



## A NEW ATHEIST ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN IS MISGUIDED, ARGUES THE BISHOP OF LEICESTER, TIM STEVENS

**A**n announcement was made last week that bendy buses in London are to sport the slogan, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life".

The slogan was written by comedy writer Ariane Sherine, who suggested the idea in a blog last June.

She thinks an atheist bus campaign will provide a reassuring antidote to religious adverts "which threaten non-Christians with hell and damnation".

The advertising campaign floundered over the summer because of a shortage of donations, but it was boosted by the financial support of Professor Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist and the author of *The God Delusion*. Dawkins is also a vocal critic of the power of religion over public life.

Following this financial boost, the campaign is now gaining momentum and beginning to capture people's imagination.

Donations have been received from unlikely quarters.

Among those to respond favourably to the campaign are, surprisingly, churches and religious groups.

# Does society truly want to be Godless?



The religious think-tank Theos, which was set up two years ago with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, has given £50 to the cause as it believes the "weak" adverts will encourage people to think about God.

The British Methodist church has also welcomed Dawkins's "continued interest" in God, and has even thanked him for "getting God on to London buses".

Early in the new year, the slogan will be seen on as many as 60 buses around London.

If the money to fund the campaign continues to grow, the British Humanist Association,

which is handling the donations, has said it will also place adverts on the Tube or other transport, and in areas outside London.

So what is the atheist bus trying to achieve?

As well as helping to establish a sense of solidarity among atheists, the campaign is designed to communicate the fact that atheists believe in something, rather than nothing.

At the launch of the campaign, their press release said: "Ours is a fun and light-hearted message, but it does have a serious point to it - that atheists want a secular country, we want a secular school and a secular government."

Richard Dawkins is hoping that the campaign to feature alternative slogans on London buses will "make people think," adding wryly that thinking is anathema to religion.

The words of the slogan indeed give us much to think about.

Bloggers, many of whom appear to be young people and who feel that no-one is listening to them, have asked why the slogan says "there is probably no God" rather than "there is definitely no God"?

Apparently, when the slogan was being developed there was much debate over this.

Dawkins is said to have favoured the words "almost certainly". But in the end "probably" was chosen to avoid

breaching the Advertising Standards Authority rules.

The values underlying the slogan also give some cause for concern.

In the current financial climate, many people are anxious about losing their jobs and homes.

These worries are likely to soon lead to pressures and strains on relationships.

As we enter what is predicted to be a deep and lengthy recession, a slogan which exhorts people to "stop worrying and enjoy life" may appear insensitive and untimely.

Paul Woolley, the director of Theos, has been more forthright.

He said: "It would be hard to

come up with a message more self-centred than this".

Building on the public interest in the advertising campaign, an event is being held on December 21 in London called Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People.

This occasion, together with the advertising campaign and other related events, are directed towards airbrushing God from public life.

Such a move would leave society at the mercy of human values and decisions to determine the nature of what life will look like.

If the advertising slogan is a glimpse of what such a future beholds, do we really want to live in a world which is Godless?