



Scoop: Scientologists not anti-gay, official says

'Crash' director Paul Haggis is publicly denouncing group

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The Church of Scientology is responding to claims that the religion is anti-gay, an allegation made by "Crash" director Paul Haggis, who is publicly denouncing the church's practices.

"I don't want any misunderstanding," said Tommy Davis, a spokesperson for Scientology. "The church supports civil rights for everybody, regardless of sexual orientation, race, color or creed. We are a minority, too; we understand what it's like to be persecuted, so to the extent that anything prohibits or inhibits on civil rights, we don't agree with it."

This sounds quite different from claims Haggis made in a letter he wrote to Davis, which opened with the following paragraph: "As you know, for ten months now I have been writing to ask you to make a public statement denouncing the actions of the Church of Scientology of San Diego. Their public sponsorship of Proposition 8, a hate-filled legislation that succeeded in taking away the civil rights of gay and lesbian citizens of California — rights that were granted them by the Supreme Court of our state — shames us."

Davis said that the Church of Scientology San Diego was at one point on a list of churches that supported Proposition 8, but it was an error that was corrected.

"Church of Scientology San Diego had been put on a list of churches that supported Proposition 8 out in California. It was incorrectly included and named when it should have never been on the list to begin with," said Davis.

Davis went on to say that Scientology was removed from the list, but Haggis wanted more than that.

"Paul's disagreement went beyond the error, which was fixed," Davis said. "He wanted the church to have an active political stance and the church is prohibited from doing so."

Davis said that taking an active political stance would have jeopardized the church's tax exempt status. "You can look at our involvement with Humanrights.com and Youthforhumanrights.org to see we're committed to human rights," he said. "But to the extent that we do not take an active official political stance, on political issues, if that's what (Haggis) is demanding, then we are going to have an impasse."

As for how the exchange — meant to be a private one between Haggis and Davis — found its way online, that remains a mystery, according to Davis' side of the story.

"It was a private communication and was made public without anyone's permission, I don't know (how it got out), neither does Paul," said Davis.

French decision 'all bark and no bite'

A Paris court on Tuesday convicted the Church of Scientology's French branch of fraud and fined it more than half a million euros, but it did not ban the group, as prosecutors had requested.

"(The decision) is all bark and no bite in reality," said Davis. "We'll absolutely appeal and emerge victorious, even if it requires us to go the European Court of Human Rights."

The fraud conviction originated more than 10 years ago with a complaint by a woman who said she took out loans and spent the equivalent of \$31,000 on books, courses and "purification packages" after being recruited in 1998. When she sought reimbursement and to leave the group, according to the complaint, its leadership refused.

"Essentially what the court is attempting to do is to state that Scientologists are guilty of practicing their own religion," said Davis. "People have donated to their own church, received services in their own church, and the people who are being convicted of fraud have themselves donated money to the church, and far more than the woman that made the complaint. She only did church services for five months."

This case could be a matter of France not understanding the Church of Scientology's structure, which can involve services where parishioners may be asked to make fixed donations and to purchase materials. Or there's this: there are more than 8,000 Scientology churches, missions and groups in 164 countries. In the case of the church in France, France makes the rules, and can decide which practices, Scientology and otherwise, are acceptable there.

Regardless, Davis feels this case shouldn't have made it this far.

"In 2006 the prosecutor recommended that the case be dismissed because there wasn't enough evidence," said Davis. "Because of (the) anti-sect movement, it got turned into a howling heresy trial and shaking of their pitchforks."

In 1996, the French government published a list of 173 "dangerous sects" that included the Church of Scientology Paris, Jehovah's Witnesses, and evangelical churches connected to Baptists in the United States. The list received widespread international criticism for restricting religious freedom.

But the way Davis sees it, Scientology is already winning. It continues to grow — the group just opened a church in Rome, another in Sweden, and are about to open a church in Berlin.

And when it comes to the French decision, he's positive. "We ended up with fines and a suspended sentence," said Davis. "What they started with, was 'let's dissolve the church.'"

Courtney Hazlett delivers the Scoop Monday through Friday on msnbc.com. Follow Scoop on Twitter @courtneyatmsbc

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