

# Not Too 'Bright'

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*Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett are smart guys, but their campaign to rename religious unbelievers Brights could use some rethinking.*

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When I first read that leading evolutionary thinkers Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett were trying to get the world to stop calling religious unbelievers *atheists* or *agnostics* and start calling them Brights, I had my doubts. Granted, I didn't dispute the basic premise of the Dawkins-Dennett media campaign—announced in *Wired* magazine (Dawkins 2003a), *Free Inquiry* (Dawkins 2003b), and on the *New York Times* op-ed page (Dennett 2003)—namely, that atheists have to put up with a lot of flack in our heavily religious society and that their reputation could use a new shine. As Dawkins noted in *Wired*, a 1999 Gallup poll found that only 49 percent of Americans would vote for an atheist for president. That's a big problem.

But it's not at all clear that this problem can be solved simply by coining a new name (the word Bright was actually introduced by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell [Geisert and Futrell 2003], but Dawkins and Dennett have been its most prominent publicists). Moreover, I wasn't convinced that the word Bright would have the positive and uplifting effect that Dawkins and Dennett seemed to expect that it be misconstrued.

Now, a recent attack on the Brights movement in *The Wall Street Journal* by the conservative thinker Dinesh D'Souza confirms my worst fears (D'Souza 2003). The article blithely ignores a key caveat that the Brights defenders have explicitly laid out—namely, that the label isn't meant to suggest that religious doubters are smarter than everyone else. But I actually think this misrepresentation ought to be blamed more on Dennett, Dawkins, and the original founders than on D'Souza—for reasons I will explain.

In his original *New York Times* op-ed announcing the Brights label, Dennett wrote, "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." That's certainly nice in principle. But who did Dennett think he was kidding? How could anyone hear the label Bright and think anything but that atheists were claiming to be smarter than everyone else? As ABC News.com commentator John Allen Paulos remarked of the Brights campaign, "I don't think a degree in public relations is needed to expect that many people will construe the term as smug, ridiculous, and arrogant" (Paulos 2003).

From the start, the Brights label reinforced a longstanding stereotype. Atheists already have a terrible rap for being cold-hearted rationalists who attend Mensa gatherings and dismiss religious believers as simple-minded fools. Remember the public outcry that resulted when Jesse Ventura told *Playboy* magazine that he considered organized religion to be "a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers" (Ventura 1999)? Given this backdrop of strongly held negative preconceptions about the nonreligious in our heavily religious society, how is renaming atheists as Brights supposed to burnish their image?

Sure enough, in his *Wall Street Journal* reaction to the Brights campaign, D'Souza reverts to the standard anti-atheist

stereotype. Dennett's "implication was clear," observes D'Souza. "Brights are the smart people who don't fall for silly superstitions." D'Souza then ventures into some questionable territory, arguing that atheists aren't really so "rational" after all. I disagree: While all people have their foibles, I do think there's at least one obvious sense in which atheists are more "rational" than religious believers. Atheists don't accept supernatural claims on the basis of faith—a practice that cannot, in my opinion, be defended by rational argument. In this sense, at least, atheists do have a leg up in the rationality department (though I'm not sure how much good it does them).

But philosophical points aside, the fact is that D'Souza, writing in the most prominent of conservative outlets, made

precisely the attack on the Brights movement that its proponents should have expected from the outset. (Indeed, quite a similar critical approach was taken on NPR by a nonconservative, Steve Waldman of *Beliefnet* [Waldman 2003].) Given this tactical vulnerability, D'Souza could actually have made a far more devastating criticism of Dawkins and Dennett than the one he makes. After all, if atheists really are so smart, how could two leading atheists—and brilliant evolutionary thinkers—fail to see that the Brights label would be misconstrued?

My guess is that the Brights proponents simply didn't realize that in order to introduce a concept like this, one needs to do polling, message testing, focus groups, the works. You can't just go on ungrounded inspiration. Yet the idea of championing Brights appears to have a very cerebral origin: It's closely tied to the Dawkins-Dennett theory of memetics. In his book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins 1976), Dawkins coined the term "meme" to describe an infectious, self-replicating idea or concept. Dennett then jumped on the bandwagon with his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* [Dennett 1995]. Now, by promoting the Brights concept in the media, it appears that Dennett and Dawkins think they can start a memetic idea infection and watch it catch on. As one savvy communications expert observed to me by e-mail, "Once you've coined a term like 'meme,' I guess you hanker for that big followup."

