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An Unbelievable Challenge — A Look at Atheist Public Relations

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Given how crazy this sounds, I would not have believed the report except for the fact that it was published by one of the world's most venerable newspapers, *The Times* [London]. It seems that Richard Dawkins, perhaps the world's most famous living atheist, is launching a campaign to put advertisements for atheism on London city buses.

Take a look at the story:

"There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." That is the cheery message London buses will be carrying if Richard Dawkins, the atheist, can raise enough cash.

The slogan is to be daubed across 30 Westminster buses in retaliation for a series of bendy-bus Christian messages. CBS Outdoor, the bus advertising company, said that it would run the atheist ads in January. "Religion is accustomed to getting a free ride," said Dawkins, who will match donations up to £5,500.

Ariane Sherine, creator of the Atheist Bus Campaign, said: "I'm very pleased so many people are behind the atheist bus. Though not actually behind the atheist bus - they'd get covered in exhaust fumes."

Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University, is among the world's most famous scientists. His professorial assignment is identified as "the public understanding of science," but most of the world knows him as the proponent of the "selfish gene" as the basic engine of evolution.

In more recent years, he has emerged as a strident and outspoken atheist. In his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins presented a broadside attack on theism in general and the Christian faith in particular. He has become the world's most vocal opponent of belief in God and a significant presence in the media. Now, however, he seems to risk becoming a parody of himself.

Look carefully at the strange wording of the proposed bus advertisements: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." That hardly seems like a ringing call to an emboldened atheism. "There's *probably* no God?" Dawkins doesn't exude much confidence with this wording. *Probably?*

Regardless of the wording, I cannot imagine that these signs would prompt a wholesale resurgence of atheism. But the wording is interesting, to say the least. Maybe this represents a new "seeker sensitive" approach on the part of the atheists.

Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, Ronald Aronson of Wayne State University argues that politicians had better pay heed to atheists and allied unbelievers. Writing in *USA Today*, Aronson argues:

Surveys regularly receive front-page coverage for reporting, as the 2008 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey did,



that nearly all Americans believe in God. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life concluded that 92% of Americans are believers and that only 5% of Americans don't believe in God (3% gave some other answer, didn't know, or refused to answer).

But something is wrong with this picture. It erases vast numbers of Americans —not only atheists, agnostics and secularists, but also those who have turned away from the God and religion of the Old and New Testaments. And it makes it seem as though most of those who claim to be “believers” believe pretty much the same things — though this is manifestly false. It encourages the sense that there are two kinds of Americans, the overwhelming majority who believe and belong, and those few do not believe, and are outsiders. But the conventional wisdom that nearly all Americans believe in God is wrong.

Aronson wants the media and the political parties to pay more attention to unbelievers. In order to make his case, he goes after the numbers often cited to reveal how many Americans do and do not believe in God. “The politics and prejudices that marginalize secularists are unintentionally abetted by surveys,” he argues. Aronson suggests that the surveys are too vague, including any believer in any notion of God in their calculations. In addition, he asserts that the surveys are skewed by the factor of “social desirability.” It is not socially popular to be an atheist or an unbeliever, so the numbers are under-reported.

I wonder if Aronson really thinks this is a strong argument. If unbelievers were so numerous, the social sanction should disappear. Furthermore, when Aronson attempts to recast the numbers, he adds together atheists, agnostics, those with no affiliation (“nones”), and those who either didn't want to answer or were unsure how to answer. Added together, he claims that these represent something like 25% of the population.

Well, even if we accept his recast numbers here (and this is no way to count), the numbers still add up against his argument. If believers outnumber unbelievers by three to one, unbelievers are still vastly outnumbered.

Aronson's real concern appears at the end of his article:

In an America where other minorities have mobilized themselves to demand their rights, when will our largest, most invisible minority “out” itself in daily life? When will they demand that the spirit of multiculturalism be extended to those who do not pray, instead of the widespread assumption that religious values, norms and practices apply to everyone?

When will they realize that secularists, along with spiritualists and non-traditional believers, make up a good chunk of Democratic votes — and demand that secularists be included among the caucuses at Democratic Party conventions? And, because contrary to their carefully fashioned image, not all Republicans are believers, that secularists become visible in the GOP as well? When will secularists demand recognition for their enormous contributions to American history, culture, science, education and public life? When will this sleeping giant begin to rouse itself and make itself heard?

Professor Aronson wants secularists to have recognition and a caucus within the major political parties. He seems absolutely certain that secularists represent a “sleeping giant” that will and must make itself known. Who knows? Maybe he sees the future.

There is something deeper here that we should notice. The numbers game is slippery. Christian leaders are often only too happy to cite these figures without recognizing that belief in God, as represented in these surveys, does not necessarily mean Christian belief. If the vast majority of Americans were Christians who believed in the God of the Bible, we would face a very different nation than the one we know today.

Similarly, atheists, agnostics, secularists, and assorted unbelievers can over-estimate their numbers as well. The “social desirability” issue is certainly at play here, but so are the hard facts of arithmetic.

Even in our increasingly secularized age, strident unbelief is a hard sell to most Americans. Atheists have a real public relations challenge — and for good reason.

Something tells me that arguing that, “There's probably no God,” on London buses is not going to resolve that challenge. Do they really think it will drive Londoners into atheism? Probably not.

UPDATE: *The Guardian* [London] has both an article and a photo of the new signs. [[see here](#)]

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