

Spanish atheists put faith in bus ads

From Elizabeth Nash in Madris (13.01.2009)

BUSES WILL start to criss-cross the Catalan n capital, Barcelona, tomorrow bearing the atheist slogan that translates into English as: "There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." In two weeks, buses carrying the same slogan will wend their way around Madrid. Similar campaigns are planned for Valencia, Seville, Saragossa and Bilbao.

Religious authorities are furious, but signs are that the modest non-confrontational campaign has blown some fresh air into arguments about religion and provoked unprecedented public debate over people's beliefs. The campaign is eagerly discussed in the press and on websites, and reflects a moment of social and economic uncertainty when people want to reaffirm their own values or seek new ones, experts said last week.

The bus advert campaign, announced last month by the Catalan Union of Atheists and Freethinkers, is copied from one launched recently by humanists in London and has enjoyed unexpected success in Spain. Atheists have received more than 9000 in donations, enabling the Barcelona campaign to be prolonged from two to four weeks and extended to other cities. From being almost invisible, atheists have shot to prominence in a country where religious discourse is dominated by the Catholic Church.

"We want to make atheism more visible and encourage people to think and take decisions not out of habit, but after reflection, because everyone has the right to think what they like," said Albert Riba, founder of Spain's Union of Atheists and Freethinkers. "The Church transmits its messages. Why shouldn't we?"

The Catholic hierarchy has condemned the atheists' bus-ad campaign, further enhancing its appeal to 50% of young Spaniards who claim not to believe in God. The Vatican's cultural spokesman, Cardinal Paul Poupard, dismissed it as "stupid, superficial and ridiculous", and invited people of faith "to continue enjoying life believing in the love of God".

An evangelical pastor in the Madrid suburb of Fuenlabrada was even swifter off the mark, raising funds from his faithful to pay for two buses to drive round the Spanish capital for two months bearing the counter-slogan: "God does exist. Enjoy life in Christ."

"We want to communicate to the world that Christ exists and offers the way to a better life," Pastor Francisco Rubiales of the small but active Christian Reunion Centre said. "Everyone has the right to express their opinions freely, and that includes us." The bus campaign was, he added, a unique way of reaching the wider public.

Rubiales's riposte inspired the Catalan evangelical E-Cristians to mount a similar counter-offensive in Barcelona. The grouping said it "celebrated the initiative of non-believers to situate the debate about God in the public arena, and wanted to contribute".

The unprecedented emergence of religious debate on the street in a so far good-humoured and non-aggressive campaign has been warmly welcomed by advertisers as an unexpected source of funds at a time when conventional clients for advertising space are flagging.

"The idea of a God is marketable and so is the opposite," says Clemente Ferrer, head of the pEuropean Institute of Marketing, Communication and Publicity. Another advertising guru, Antoni Gutierrez Rubi, reckons the formula will spread to other faiths. "We'll get used to different religious and secular opinions being expressed quite naturally."

Spain's Muslims welcomed the "expression of respect" for other people's opinions, and reserved the right to mount their own campaigns.

Madrid's ultra-conservative regional rulers are keeping at arm's length, saying the mobile slogans reflect people's freedom of expression, and do no harm. "We live in a free country," the region's president Esperanza Aguirre said when asked for her opinion. Negotiations are still under way with Madrid's transport advertising authorities, but as the slogan infringes no regulation they are expected to give the green light. "We expect a rapid agreement," says Luis Vega, chairman of the Madrid Union of Atheists and Freethinkers. "Our message is clear, positive, calm and doesn't offend anyone."

Atheists in Valencia are pressing for the route of their bus to pass by a monument commemorating Europe's last victim of the Inquisition, Cayetano Ripoll, who was hanged in 1826 for heresy.

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