

The bus campaign: questions



- 1) What do you think was the purpose of the campaign?
- 2) Is the message atheist or agnostic? How do you know?
- 3) Why do you think those specific words were used in the advert?
- 4) How do you think different people reacted to the campaign (religious and non-religious)?
- 5) What is the key difference in the follow-up Christian bus campaign (see the picture below)?



- 6) Do you think these sorts of adverts should be allowed? Is it OK to share our beliefs publically? Is it OK to question the beliefs of others?

The bus campaign: answers

This campaign took place in 2009. After several Christian adverts appeared on London buses, the comedian and journalist Ariane Sherine campaigned to raise funds for an alternative message. The adverts appeared on around 500 London bus routes.



1) What do you think was the purpose of the campaign?

The aim of the campaign was not to try to persuade people not to believe in a god. It was to say that it is OK not to, and to share the belief that one can lead a happy and fulfilling life without religion. It aimed to reassure those who already didn't believe in a god and tell them they are not alone.

2) Is the message atheist or agnostic? How do you know?

In some sense the message is agnostic, because it uses the word 'probably'. The word 'probably' meant that the campaign did not breach any advertising rules. It was also, in the eyes of the organiser, Ariane Sherine, more accurate: 'Even though there's no scientific evidence at all for God's existence, it's also impossible to prove that God doesn't exist (or that anything doesn't).' However, there is also an atheist message in that, if we don't know, it's OK to not believe and to get on with our lives.

3) Why do you think those specific words were used in the advert?

The words carry a humanist message, focusing more on a positive approach to life, rather than the negative absence of belief.

- 'Probably': We can't know for certain that a god does not exist (see answer 2 above).
- 'Stop worrying': Some humanists believe that questions about god can sometimes be a distraction from other things that are important to us. They also want people not to feel anxious about their absence of belief in a god (they are not alone).
- 'Enjoy life': Many humanists believe that this is the one life we have and so we need to make the most of it. Robert Ingersoll, a 19th-century American humanist, said 'The time to be happy is now!'

4) How do you think different people reacted to the campaign?

Some people were offended but many other people appreciated it. Many non-religious people said they liked the sentiment of the campaign, while some religious people said it got them thinking about what was important in their life. Some people (including some non-religious people) thought that the campaign oversimplified things, arguing that not everyone can so easily shake off their worries. The number of new members joining Humanists UK more than doubled during the campaign.

5) What is the key difference in the follow-up Christian bus campaign?

The use of the word 'definitely'. This implies a sense of certainty in their belief that a god exists.

6) Do you think these sorts of adverts should be allowed? Is it OK to share our beliefs publically? Is it OK to question the beliefs of others?

Many religious groups use adverts to promote their beliefs. Many humanists believe that there should not be any limits on freedom of speech (unless that speech encourages violence on others). Everyone should be allowed to express their beliefs and other people should be free to make up their own minds: that is part of living in a secular society where everyone is free to believe what they want. Many humanists believe there is nothing wrong with questioning each other's beliefs. It is a sign of a healthy society that it is open to disagreement and discussion.

The bus campaign: activity

Write comments on and around the picture below to explain what the words mean and the purpose of the advert.

Think about the following:

- What do the words in the advert mean?
- Why do you think they were used?
- Do the words tell you the campaign was atheist, agnostic, or humanist?

