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Religious bigotry in the subway: answering hate with love

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NCR Today

Recently, in the New York subway, public ads -- in red, white and blue no less -- spewed a message of religious ignorance and bigotry. This is what they said: "In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad." The implication is that Muslims are savages.

The ads were placed by none other than Pamela Geller's organization, the American Freedom Defense Initiative. If you don't remember Pamela Geller, think "birtherism." She is a spokesperson for the movement that thinks President Barack Obama was born outside the United States.

Geller is also a part of Islamophobic groups that apparently learned nothing after the release of that highly offensive video about Mohammed and the response in the Muslim world.

The subway ads were rightly denounced by the Interfaith Center of New York. See their statement and the ad itself.

But the best answer to this bigotry came from Rabbis for Human Rights of North America and the Sojourners, led by the social-justice advocate Jim Wallis. They have designed ads that will be placed near the anti-jihad ads in the same Manhattan subway stations. Their ads read: "In the choice between love and hate, choose love. Help stop bigotry against our Muslim neighbors." You can see the ad design here.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York initially rejected the ads, but was forced to comply after a federal judge ruled the ads were protected under the First Amendment. So the MTA has added a disclaimer: "This is a paid advertisement sponsored by [Sponsor]. The display of this advertisement does

not imply MTA's endorsement of any views expressed."

MTA chairman Jay Lhota explained, "You deal with ... a free speech issue with more free speech." And that is exactly what the "choose love" signs do. They go further than MTA can go, and they also answer speech with speech.

Geller's group also wanted to post ads in the Washington, D.C., Metro system, but the display was postponed because of "the situations happening around the world at this time ... The reason for this decision is one of security and safety for the commuters using the DC Metro rail system." Geller's group has, as expected, filed a lawsuit to get its message posted.

Now, if they are posted, they will no doubt face the same reply as the signs in New York. But wouldn't it be good if a Catholic group would join Rabbis for Human Rights and the Sojourners in the message of "choose love"? I'd be proud.

Advertisement

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