

# The Bus to Everywhere

Julie Breeze

*Free societies... are societies in motion, and with motion comes tension, dissent, friction. Free people strike sparks, and these sparks are the best evidence of freedom's existence.*

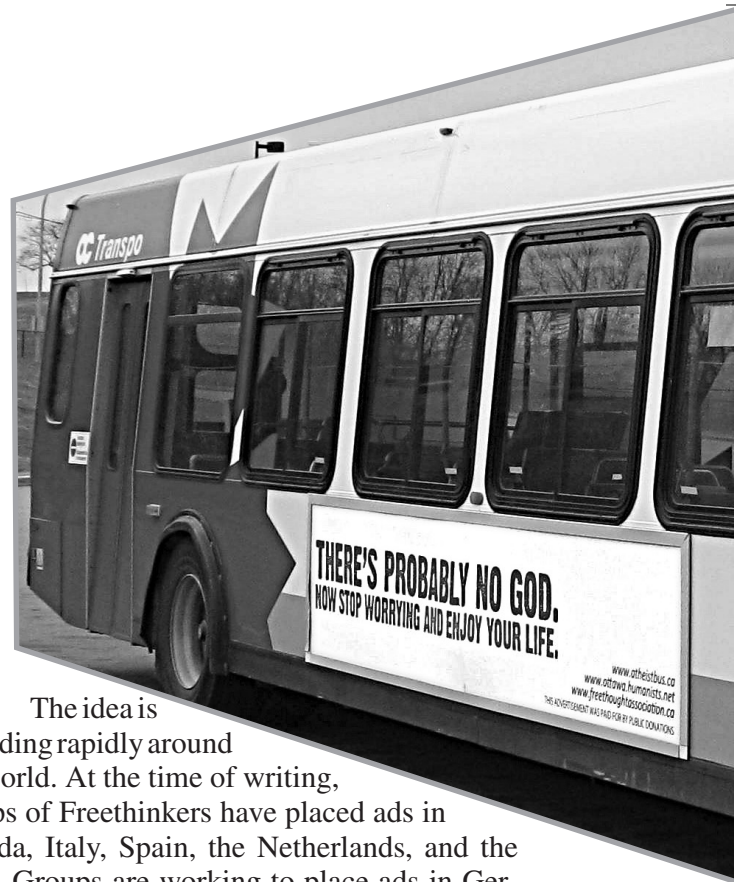
— Salman Rushdie

Non-Christians will “spend all eternity in torment in hell. Jesus spoke about this as a lake of fire which was prepared for the devil and all his angels.” (Matthew 25: 41) So read the website advertised on the London buses in June 2008.

Disgusted, British comedy writer Ariane Sherine decided to counter with an ad of her own. She teamed up with Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, and the British Humanist Association, and set the goal of raising £5500 (about \$10,000 Canadian) for their own counter-ads. Dawkins pledged to match all donations up to £5500. They settled on the slogan THERE IS NO GOD. NOW STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE. “Ours is a fun and light-hearted message,” said Sherine, “but it does have a serious point to it: that atheists want a secular country. We want a secular school (system) and a secular government.”

The word probably was added later, to satisfy British advertising regulations and make the ads less likely to attract vandalism. It also shows a more scientific allowance for doubt.

In spite of there being no plan or funding for soliciting donations, the money flooded in. The original fundraising target was met within 24 hours. Today the total raised in Britain is in excess of £140,000, which is being used to put bus ads in twenty cities across the nation.



The idea is spreading rapidly around the world. At the time of writing, groups of Freethinkers have placed ads in Canada, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and the USA. Groups are working to place ads in Germany, Australia, Finland, Switzerland, and even Croatia.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation in the United States came up with very creative ads, including

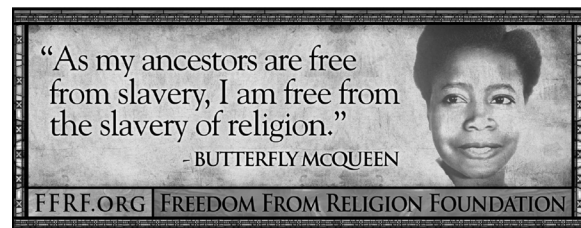
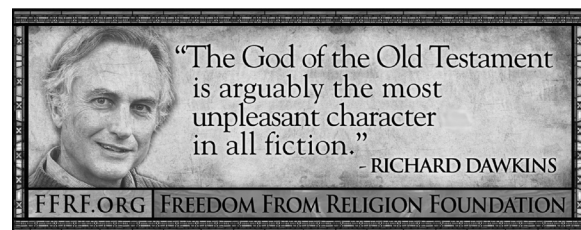
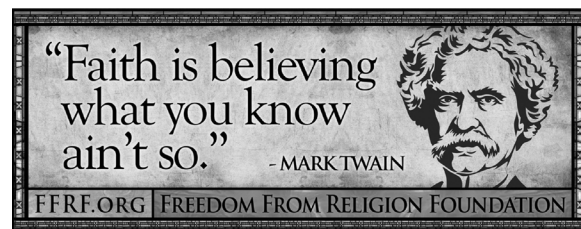




Photo: Henry Beissel

People have opened their wallets to the campaign because they feel it gives a public voice to their point of view, in a way never seen before. It gives them a sense of solidarity with other non-believers. They derive satisfaction from giving confidence to other nonbelievers and doubters who may feel bound by a need to appease religious family and friends. The Freethought Association of Canada, working with atheistbus.ca, has raised over \$46,000 so far.

