

Who needs God to enjoy life?

Do atheists - or Christians - understand what real joy is?

2009 has certainly started off with a bang. We've got a new American President being hailed as a saviour, an Airbus ditching in the Hudson River hailed as a miracle, while atheists in several countries, including Canada, are mounting ad campaigns on the sides of transit buses claiming God doesn't exist!

I got to thinking, then, putting all three of these events together, what would go through your mind if, by chance, you were on Flight 1549 on January 15th as it takes off from LaGuardia Airport, rises to 3,000 feet and then, wham, the plane shudders and both engines go silent and there you are gliding without any power over the skyscrapers of New York?

But not to worry, because you look up and there on the plane's TV screen is a News report on the atheist bus ad campaign in London, England, showing a red double-decker bus with a large poster on its side declaring "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

But how, you wonder, is believing there isn't a God going to help you stop worrying and enjoy life when your life could very well end in the next 45 seconds, or when you've just heard you've got cancer, been fired from your job or lost your children in a house fire?

But atheists still believe joy is possible without God, because in their own experience they don't need God to be happy. They're perfectly content without him. Christians, on the other hand, aren't very happy at all. They preach a horribly negative message about eternal damnation and hellfire for unbelievers, they live in constant fear of not doing enough for God, and they're in slavery to all kinds of rituals and religious duties they'd better perform to get a decent reward in the afterlife.

Atheists look at Christians and think, "Who'd want to believe in a God that produces that?" This is what inspired the atheist posters on the buses in the first place, it was Christian ads on buses back in June 2008 directing people to a website that stated non-Christians "will be condemned to everlasting separation from God and they spend all eternity in torment in hell." So much for the gospel being good news!

There's no denying that atheists have a point. Christians don't exactly come across as joyful. But two questions come to mind: First of all, have these atheists ever talked to a Christian who *is* joyful, and secondly, what is joy?

To atheists joy is defined on the buses as “enjoying life,” meaning living life to the full without having to worry what God thinks. You’re free to do what you think best based on decency and logic, not on the rules and dictates of a religion. You can do good deeds because you want to, not because you have to. You don’t have to worry about there being a mapped-out plan for your life and being punished for veering off it. You can be friends with everyone, accepting them as is, rather than expecting them to fit a godly lifestyle, or to save them from Hell. You can bring up free-thinking children without feeling guilty if they don’t go to church - and the list goes on, but all summarized rather nicely in the atheist mantra, “Live free, die unbothered.” Or as the Italian atheists would like written on the sides of their buses, “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake.”

In other words, who needs God to enjoy life? And that kind of life is so free, too. There’s no fear of Hell or a Devil trying to get us, or thinking God’s punishing us if we get sick or have an accident, or worrying that things might go wrong if we aren’t praying enough. There’s none of that other awful religious stuff either, like “we’re all born in sin,” justifying atrocities in God’s name, treating women as 2nd class citizens, being afraid to challenge church doctrine, or thinking our life is controlled by “sky pixies.” Forget the sky pixies, atheists say, our lives are up to us and our own actions, not some magical plan in the sky that only happens because of prayer and strict obedience to a religious code of conduct.

To atheists, then, life is freer and fuller without God and religion, and their evidence and reasoning is based on one simple, obvious point, that what they’re experiencing is so much more joyful than what Christians are preaching and experiencing. Perhaps it might help, then, if they knew some Christians who *are* joyful, who could also explain to them what joy is from the Christian perspective.

Given the chance, then, to present the evidence of Christian joy to an atheist, where would we Christians start?