

Spain's atheists continue other countries' ad campaigns on buses

MADRID, Spain – Catholic and religious leaders have denounced slogans questioning the existence of God planned for buses in Barcelona and other Spanish cities.

The message, “Probably, God does not exist. Stop worrying and enjoy life,” were to be placed on buses in Barcelona by Jan. 12.

The advertisement campaign, organized by the Madrid Association of Atheists and Freethinkers and Atheists of Catalonia, will arrive in the capital city of Madrid by Jan. 26, Madrid Vice Mayor Manuel Cobo announced Jan. 8.

Ads in Valencia, Bilbao, Zaragoza and Seville are set to follow, organizers said.

In a Jan. 2 statement, Cardinal Lluís Martínez Sistach of Barcelona said that “faith is not a reason for worry, nor an obstacle to enjoy life honestly, but a solid foundation to live life with an attitude of solidarity, peace and a sense of transcendence.”

Retired French Cardinal Paul Poupard, former president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, called the ad campaign “stupid, superficial and ridiculous.”

“No one has been able to show that God does not exist. Why are the faithful always asked to show the existence of God? Atheists should be asked to show that God does not exist, if they are so convinced,” Cardinal Poupard said Jan. 8.

Pablo Molinero of the Observatory for Religious Liberty and Conscience said Jan. 7: “The message of Catholics is positive. It does not make sense to proselytize negation. It is a destructive message.”

In anticipation of the “atheist bus,” an evangelical church in a Madrid suburb placed a bus ad in late December with the saying: “God does exist. Enjoy life in Christ.”

“We want to communicate to the world that Christ exists and is the way to a better life,” said the Rev. Francisco Rubiales, pastor of the Christian Reunion Center Church.

The British Humanist Association and a prominent atheist and professor, Richard Dawkins, originated the idea for an atheist campaign in Britain that is funded by donations. Organizers there announced the plan last October.

In November the American Humanist Association ran an ad in Washington that read: "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness' sake."

On Jan. 6, 800 buses with the message that God may not exist were unveiled in Britain. An additional 1,000 ads will appear on British subway trains.

According to the British Humanist Association's Web site, the ads aim to offer "an alternative view to the traditional religious messages."

Organizers also plan to take the campaign to other countries, such as Italy, according to Atheists of Catalonia.

But the message has not been welcomed everywhere. In Australia, recent attempts to replicate Britain's ad campaign were rejected by the nation's top outdoor advertising company.

The ads in Spain generate social debate and draw attention to the "high percentage" of atheists in the country, Albert Riba, the president of Atheists of Catalonia, said Jan. 7. About 24 percent of Spaniards identify themselves as atheist, according to a recent Center of Sociological Investigations poll.

At a Jan. 8 news conference, Spanish organizers said the ads are not aimed at anyone but are meant to challenge the "privileges" of organized religion in Spain, particularly those of the Catholic Church.

Jorge Sans of Barcelona told Catholic News Service Jan. 8 that although the ads are getting attention "it won't make anyone change their opinion."

Madrid resident Miguel Aristizabal said publicizing messages for or against religion or spirituality is unnecessary.

Such messages "don't benefit anyone and encourage social clashes. (No one) needs to see written on a bus that God exists or does not exist," Aristizabal told CNS Jan. 8.