

Islamic Sunday school pulls anti-Semitic teachings from website

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A Toronto-area Islamic organization is facing a police investigation after one of its Sunday school texts drew a comparison between Judaism and Nazism and accused “treacherous” Jews of conspiring to assassinate the Prophet Mohammed.

The East End Madrassah, which holds classes in a Scarborough public school, apologized for the offending statements, removed them from its website and promised to review its teaching material. But a Jewish advocacy group says the school must go a step further and open up its curriculum to scrutiny by outside organizations and the provincial Education Ministry.

“The onus is on them to prove to the community at large that they are not teaching hate,” said Avi Benlolo, president of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies. “They need to reach out to us and to other groups to convince us that this was not meant and they will take any step to change it.”

It’s not clear if that will happen: the Sunday school’s principal did not respond to The Globe’s request for comment Wednesday.

On its website, the East End Madrassah says it has been operating for 37 years out of David and Mary Thomson Collegiate Institute, a high school on Lawrence Avenue East. Classes run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sundays. It is affiliated with the Islamic Shia Ithna-Asheri Jama’at, a charity based in the suburb of Vaughan.

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, an Islamic scholar at the charity, said the offending passages were taken from websites on Mohammed’s life and weren’t scrutinized by those who compiled the textbook.

Toronto District School Board officials would not answer questions on the situation, but released a brief statement saying they would wait until the police investigation was finished before deciding whether to take any action. The board’s application for groups that use its space allows it to kick them out at any time.

The anti-Semitic statements are contained in a text that discusses theology and describes events in Islamic history. A section titled “The Purpose of Jihad” says that the beliefs of ancient Romans, Jews and Nazis are “restricted to a certain community of a certain race.” A later historical portion states that the Jewish population of Medina tried to “stamp out” Islam.

Mr. Benlolo learned of the material last week, lodged a complaint with police and contacted the Sunday school. David Spiro, Greater Toronto co-chair of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs condemned the text, terming the assertion Jews wanted to kill Mohammad a “horrific conspiracy theory” and “blood libel.”

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty weighed in: “It’s a big province,” he told reporters Tuesday. “We can find room for a lot of things, but we can’t find room for hatred or intolerance.”

A spokesman for York Regional Police said the force’s hate-crimes unit was investigating.

For its part, the Sunday school posted an online apology, which said the offensive statements should not have been part of the text. A team of scholars had been tasked with reviewing all the material used in the curriculum, it said.

“We unreservedly apologize to the Jewish community for the unintentional offence that the item has caused,” it read. “Our curriculum is not intended to promote hatred towards any individual or group of people, rather the children are taught to respect and value other faiths, beliefs and to uphold Canada’s basic values of decency and tolerance.”