

Humbled by the Muslim response to Christians at Christmas time

Joseph Wakim, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Dec 2012

Each Christmas, my family receives more greetings and gifts from Muslim friends than from fellow Christians.

We treasure handmade cards by Muslim children who do not celebrate Christmas. We cannot dismiss these efforts as tokenistic as they are annual and original. They are not five-second, to-from cards but well-worded peace messages in English and Arabic.

I only wish we took the time to reciprocate this goodwill gesture at the two Islamic Eids, their religious festivals, annually.

Throughout my childhood, we would be visited by Lebanese Muslim friends laden with generous gifts. This did not mean they had suddenly elevated the prophet Issa, as Jesus is known, to the son of God.

Their faith was not compromised and we felt humbled and honoured.

As I write this article, there is a knock on the door. Ahmad, my late father's carer when he had Alzheimer's, arrives looking like a bearded, smiling Santa bearing gifts.

When people say to him "You do this but you are a Muslim?" he replies "I do this because I am a Muslim".

Twice in one year, Australian Muslim leaders were swift to disown, rather than explain, behaviour that was both un-Islamic and un-Australian.

Before the recent unauthorised and short-lived Facebook fatwa on Christmas greetings, there was a protest in September that was notorious for a "Behead all those who insult the prophet" placard. On both occasions, leaders knew from experience that the flame can quickly morph into an international inferno through modern media.

The leaders should be congratulated for being voices of reason. The Facebook post was promptly removed and a Christmas greeting was written high in the sky - literally.

Theologically, the question of Christmas greetings is not new among Muslims. Some have legitimately tried to understand their faith's position and asked where to draw the line between celebrating and condemning Christmas. The Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammad, provided perspective, saying "there is difference between showing respect for someone's belief and sharing those beliefs," and that the "foundations of Islam were peace, co-operation, respect and holding others in esteem".

This contrasts with the message posted on the Lebanese Muslim Association's Facebook page, borrowed verbatim from an international website. The fatwa centre at Islamweb.net responded to a question about whether it is "haraam" or sinful for Muslims to celebrate or congratulate Christians during Christmas.

The response was: "The disbelievers spare no efforts to draw the Muslims away from the straight path ... celebrating such feasts is actually imitating disbelievers ... whoever imitates a nation is one of them ... a Muslim is neither allowed to celebrate the Christmas Day nor is he allowed to congratulate them."

This view is not shared by Australia's Muslim leaders, a polarisation which is not unusual among religions.

Even from church pulpits, our priests have been critical of non-Christian practices, cautioning about staying on the straight path, avoiding the consumer culture of Christmas celebrations and putting Christ back into Christmas. They have cautioned that the tinsel trees, the Santa suit and the gift-giving can overshadow the nativity scene.

When I greet Muslim friends for Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr, it does not mean I share the celebration or am losing my religion. I am merely extending goodwill, and am happy they are happy.

Joseph Wakim is the founder of the Australian Arabic Council and a former multicultural affairs commissioner.