*Religion is something left over from the infancy of our intelligence.*

Bertrand Russell

In Canada, Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary have run the ads. Cities such as Halifax and Ottawa initially rejected the ads on the basis that they were offensive, though Halifax's Metro Transit said they would reconsider Humanist Canada's YOU CAN BE GOOD

WITHOUT GOD if they "toned down the message"(!) Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, and London, ON do not accept religious advertising on their buses, and so rejected atheist advertising also.

The Humanist Association of Ottawa, working with the Freethought Association of Canada, were told that the Transit Committee had rejected their ads, but were offered a discounted rate on roadside billboard ads instead. They decided to stick with their original application, since city transit had previously approved a number of Christian ads for the buses and they saw no reason why they should not demand equal treatment. The City of Ottawa later sought a legal opinion



which indicated they had no chance of winning a legal battle should they reject the ads, which was a factor in city councilors' eventual vote to accept them.

Halifax transit officials announced they will be forced to reconsider their decision once the Supreme Court hands down a verdict in a pending related case. The Canadian Federation of Students and BC Teachers' Federation are currently appealing BC TransLink's decision not to allow their political advertising on Vancouver public transit on the grounds that this violates their right to freedom of expression. Given that BC TransLink is a public rather than a private company, and is thus obliged to follow public standards concerning freedom of speech, their success seems likely, and is expected to have a great impact on other Canadian cities' decisions to disallow atheist bus ads.

In Genoa, Italy, the Catholic Church forced atheists to change their slogan from "The bad news is that God doesn't exist. The good news is that we don't need him" to "The good news is that there are millions of atheists in Italy. The best news is that they believe in freedom of expression."

In Australia not only was the "probably no god" message refused, but even "Celebrate reason: Sleep in on Sunday mornings"

and "Atheism – Celebrate reason" were turned down by the largest outdoor ad company in the country.

In this battle, however, rejection works tremendously to Freethinkers' advantage. Each time there is controversy about the ads the press seize upon the story, carrying the message to far more people than unopposed ads would ever do. Few people outside Britain have actually seen one of the ads on a bus, but almost everybody has heard of them. The Atheist Foundation of Australia has had their rate of media interviews shoot up from an average of six per year to fifty. They are pursuing legal action to have their ads allowed, with accompanying media attention. "The object of the slogans on buses has always been, as Richard Dawkins quipped, 'To make people think'. I consider we have achieved that goal in spades," writes Foundation President David Nicholls.

The atheist bus ads have become such a household word that the United Church of Canada has started running their own ad which poses a question to the viewer, ballot-style:

- ✧ There's probably no god.  
Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.
- ✧ There's probably a god.  
Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.



Heidi Martin ©2009

They are not alone among religious groups supporting the atheist ads in the hope that stimulating people to question their religious faith will in fact strengthen that faith. The Christian think-tank Theos, supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England, has even donated to the British atheist bus campaign on the premise that talking about God is a good thing and there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Critics who would like to see any expression of doubt in their personal beliefs suppressed reveal a tremendous need for public education about secular humanism. Some people truly believe that Humanists desire to see a repeat of the repression and murder of the atheistic Communist regimes. We need to have Humanism taught in schools along with world religions. Already ad slogans are emerging to spread the word about humanist ethics, such as Humanist Canada's, and Washington DC's "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness' sake."

Why have the atheist ads stirred up so much more controversy than, for example, Hare Krishnas' proselytizing or the Islamic ads which have recently appeared on Florida and San Francisco buses in response to the atheists'? Florida's says "Islam: The Message of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad", and is sponsored by a group wanting to turn the United States into a Muslim country governed by Sharia law, surely a far more frightening notion than the Humanists' desire for freedom of expression.

The answer is that many deists are afraid that without society's taboo against criticizing religious beliefs they will be forced to confront the many illogical and contradictory aspects of their own beliefs. If after a lifetime of effort for and identification with their religion they discover that their own beliefs are in fact based on a fantasy, they lose the comfort that goes with the beliefs that somebody will always take care of them, and that however awful life may become, a reward awaits them afterwards. They

will also have to deal with the fact that they were completely wrong about something they have an enormous investment in. The psychological effects of their disillusionment will be devastating.

Atheism is a far greater threat than any dogma of irrational beliefs because it makes sense. Just as the strongest opponents of homosexuality are responding to their own largely unconscious fear of their own bisexual desires, so the greatest opponents of others publicly doubting religious belief have an unconscious terror that in fact their entire belief system is wrong. Their often enormous anger at the ads stems largely from this fear.

They have reason to be afraid. According to a 1998 Harris-Decima poll, the number of Canadians identifying themselves as belonging to no religious group has risen to about 23% of the population. Forty years ago less than one percent declared themselves non-believers. The change is probably due largely to a rise in education levels. Encouragingly, the number of non-believers is even higher among young people.

Since the start of the atheist bus movement attendance at Humanist events has increased. Membership in freethinking organizations is rising. Like many other marginalized groups in the history of our society, Freethinkers are coming out of the closet to declare themselves and find each other.

**If you would like to donate to the Canadian atheist bus campaign, contact**

***atheistbus.ca, or  
www.humanistcanada.com***

**or your local Humanist Association.**

***Julie Breeze is a lifelong Humanist. She is currently on the Board of the Humanist Association of Ottawa. She is passionately devoted to seeing Humanism become universally understood and accepted in Canadian society.***