

Friday Night Theology, 20th November 2009.

What should we make of the Atheist (non-bus) campaign?

The [Atheist 'Bus Campaign'](#) is now back on our streets, although this time it's not actually taking place on buses, nor is it particularly atheistic.

The new poster features two children with the faded words 'Catholic Child', 'Atheist Child', 'Humanist Child' and 'Anarchist Child' amongst others behind them. In bigger, bolder lettering, are the words 'Please don't label me. Let me grow up and choose for myself.'

The advert appeals to our love of autonomy and the right to choose. Children are children. They shouldn't be labelled according to a particular philosophy. They should be able to choose their beliefs for themselves when they are old enough to do so. Who could argue against that?

The poster, then, is superficially appealing, but largely on an emotional level. How often have you heard the word 'label' used positively about anybody? On a more rational level, however, is it based on some seriously flawed ideas.

Firstly, it assumes that there is a position of philosophical neutrality out there, a value-neutral cultural space in which children can grow up. The suggestion is dubious, to put it kindly. Families, communities, and societies – and the institutions in them – are all shaped by a certain set of values and assumptions, particular and personal ideas about what is and is not good. The question is not whether or not we want children to grow up with values or no values, but which values we want to nurture in them.

Secondly, a value-neutral culture is not only impossible, it is thoroughly undesirable. It's unthinkable, for example, that we would want our children to grow up in a culture that takes a neutral position on questions of race or gender. I've not heard anyone suggest that children should simply be left to decide whether or not racism is acceptable without any encouragement or guidance. Children should be taught to grow up respecting equally all people, regardless of ethnicity. And that is not a neutral, value-free position. Social Darwinists, for example, would have deemed it intellectually flawed, morally ugly and socially undesirable.

Thirdly, the British Humanist Association is, I think, being disingenuous. It's interesting and honest that, included among the labels in the background of the poster, are the terms 'Humanist Child', 'Modernist Child', 'Libertarian Child' and 'Agnostic Child'. The poster rightly recognises that these are ideological, even faith positions. The poster appears to make the case that the brainwashing or labelling of children into any of these philosophies is as undesirable as nurturing them in Christianity or any other of the world's major religions. The reality, however, is rather different. It's no accident that the [associated campaign poster](#) is 'No faith schools'.

What the British Humanist Association defines as neutral is in fact non-religious and even anti-religious. As Richard Dawkins, one of the sponsors of the campaign when it launched last year, has remarked 'We urgently need to raise consciousness on this issue. Nobody would seriously describe a tiny child as a "Marxist child" or an "Anarchist child" or a "Post-modernist child". Yet children are routinely labelled with

the religion of their parents. We need to encourage people to think carefully before labelling any child too young to know their own opinions and our adverts will help to do that.'

However, this is the same Professor Dawkins who has said 'It is fashionable to wax apocalyptic about the threat to humanity posed by the AIDS virus, "mad cow" disease, and many others, but I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.' It doesn't sound like Professor Dawkins is so willing to let children grow up and choose for themselves after all. Indeed, on his logic, if religious faith really is so evil, it's absolutely imperative that he doesn't just let children choose, but actively warns them of it.

Finally, the advert sets up a straw man. I've never been introduced to a 'Protestant child' or to a 'Humanist child', come to that. I suspect (though cannot prove) that people who have been given a faith-based education are generally more tolerant when dealing with people of other religious and non-religious faith traditions than those who have been nurtured in an intentionally anti-religious or 'secular-humanistic' environment. The way in which Muslim parents actively seek out Christian ethos schools is testimony to the fact that they believe those schools are more likely to encourage a tolerant and warm attitude to their own religious beliefs, than a school which may deliberately exclude the idea of the divine. Lord Sacks was educated at St Mary's Primary School. Comments the Chief Rabbi, 'I got more tolerance in that Christian school than I suspect I might have had if I had gone to a secular school where no faith was taken seriously at all. That was when I discovered religiously based tolerance - the religious roots, the foundations of tolerance.'

So, let's be honest. We can't nurture children in world-view neutral contexts. The challenge is to engage in serious respectful conversations with secular humanists, with charities, with other groups in civil society about the nature of the common good and the kind of society we wish to create for our children.

Paul Woolley, Director of [Theos](#)