

Why the British Aren't Boarding the Atheist Bus

British atheist Richard Dawkins wants to stamp out Christian faith in England. But that faith is still very much alive.

When I arrived in London last week I fully expected to see one of the city's celebrated "atheist buses" racing past Gatwick Airport on its way to Victoria Station. I had read about how Oxford University professor Richard Dawkins, author of the book *The God Delusion*, helped raise more than 140,000 British pounds from donors in January to plaster the city's famous double-decker buses with signs that read: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

Dawkins, who has publicly compared religion with the smallpox virus, is quite evangelistic when it comes to his doubts. But his London bus experiment was a dud, if you ask me. Early 2009 was not a good time to mount an atheist campaign. With British banks in crisis and companies laying off workers all over the U.K., most people would prefer to believe divine help is a possibility. "There's probably no God" is a depressing message to share with anxious Londoners who are weathering the Great Recession.

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Although I boarded several buses in downtown London last Saturday, I never saw Dawkins' offensive advertisements. (I later learned that his campaign ended Feb. 1.) I did, however, see a bus plastered with a competing message, placed by Christian politician George Hargreaves. It said: "There definitely is a God. So join the Christian Party and enjoy your life."

A British Bible society has since joined this battle of the buses. It spent \$50,000 to put up signs that quote Psalm 53:1: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' " And a Russian TV channel is partnering with the Russian Orthodox Church to post messages on London buses that say: "There is God. Enjoy your life."

This ruckus prompted the atheists to rethink their strategy. Now they plan to post more of their signs in April—just in time for Easter. Who knows—before this is over maybe the queen will step out of Buckingham Palace and weigh in on the matter.

I'll admit I tend to think of England as a godless country. We've all heard the stories of British churches being turned into mosques. But during my visit I found many encouraging signs that faith is still very much alive in the land that gave us John Wesley, John Bunyan and C.S. Lewis. I am sure Richard Dawkins is not alone in his atheism, but he has a lot of work to do if he thinks he can wipe out Christianity in England with a few billboards.

When faith is challenged here, British believers are known to fight back. Just recently a born-again nurse, Caroline Petrie, was fired from her job because she asked a patient if she could pray for her. At first her employer, the North Somerset Primary Care Trust, said that Petrie acted unprofessionally. But when the Christian Legal Center got involved and challenged the decision, Petrie was quickly reinstated.

When I arrived in England I spent three days ministering to a group of Pentecostal pastors from various parts of the U.K. Among them were immigrant church leaders who moved to England from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Ivory Coast and Congo. One young minister from Ghana lives in a town near Oxford (where Dawkins taught evolutionary theory) that has become a stronghold of New Age occultism. The young Ghanaian believes God sent him to the U.K. to help dismantle the spiritual darkness that has settled over this nation.

On Sunday morning I preached in a church in the east London suburb of Leytonstone. The pastor of the church is from Ghana, his wife is from Guyana, and his church members are from 15 nations. This is the new face of British Christianity. These immigrants, most of them now British citizens, are passionate in worship and aggressive in evangelism. Their vibrant faith is something Dawkins and his atheist friends never imagined they would contend with on British soil.

Also over the weekend I spoke to a group of Christian men in Littlehampton, a city on the southern coast of England not far from Brighton. After the meeting I learned that one of the guys in the audience was Martin Smith, lead singer of the Christian band Delirious. Smith is the author of the popular praise chorus "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever." He says he wrote the song in five minutes while on a vacation with his wife at a farmhouse in Devon.

Meeting Smith reminded me what a valuable contribution British Christians are still making to the global Christian scene. There is definitely a battle raging here for the hearts and minds of people, and evangelical believers are a minority facing a looming threat from both secularism and Islam. But in pockets of this country, Christian faith is strong, worship is passionate and many are eager to take the gospel into a hostile environment. If their fervor keeps building, they could become Richard Dawkins' worst nightmare.

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