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## Cultural Commentary: The One that Doesn't Know

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# The One That Doesn't Know

By Barbara Apstein

**C**arpooling, one of the best-known suburban chores, is also one of the least gratifying. On rare occasions, however, the driver may be compensated for her labors by having the opportunity to observe the inner lives of children in ways that wouldn't otherwise be possible. Direct attempts to engage the average 13 year old boy in serious conversation usually elicit monosyllables, grunts and ultimately, dismissal couched in the form of a question like "Do you mind if I listen to the radio?" But if the driver remains quiet, her presence is soon forgotten, and like the proverbial fly on the wall, she is in a unique position to gain direct access to the adolescent mind.

I've been chauffeuring boys to and from soccer practice for several years now, and for the most part the conversations are fairly predictable. Silent and unobtrusive at the wheel, I have overheard numerous discussions of past games, analyses of the performances of individual players ("you played really awesome against Medway") and projections of future success or failure ("we're gonna get our butts kicked on Saturday"). One day, however, surprisingly, the talk turned to religion. "Are you Jewish or Christian?" one of the boys asked. "Christian," replied his teammate somewhat tentatively, then added, "though perhaps not really - I've only been in church twice, both times for funerals." He continued, with increasing confidence: "I'm not an atheist though - I'm the other one, the one that doesn't know." At this point, the other boys chimed in with energetic declarations that they too were not atheists, although they couldn't think of the word for "the other one." Breaking my customary silence, I supplied the missing term: agnostic.

Agnostic, which comes from the Greek "a," meaning "not" and "gignoskein," "to know," is one of the few words whose origin we can trace to a particular individual in a particular time and place. It was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley at a

party held one evening in 1869. Huxley was a biologist and an enthusiastic advocate of Darwin's theory of evolution, who became an active participant in the Victorian debate over science and religion. Huxley carefully distinguished agnosticism from atheism, the belief that God does not exist. In an essay entitled "Agnosticism and Christianity," he argued that "it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty." Huxley implies that he would be willing to believe in the proposition that God exists if there were evidence to support such a belief, but, lacking such evidence, he must suspend judgment.

New words often make their way into general usage because they fill what linguists refer to as a "semantic space," a category or area of experience for which there was, up to that time, no name. The terms "skeptic" and "freethinker" were well known in the late nineteenth century, but neither of these conveys the specific kind of religious doubt which "agnostic" denotes, a doubt which has its origin in the belief that theological questions lie beyond the limits of human knowledge. "Agnostic" filled for the Victorians, and apparently continues to fill for us, an important semantic space.

But do such questions really occupy the minds of the boys in the soccer carpool? On the surface at least, theirs is a thoroughly secular world, a world of athletic competition, of Lethal Weapon II, Nintendo, Beverly Hills 90210, Guns 'n' Roses, cars with fast acceleration and the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. Yet psychologists explain that beneath the surface, 13 year olds are thinking about larger issues and actively questioning traditional beliefs. In Piaget's stage theory of development, adolescence marks the beginning of dramatic shifts in cognitive capability; the adolescent engages in philosophic speculations about such sub-



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jects as truth, goodness and reality. Investigating the spiritual lives of children, psychiatrist Robert Coles discovered that even children with little religious background who rarely or never went to church or synagogue speculate about whether God exists, and if so in what form.

Why did the carpool philosophers unanimously reject atheism? Perhaps "atheism" has some negative connotations—a hint of dogmatism and an association with immorality stemming from the idea that someone who doesn't believe in God has no reason to behave in an ethical way. Or perhaps the young carpools have secretly asked God to help them score a crucial goal or shoot a winning basket. Perhaps they have even made

deals with God, as did a friend of mine who, as a young teen-ager, defied her parents by secretly wearing lipstick and eyeshadow. One night, during a thunderstorm which terrified her, she promised God that she would abandon make-up forever if He would make the thunder stop.

Agnosticism conveniently leaves open the possibility of appealing for divine help without compromising one's beliefs. In his memoir *Growing Up*, Russell Baker recalls that as a boy he had no faith in prayer, yet he prayed fervently before an important scholarship examination: "Dear God, help me with this test." How many agnostic airplane passengers, suddenly jolted by what the pilot soothingly describes as "a little bit of turbulence,"

have whispered "Please, God, don't let this airplane crash"? As the saying goes, there are no atheists in the foxholes.

The soccer players in the back seat of my car are engaged in boisterous, often exasperating rebellion against adult authority while busily establishing an authority of their own. They know everything; adults are "out of it" and "totally clueless." Yet religious belief remains the one area of acknowledged uncertainty in these adolescent lives, the area in which it's O.K. to be "the one that doesn't know."

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