel C. Dennett in a clarion call carried by the New York Times (7/12/03), “for us [B]rights to come out of the closet” and to affirmatively and proudly “avow an inquisitive world view.” Small wonder those rusty closet hinges need lubricating: the Webster’s Third International Dictionary’s entry for atheism concludes its second and last sense, ignobly, with a defaming synecdoche: wickedness. Overawed, many nonbelievers even observe religious rites de rigueur.

Launching the modern world, the original Enlightenment was “[a] vision of secular knowledge in the service of human rights and human progress,” observes E.O Wilson in *Consilience* (1998, Vintage Books). The Enlightenment represents “the West’s greatest contribution to civilization.” Two centuries after the conclusion of the Enlightenment, this Western nation is largely inhospitable to atheistic and secular humanism: consider that an announced unbeliever running for elective office would lose in a landslide to a hyena. We need a new Enlightenment; the Brights hope to help usher in one.

**© 2003 by the author. Used by permission.**

## Thomas Jefferson on Freethought

“...shake off all the fears of servile prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first the religion of your own country. Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The testimony of the writer weighs in their favor in one scale, and their not being against the laws of nature does not weigh against them. But those facts in the bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from god. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong as that [its falsehood] would be more improbable than a change of the laws of nature in the case he relates...

“Do not be frightened from this enquiry by any fear of [its] consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in [its] exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a god, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement. If that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a god, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat that you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject any thing because any other person, or description of persons have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision...”

**(Thomas Jefferson, letter to his young nephew Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. From Adrienne Koch, ed., *The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and a Free Society*, 1965, p. 321.)**

## July 2003 Events

### **July 15<sup>th</sup> – Atheists meetup – 7:06 pm**

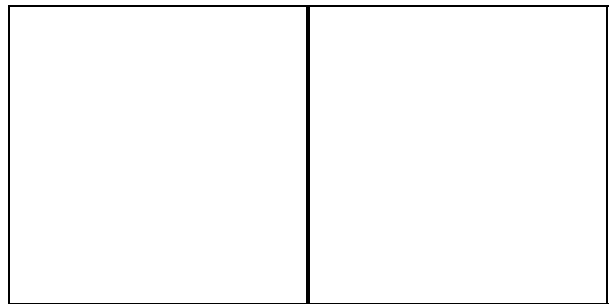
Please vote for your favorite location at <http://atheists.meetup.com>

### **July 25<sup>th</sup> – Labyrinth Deli – 7:06 pm**

Food, fellowship, fun! 3214 N. Classen Blvd.

### **June 28<sup>th</sup> – STOP meeting – 7:06 pm**

Avid church-state separationists meet up at the Belle Isle Library (NW Expressway and Villa) in Oklahoma City to consider the question: does Oklahoma need a new coalition of separationist activists?



Visit <http://www.CafePress.com/AOK1>  
( or AOK2, AOK3, AOK4, etc. and so forth...)

## **Oklahoma Atheists Contact Info**

**Web:** <http://OklahomaAtheists.org>

**E-mail:** [Contact@OklahomaAtheists.org](mailto:Contact@OklahomaAtheists.org)

**Voice-mail:** (405) 524-0801

Please leave a message after the tone.

### **Snail-mail:**

Oklahoma Atheists  
P.O. Box 60074  
Oklahoma City, OK 73146