



August 4, 2008

Noah Morowitz
Executive Producer, *Inside the Koran*
National Geographic Channel
1145 17th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Dear Mr. Morowitz,

I am writing on behalf of a New York Muslim focus group that viewed *Inside the Koran* documentary prior to its August 5th release on The National Geographic Channel. This diverse group of Muslims met last month in order to evaluate the documentary's potential use as an educational tool in churches, synagogues, schools, or other public spaces.

First of all, I would like to express our excitement that a major media outlet has decided to produce and air such a documentary. Given today's political climate, we welcome this opportunity.

While we appreciated some aspects of the documentary – such as depicting the Qur'an in everyday life, its relevance to Muslims, its diversities of interpretation and Muslims' unity of faith around the Qur'an – we feel compelled to indicate our overall discomfort with certain aspects and specific segments of the documentary. The crux of our concern lies with the film's title. *Inside the Koran* is a documentary about Muslim practice, diversity of opinion, and political tensions from conflicts which are loosely centered on the Qur'an. The documentary made minimal effort to deal with the text itself, its history, transmission, recitation or the sophisticated traditions of interpretation (*'ulum al-Qur'an*). Not only were no Qur'anic experts interviewed but there was also a consistent attempt to conflate cultural practices with religious doctrine -- an unfortunate and untrue association. One example is that of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Although the documentary included interviews with scholars who insisted that FGM is a cultural practice, FGM was treated nevertheless as a Qu'ranic issue.

The focus of the documentary was overly political, beginning with the opening images of a suicide bomber reciting the Qur'an. Overall, the documentary made excessive use of bloody and violent images. It constantly showed Muslims killing others (or other Muslims). As we all know, the gaps between the Muslim World and the West are only exacerbated by associating extremists' actions with mainstream views. The documentary's unfortunate focus on violence undermines more positive portrayals of Muslims in the West and therefore pushes reconciliation farther out of reach.

The documentary also contained some inaccuracies, most notably in the sections on Shi'ism (see attached link from notable Shi'a authorities). For example, Qom was related to the Vatican and the Shi'i-Sunni relationship was compared to that of Catholics-Protestants. The Sunni-Shi'i split arose

after the Qur'an, but this history was never mentioned. Another minor inaccuracy portrayed the Dome of the Rock as a mosque (it is actually a shrine whereas Al-Aqsa is a mosque nearby).

The following factors should also have been taken into consideration:

- The documentary should have included an in-depth discussion on Qur'an's revelation, its means of transmission, its structure (chapters, arrangement etc.), and compilation.
- Instead of simply quoting "problematic" passages, the documentary should have provided the context of revelations.
- The documentary should have focused on the *'ulum al-Qur'an* (reason of revelations, abrogation, linguistics/phonetics, and other tools of interpretation) to ensure that the viewer walked away with an understanding of the rich history of the Qu'ran.
- The filmmakers should have minimized the extensive coverage of current political events (and that of contentious issues in general, especially when not related or only tangentially related to the Qur'an) and instead presented the Qur'anic view on various issues such as the environment, God's creation etc.
- Finally, the filmmakers should not have included the section on the German scholar which does not add much to the documentary and is condescending to Muslim traditions of Qur'anic interpretation.

We strongly feel that the documentary should have additionally included information relating to four areas that do not currently appear in the film: 1. The Qur'an as the "word of God"; 2. the compilation of the Qur'an's text (i.e. how it is written); 3. Qur'anic recitation (i.e. how it is recited); and 4. how the Qur'an is interpreted into everyday practice. These factors must have been taken into account for the documentary to be truly worthy of the name *Inside the Koran*.

In light of the above, members of our group have suggested organizing a follow-up National Geographic program, which would hold discussions and/or debates surrounding the Qur'an or even specific segments of the documentary. This would provide viewers of *Inside the Koran* with a further developed understanding of this critically-important text. The group would be willing to meet with you to discuss this suggestion or any of these attached comments. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Daisy Khan
Executive Director, The American Society for Muslim Advancement