

# The Debate Over Name Calling

By Dana Clinton Lumsden

There is a new cry for a name change in the Black community. Reverend Jesse L. Jackson has called for Black people to call themselves African-Americans — a reflection says Jackson of the community's new cultural maturity. "Just as we were called colored but were not that, and then Negro, but not that, to be called Black is just as baseless," Jackson said during a Washington conference. "To be called African-American has cultural integrity. It puts us in our proper historical context. Every ethnic group in this country has a reference to some land base, some historical cultural base," said Jackson.

Jackson's new call has renewed the debate among scholars and members of the Black community on what to call Americans of African descent. "I think what Jackson was alluding to is the fact that when we speak of other ethnic groups we say Italian-Americans or Chinese-Americans, this is just another way of creating an analogous relationship," said Colin Palmer, professor of African Studies at UNC. "Whatever Blacks choose to call themselves will be picked up by the general public."

Some prevalent scholars in the Black community favor the name African-American because they assert that it reflects a positive step in the direction of nationhood. "Our situation will always be different because we were descendants of chattel. Because of that, what we call ourselves will always be a different issue than (what immigrant groups call themselves)," said JoNina Abron, *Black Scholar's* managing editor in an interview in the *Bay State Banner*. "For us to have that name (African-American) as part of our

heritage is important in a society that is not really a melting pot. We need that type of identification." Abron noted that it is important for our children to look toward Africa with pride.

Ever since the early nineteenth century, when names for Black people were reflections of White supremacy and were used to justify the slave trade, the names for Black people have been political maneuvers. It has been but recently that Blacks have seized the opportunity to name themselves and create their own identity.

New political directions and objectives have always been signified through name changes. In the 1820s, Blacks stopped referring to themselves as African or Free African because they wanted to distance themselves from a northern White movement that sought to return them to their original continent, said Wayne Dawkins, writing in the *National Association of Black Journalists Newsletter*. Blacks become Negro or "Colored" when assimilation was the desired political objective in the minds of Black-Americans. As segregation and certain institutions forced Blacks to become more militant in their politics, there was a scream for "Black Power" during the sixties by Stokely Carmichael and other members of the Black Power Movement. Negroes and Coloreds had become "Black," a term that used to be an insult.

There are still some members of the community who cling to the words Colored and Black because they signify our genetic and anthropological distinctions from White Americans. Others believe that it doesn't matter what Blacks are called as long as we are moving in the right direction.

# Swimming Cross-Current Through the Hallelujah Deluge

Garraud Etienne, Editor

I didn't appreciate being woken up after only two hours of sleep, especially since I wasn't in the mood for a discourse on the fabric of life.

Two hours of sleep, standing in the doorway braving sub-freezing temperatures and Watchtower-packin' Jehovah's Witness: charming.

Despite having spent the past 24 hours waking up exhausted, doing a few hours of last-minute cramming, getting spanked by a 30-page final exam, driving 10 hours through the night and being dragged from my much-deserved slumber after a meager two hours, I still found myself managing a facade of politeness. They made it tough.

Exhausted yet polite—"Yes?"

Witness—"Good morning and (something along the lines of blah-blah, repent, yes Jehovah, hallelujah and amen)." I admit after two hours of sleep I wasn't alert enough to remember this pious broadside.

Exhausted yet polite—"Thanks, but we're not interested."

Witness—"But do you know who we are?"

Exhausted yet polite—"Ah, Jehovah's Witness?"

Witness—"That's right, son, but when you say you're not interested, that sorrows us. What do you mean?"

Exhausted yet polite—I wanted to say that's a signal for you to get the hell out, but yet Exhausted, ever so polite, refrained. "Well, we're not too religious here."

Witness—"Well, we're sorry to hear you're not interested in the gospel of God. That means you're not interested in life, and that's a shame."

Exhausted yet polite—"That's O.K. Have a nice day."

Between the "moral" God squads, the roving hordes of Jehovah's witnesses and those hysterical Hee Haw-reject televangelists, it's hard for a good old-fashioned atheist to lead a quiet, contemplative life.

I firmly and unequivocally reject the Judeo-Christian notions of an all-knowing, benevolent "he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake" deity. I firmly reject fairy tale notions of an apple full of knowledge of evil, Moses parting the Red Sea and other independently but equally ridiculous historical exaggerations. Despite 12 years of Catholic education, by the time I reached the fifth grade I grew increasingly insulted by the corny and obscenely childish notions of guardian angels, the divinity of some dude elected Pope and the whole entire world being repopulated (only about 5,000-10,000 years ago according to the Bible) by animals crammed into Noah's ark. (Fossils, geo-physical formations, and natural and written history must all be a fiendish plot by Satan to confuse us!) Even as a child I found it ridiculous that grown, intelligent people could swallow this without batting an eyelash. After Mass I would venture into the consciousness of my fellow worshipers and hear: "Gulp...ahh, now the world is truly ordered, purposeful and all I have to do is be good and believe, and I'll be saved. Hallelujah!!!"

I must admit though, atheism isn't a topic I am totally at ease with, but I believe whole-heartedly in challenging people, forcing them to think about entrenched belief systems, and ideally have them respond and expound on their beliefs. Many students are more interested in simply getting a degree than in truly learning. You don't learn anything by surrounding yourself with people of like mind and retreating into the safe, cozy world of yuppie-dronedom.

Many people never progress beyond the fundamentalism of the Bible and the Ten Commandments and explore the philosophy and dynamics of faith. I believe the Bible isn't the book created by some god but a masterful text outstanding for its literary and philosophical merit. Of course the Bible isn't verbatim directions of "I am" but a guide, a highly principled one, as to what the authors believed were universal principles and proper conduct for mortal man.

Morality is a non-entity, highly subjective and difficult to describe, but I'll wager I'm as principled, humanitarian and egalitarian as those of you who have already picked up your pens to write a "you're gonna burn in Hell if you don't get saved, son" letter. So, therefore, I serve notice on all holier-than-thou crusaders.

Leave me to my inevitable damnation, and I will leave you to entertain whatever religious fantasies you wish to hold on to.

**Write  
for  
Black Ink**