But though Dawkins and Dennett may know a lot about evolutionary biology, the packaging and marketing of ideas—what we might call the science of "framing"—might not be their strongest suit. A basic lesson of framing is that you have to avoid promulgating messages that reinforce negative stereotypes, because these stereotypes tend to be too deeply held to



Photo by Lallia Ward  
Richard Dawkins

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defeat head-on. I provided a good example of such well-intentioned stereotype reinforcement in an article about framing guru Susan Bales (Mooney 2003):

Some of the failures of well-intentioned groups to understand the power of frames would be comical if the stakes weren't so high. For instance, teenagers have a terrible reputation among the adult public because of the general perception of endemic teen violence, promiscuity, drug use, and sloth. Thanks in part to the media, which frequently depicts teens in the context of crimes, accidents, or frivolous pursuits, this stereotypical view of adolescents is deeply embedded. . . .

Most young people are not, in fact, out trashing the neighborhood. But how to change public perceptions? In 1997 the National Crime Prevention Council and The Advertising Council ran an ad campaign that proved too clever by half. Titled "Prove Them Wrong By Doing Something Right," the ads sought to inspire teenagers to subvert anti-youth stereotypes by becoming active in opposing crime among their peers. But the advertisements used harsh stereotypes, such as an image of a young skateboarder with his hat on backward and the words "Vandal," "Heroin Addict," and "Purse Snatcher" superimposed over it. Only in smaller print could one read "... all kicked out with the help of kids like me." The problem, Bales and company say, is that once you conjure a powerful and negative stereotypical frame such as troubled teens, you can't just suppress it again.

I think this example runs closely parallel to the Brights/atheists case, and clearly demonstrates the shortcomings of the Brights frame. And it doesn't matter whether Dawkins or Dennett or anyone else actually *is* claiming to be brilliant. Simply by announcing the label, the damage has already been done. When people—most of whom are religious believers—hear that word, the vast majority will likely revert to the stereotypical atheists-as-arrogant frame, which has already been burned into their psyches. That means the Brights label will have failed. In fact, it will have backfired, making the anti-atheist stereotype even harder for future atheists to defeat or dislodge in the future.

What would be a better way to polish the atheist image? I have no studies to point to, but there may be a lesson in this episode. I suspect that what atheists really need is for people to

believe that they're likeable, and not so different from everybody else. So perhaps future atheist message crusaders should describe themselves and their brethren as humble, rather than angry or sneering or super-smart. In addition, perhaps atheists should try to confound expectations, associating themselves more with universal human feelings of sympathy, joy, and even vulnerability, rather than cold rationality and relentless inquisitiveness. I'm not sure, but I do know one thing—something that we all learned in high school. The Bright kids aren't always the ones with the most friends, and nobody—nobody—likes a smart ass.

## Note

This article was originally published online at [www.csicop.org](http://www.csicop.org) on October 15, 2003. A note about the subsequent reaction that I received concerning it may be illuminating. The article prompted over thirty e-mailed responses, far more than any other [csicop.org](http://www.csicop.org) column, which I've been writing for a year. Of these, virtually all came from skeptics/atheists who wanted to thank me for expressing their own bewilderment about the Brights campaign. This suggests to me that a lot of skeptic/unbeliever folks were feeling leery about the Brights label, and glad to see someone make a strong case against it. As one correspondent memorably put it: "I am a business student and an atheist, and so I look at this from a marketing/advertising perspective. We have done a horrible job of . . . managing our image. The main reason for this, I think, is that the classic generalization of atheists is true. We do tend to be more rational and cold than the average person, because rational cold people are more likely to see through the flaws of religion and be unmoved by the religions' emotional hooks."

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appropriate level of science literacy. To paraphrase Stephen Hawking, then we shall all, science educators, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that pseudoscientific beliefs exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we should know the mind of God.

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