

Disputed dinner fails to deliver on dialogue

Chris Herlinger Religion News Service | Sep. 27, 2008

NEW YORK -- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dined with 300 religious and political leaders Thursday night (Sept. 26), but the event that drew condemnation and protest offered far less dialogue than advertised.

What was promised as a discussion of how religion can contribute to solving global problems turned into an evening of polite speech-making. The criticism of Ahmadinejad for his bellicose statements on the Holocaust and Israel was tempered by calls for bridge-building and reconciliation.

Arli Klassen, executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee, implored the Iranian leader to "change the way you speak about the Holocaust," while professing the stalwart belief of the Christian peace tradition "that we are following Jesus Christ's example and his teaching as we eat together and hold this dialogue despite our many differences."

The dinner -- the fourth such event attended by Ahmadinejad -- was billed as an Iftar meal, during which devout Muslims break their 12-hour fast in the holy month of Ramadan.

It met heavy criticism from the Anti-Defamation League and conservative Christian groups, who said the Iranian leader was not an honest broker for peace, much less dialogue.

The historic peace churches that helped organizer the dinner, including Quakers and Mennonites, rebuffed the criticism, saying Jesus was condemned for dining with prostitutes and other marginalized figures of his day.

During her remarks, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, a prominent Jewish peace activist, looked at Ahmadinejad directly as she said that her commitment to the work of peace and reconciliation came from her experience as a member of "a community that has experienced genocide."

"Because of the Holocaust," she said, "I learned from the rabbis who ordained and guide me, to be active in preventing further suffering of all human beings as a primary religious call to action."

For his part, Ahmadinejad delivered a broad, if meandering, 45-minute address that cut short any possibility of question-and-answer "dialogue." The Iranian leader occasionally touched the evening's theme -- "Has Not One God Created Us?" -- and held out hope for common ground, saying: "All divine prophets have spoken of one truth. The religion of Islam is the same as that offered by Moses."

Yet he also returned to points he made earlier at the United Nations, condemning Israel and the United States for the longstanding plight of the Palestinians, and criticizing the U.S. for what he sees as military arrogance.

Turning the tables on American attempts to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, Ahmadinejad addressed the United States' considerable nuclear arsenal, saying, "These tens of thousand of nuclear weapons are for what? Will these warheads turn into a tool for mankind?"

Given the anger that preceded the event -- one protester outside held a sign that read "No Feast for the Beast" -- the lack of substantive dialogue seemed deflating.

But the focus on Ahmadinejad was almost beside the point, said Ron Flaming, director of international programs for the Mennonite Central Committee, who called the evening "a step in a journey."

Flaming said there are two "narratives" in play -- Iranian and American -- and that religious communities can be instruments for bringing the estranged nations closer together. "We have to bridge these narratives," he said.

Aside from the MCC, the dinner was sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker United Nations Office, Religions for Peace and the World Council of Churches, all working with Iran's Permanent Mission to the United Nations.

Support independent reporting on important issues.



Source URL (retrieved on 07/24/2017 - 11:34): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/disputed-dinner-fails-deliver-dialogue>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>