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Wednesday, October 15, 2008

Interfaith leaders call 'Obsession' DVD hateful

Critics say film instills fear of Muslims with misleading claims; distributor says it's meant to focus on terror issue.

A documentary film mailed to tens of thousands of households in Macomb and Oakland counties and distributed as advertising in local newspapers is being decried as bigotry by some Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, who say it portrays radical Islam as a demonic force bent on world domination.

The film "Obsession" contains a disclaimer, asserting that it is not about most Muslims. But critics of the film say the remainder of the production, with rare exceptions, distorts Islam, compares radical Muslims to Nazis and says that it is not possible to determine how many Muslims are predisposed to terrorism, a claim the film makes. The sacred Islamic principle of jihad -- a personal or community struggle against evil -- is misidentified as a commandment to Muslims to make war against the United States and Europe, they say.

"After the film starts off with a very weak disclaimer that Muslims are a peaceful people, and the problem is so-called radical Islam, it goes through a barrage of images about Muslims and Islam that would scare the average viewer and make the average viewer suspicious of anyone who has any resemblance to figures shown in the movie," said Dawud Walid of the Council on American Islamic Relations, a Muslim advocacy group.

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About 28 million copies of the DVD "Obsession" have been distributed by dozens of newspapers nationwide, according to Editor & Publisher, a media journal.

The Council on American Islamic Relations has asked the Federal Election Commission to investigate whether the nonprofit group that distributed it is a "front" for pro-Israel groups aiming to affect the presidential election. A liberal Jewish organization, Tikun Olam, has asked the Internal Revenue Service to review the tax-free status of the Clarion Fund, questioning whether it is independent and nonpartisan, as required of nonprofits.

"It's a completely false claim and another attempt by organizations to shift the topic from radical Islam," said Gregory Ross, director of communications for the Clarion

Fund. "Certain Muslim groups are trying to politicize this in a way to get people off the topic and to start talking about implications they construe from the film as opposed to the real message that radical Islam is a threat."

Ross denied that the film is "a criticism of Islam" and said it is an attempt to resuscitate the issue of terrorism.

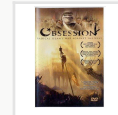
"There is not one mention of Republicans or Democrats in the film, and we name no politicians, specifically, at all," he said.

But Muslims and others point to the targeting of swing states like Michigan, Virginia and Missouri and areas like Macomb and Oakland counties by the Clarion Fund. Those critics say it is an attempt to influence the election by scaring the electorate, so voters are more likely to vote for the candidate they think will best defend national security. Interfaith groups, including ministers, rabbis and imams, held press conferences in Hollywood and Washington, D.C., in the past week to criticize the film as hateful.

Robert Bruttell, an adjunct professor of religion at the University of Detroit and a member of Interfaith Scholars, which is part of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion, said, "The movie is appalling, a piece of the most blatant sort of pernicious propaganda. We have formed a task force to see what we can do to countervail against it."



"Obsession" (Clarion Fund)



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"What the movie is doing is trying to label all Muslims as supporting terrorists," said Mir Asghar of Dearborn, a doctor and a Muslim. "There is a small group of extremists, like al-Qaida and the Taliban, and we are 100 percent against them and behind all efforts against them. But we are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide and we are a voice of moderation."

Lena Kamal of Detroit, a student at Wayne State University Law School and a Muslim, said, "They have the disclaimer, this little thing at the beginning of the film. But the rest of the 85 minutes is about how Islam is dangerous to people. The whole approach is to spread fear and suspicions. The way to combat fear is knowledge. People are fearful of what they don't know, and this film tries to exploit that, rather than informing people."

Jeffrey Parra, publisher of the Macomb Daily, said in a written statement issued via e-mail that: "As far as we're concerned, we treated the DVD offering as just another advertising insert. We did receive two or three complaints, although the only one we received, as far as I know, from Muslims, was from the group CAIR."

The Detroit Media Partnership, the agency that manages The Detroit News, detnews.com, the Detroit Free Press and freep.com, declined to distribute the film after officials viewed it.

"We decided not to distribute it, just based on our published advertising policy," said Rich Harshbarger, vice president of consumer marketing. "We maintain the belief that the opinions of our advertisers are their own, and we in no way endorse those opinions. But after viewing it, we decided not to distribute that message."

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