

# Filmmaker switches sides and now opposes mosque

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c. 2012 USA Today NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) An outspoken supporter of a planned mosque that has sparked opposition in Murfreesboro, Tenn., has switched sides and joined the anti-Islam movement.

Eric Allen Bell, a documentary filmmaker, was a fixture at court hearings and protests over the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro in 2010. Back then, he was making a movie called "Not Welcome," which depicted mosque critics as Southern Christian bigots.

Now he says the mosque is part of a plot to destroy America. He claimed the mosque is "built on a foundation of lies" in a recent op-ed piece at the anti-Islam site Jihadwatch.com.

"I want to communicate that the biggest threat to human rights is Islam," he said in a recent phone interview.

Mosque supporters feel betrayed by Bell. They wonder if he was a fraud or has been paid off by anti-Muslim groups.

"Only a hired gun would switch sides like this," said Jace Short of the group Middle Tennesseans for Religious Freedom.

Bell, a 44-year-old California native, moved to Murfreesboro in 2008 after a previous movie project lost its financing. A self-described liberal, he runs a website about spirituality and meditation called globalone.tv.

An early, 25-minute version of the Not Welcome documentary is posted at vimeo.com. He used the short version to raise money for a feature-length documentary after returning to California in late 2010.

As late as last November, he was still ridiculing mosque foes in a blog post called "Holy War Y'All."

"Of course, Muslim Americans making up less than 1 percent of the total population in this country, the idea that 1 percent will arm themselves and take over is nothing short of paranoid and psychotic nonsense, but it sells," he wrote then.

By January, he'd begun changing sides after learning more about terrorist attacks by Muslims overseas. Bell also read books critical of Islam by Robert Spencer, who runs Jihadwatch.com. When he tried to add his new views to the film, he lost his financial backers.

"Hollywood likes a movie about outsiders being bullied by Southerners," he said. "They don't like the story I want to tell."

Bell's new views made him friends with critics of Islam such as Spencer, who published Bell's op-ed piece about the mosque in Murfreesboro.

"Eric is one of the very few people who aren't afraid to go where the truth may lead them," Spencer said.

Bell's op-ed piece recounts the legal troubles of former Islamic Center spokeswoman Camie Ayash, a convicted felon who served prison time in Florida. He claims the mosque got special treatment from county officials, and said he suspects mosque leaders of terrorist ties.

He also accused Lema Sbenaty, a college student who works at a local pharmacy, of leaking confidential medical information about mosque foes to him for his documentary.

Sbenaty, who attends the Islamic Center, said Bell's claims were false and that she told him that before his piece ran.

"It stinks because he is trying to ruin my life," she said. "If he had all these concerns, why didn't he say something two years ago?"

So far, Bell's new views haven't paid off. He approached members of the anti-Islam movement about funding his movie but has found no takers. He sold his Toyota SUV to pay his bills.

Bell is writing a book about his experience and has started a new website called [www.globalinfidel.tv](http://www.globalinfidel.tv), which he calls a Facebook-style social network for critics of Islam.

He now says some mosque foes are concerned citizens whose methods for fighting the mosque were flawed.

"It doesn't help when you show up in red, white and blue and spout Bible verses," he said.

Mosque foes, he said, should be honest about why they oppose the project.

"Don't say that you are concerned about traffic and then out of the other side of your mouth say you are concerned about Shariah," he said. "Say you are concerned about Shariah."