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## Importing Islam from America

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When Jesus is pitched against Mohamad, the winner may be APN Outdoor billboards.

The bold billboards spreading across Sydney by *MyPeace* inviting us to ask questions about Islam may be a novelty in Australia. But the wording and web-site is a carbon copy of the *GainPeace* missionary outreach project that was launched in Chicago in 2008. Our Australian version may be a timely cross (pun intended) between MySpace and *GainPeace*.

As part of the Islamic Circle of North America, and in the ruins of the Islamophobia tsunami that flowed after the September 11 attacks, *GainPeace* felt compelled to explain that "Islam is not synonymous with terrorism".

Founder of the Australian equivalent *MyPeace*, Daa Mohammad, confirms that this is borne out of frustration because Muslims "cannot reach Australians through mainstream media". Unlike the 'mediated accounts', this project was "an act of desperation to find some other avenue to have their voice heard... because they're trying to reach out to people directly". Fed up with the negative banner headlines, *MyPeace* paid to create its own.

Daa is brave to blame his own community for the misconceptions and embark on this quest to demystify Islam. But his benevolent intentions may backfire with malevolent results, as we have already seen with the recent vandalism.

Like *GainPeace*, he offers a toll free hotline, free translated Korans, and invites us to "converse live with Muslims... no question is off limits". His four week billboard series commenced on 26 May with the message: "Islam: Got questions? Get answers". This is disarming and brilliant marketing.

His second billboard "Jesus: Prophet of Islam" was more confronting and attracted more outrage than outreach. City Bible Forum responded with an Aussie Christians web site and launched a series of billboards commencing with "Dear Aussie Muslims: Glad you want to talk about Jesus. Love to chat more". Founder Ian Powell announced that there will be four more billboard messages, changing every week.

At the time of writing this piece, his invitation for a friendly and respectful online chat has only attracted one Muslim (Zainab) who is single-handedly fielding questions about the divinity of Jesus from ten Christians.

This is a modest start that has been bogged down in selective citations from the Gospels to verify if Jesus was a prophet or God. It has shifted from conversations to conversions.

The intention of *MyPeace* was to "build bridges and extend a hand", using Jesus as a common plank. With that intention, the billboard should have read:

"Jesus and Mary are holy to Muslims". Relegating Jesus to a string of prophets was a premature trump card that has toppled the delicate discourse.

The message was akin to telling Muslims that Mohamad was at best a warrior for monotheism, or at worst a false prophet.

For Christians, the Nicene Creed declares the pillars of the faith. God is our Father, and Jesus was his "only begotten son", who rose from the crucifixion after three days in accordance with the scriptures. The trinity, divinity and resurrection of Jesus are not optional endings. They are the core and climax of the faith, and testified as truth by the disciples whose eye-witness accounts are the four gospels.

For Muslims, the faith is summarised on the *MyPeace* and *GainPeace* websites. They quote from Saheeh (meaning 'truth') International, who have translated the Koran. This publishing house was formed by "three American converts to Islam" in 1989, and the impressive work of these female scholars has been extensively used for Da'wah (invitation or call to Islam) campaigns.

All these sites declare that "Monotheism is the foundation of Islam and its most important concept which cannot be compromised in any way... God is the only true deity and He alone is worthy to be worshipped... He is absolute". With this interpretation, Christians are not monotheistic, so let us not beat about the burning bush - there is no happy medium or 'compromise'.

*MyPeace* has as much right to pursue its mission as any Christian evangelical mission in Australia. Their American-style banners are a refreshing change to the banner headlines that equate Muslims with violence and hatred, rather than peace and love. They open up the conversation from us talking about them, to direct dialogue. It is a well overdue process of rehumanising the other and replacing the enigma with clarity.

Their illuminated billboards are an open invitation that show there is nothing to hide. This is a stark contrast to the Howard government's 'Be alert, not alarmed' billboards in 2002 that created suspicion and division. Ironically, the buses that were feared to be targets of terrorism are now the targets of the *MyPeace* posters.

There are two big BUTS.

The billboards, banner headlines and online chats are two dimensional. Pseudonyms can hide behind banners and screens. The bottom line must move from "love to chat more" to "let's have a coffee". It needs to progress from FaceBook to meeting face to face. Otherwise the bridge will be virtual rather than real.

The dialogue must be about asking questions and listening to answers. It cannot spiral into a preaching forum on a chat room. If the intention is to convert, this must not be disguised as converse. Otherwise the opportunity is lost, and APN Outdoors will have won two new clients.

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