



## A Feast with the Beast

Ahmadinejad dines with church officials in New York.

by Mark D. Tooley

10/02/2008 12:30:00 AM

IN A FOURTH encounter over two years, American church officials shared an [Iftar](#) meal with the visiting Iranian president on September 28 in New York City. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad earlier in the day had delivered his usual rant against Israel and the United States at the United Nations. But hosting religious officials, anxious for dialogue, were undeterred. Nor were they intimidated by boisterous demonstrators outside their Manhattan hotel, where some placards demanded: "No Feast with the Beast."

Hosts of the evening with Ahmadinejad were the Mennonite Central Committee, the Americans Friends Service Committee (Quakers), the World Council of Churches' UN Liaison Office and Religions for Peace. About 300 religious representatives attended, mostly American church officials, but also including the Council on American-Islamic Relations, leftist Jewish Renewal movement chief Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, a Zoroastrian priest, and former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik, a Lutheran minister.

Called "Has Not One God Created Us?", the meal and gabfest "demonstrated both the power and potential of religious leaders contributing to peace," explained a World Council of Churches (WCC) official. "While there were points of contention and clear disagreements, the event reaffirmed that religious traditions insist on dialogue, respect and love for peace making." The discussion question for the evening was: "What does my faith tradition bring to the struggle to eliminate poverty, injustice, global warming and war?"

Moderating the evening with Ahmadinejad was former Indiana Democratic congressman John Brademas, who is also President Emeritus of New York University. "We believe that war is not the solution to the differences that divide peoples," Brademas implored, according to a WCC report. "Dialogue can make a real difference."

Finding left-wing church officials to meet with Ahmadinejad is relatively easy. Finding willing Jewish leaders has been considerably harder. But Rabbi Gottlieb has previously joined in the interfaith outreach to Iran. "Torah counsels us that no matter what problems face us, we are to engage in solutions through dialogue, reconciliation and peace building measures," she opined, according to the WCC. "Dialogue brings many perspectives together, gives special attention to minority opinions and must be conducted by treating everyone with respect."

Some participating church groups published reports of their evening with Ahmadinejad, but they focused on their own comments, while mostly only paraphrasing the Iranian president. According to the WCC, Ahmadinejad addressed the "commonalities of religions, the fundamental place of justice, and the essential role religion plays in the spiritual, moral and legislative fabric of society," while stressing the "dire situation facing the world and called with urgency for religious groups to contribute to peace building."

But according to Reuters, Ahmadinejad specifically denied that he is anti-Semitic, instead insisting he only opposes the "Zionist regime." During his earlier UN speech, he had denounced "Zionist murderers" and purported Zionist influence on world finance. "As soon as anyone objects to the behavior of the Zionist regime, they're accused of being anti-Semitic, whereas the Jewish people are not Zionists," Ahmadinejad reportedly told the religious officials. "Zionism is a political party that has nothing to do with Jewish people." He also denounced "selfish powers" that try to dominate the globe and oppose Iran's supposedly peaceful nuclear program. "A lot of it was very challenging," Rabbi Gottlieb admitted afterwards to Reuters. She said Ahmadinejad had not specifically denied the Holocaust to the religious officials but had minimized it in his description of World War II.

Some of Ahmadinejad's comments were responding to questions from Mennonite official Arli Klassen, who symbolically

lit an oil lamp before talking about peacemaking, according to a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) report. "As a Christian, I believe that we are following Jesus Christ's example and his teaching as we eat together and hold this dialogue despite our many differences," she explained. "We ask you to find a way within your own country to allow for religious diversity, and to allow people to make their own choices as to which religion they will follow." Klassen also told Ahmadinejad that she was "deeply concerned" about his Holocaust statements and asked him to "change the way" he speaks about it. She likewise pressed him to declare that his "one-state solution" to the Palestine/Israel conflict was a "political, not a military solution."

The MCC reported that Ahmadinejad did not respond to the concern about human rights in Iran, instead speaking "at length about theological issues, such as monotheism, justice and commonalities among religions." His remarks about opposing Zionism did not make it into the MCC account. "All divine prophets have spoken of one truth," Ahmadinejad sermonized. "The religion of Islam is the same as that offered by Moses." According to the MCC, he decried the suffering from wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon and spoke "extensively" about the Palestinians' difficulties. And he criticized the United States' nuclear arsenal.

United Methodist Women's chief Harriett Jane Olson told Reuters afterwards that she wished Ahmadinejad had talked about "practical issues" such as the treatment of women and children in Iran instead of abstract theology. But most of the quoted religious officials expressed appreciation for the chance at dialogue with Ahmadinejad. "While there were points of contention and clear disagreements, the event reaffirmed that religious traditions insist on dialogue, respect and love for peace making," a WCC host commented.

Notably absent from the interfaith evening with Ahmadinejad was the National Council of Churches (NCC), whose chief, Michael Kinnamon instead released a statement to be read at an earlier anti-Ahmadinejad rally. "President Ahmadinejad's hateful language, denying the Holocaust and apparently calling for Israel to be 'wiped off the map,' must be persistently and forcefully denounced by all who value peace," the ecumenical official declared. "If President Ahmadinejad has so little regard for the verifiable facts of history and the legitimacy of a state created by UN decision, it is hard to believe he means it when he insists that Iran's nuclear program is only intended for peaceful purposes."

Also remarkable was a statement specifically against the dinner with Ahmadinejad by the president of the very liberal United Church of Christ (UCC), a routine partner in such interfaith political events. "I fear the occasion can and will be used by President Ahmadinejad to claim legitimacy and support for himself by an association with respected United States religious leaders," said the Rev. John Thomas. "I respect the sponsoring organizations' intent for dialogue, but fear that the more likely outcome is sowing confusion and disappointment among our own members and, in particular, the American Jewish community."

The NCC and UCC leadership have been sensitized to contacts with Ahmadinejad, thanks mostly to warnings from U.S. Jewish groups. The other denominations that sent representatives to the Iftar dinner included the United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), all of which, along with the UCC, have recently rejected anti-Israel divestment initiatives, thanks partly to appeals from American Jews.

An attending Presbyterian official explained that he was attending the dinner to press for the release of a recently arrested Protestant minister in Iran. It's not clear whether he had the chance. After his long speech, Ahmadinejad left the hotel without taking any questions.

*Mark D. Tooley directs the United Methodist committee at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.*

© Copyright 2008, News Corporation, Weekly Standard, All Rights Reserved.