

# Talking with the enemy: Meeting with Ahmadinejad

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When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran visited Columbia University, he was introduced as a “a petty and cruel dictator” by his host, the school’s president, Lee Bollinger. When he addressed the General Assembly at the United Nations, the U.S. delegation walked out. He was treated with considerably more respect when he met for two hours with over 100 religious leaders at a chapel across from the UN. The third in a series of meetings with Ahmadinejad arranged by the Mennonite Central Committee, this dialogue was opened to other church leaders and endorsed by the World Council of Churches’ Commission of the Churches on International Affairs.

At this meeting, Ahmadinejad focused on religion. He recited the roster of biblical prophets, culminating, according to Islam, in Muhammad, and talked about his expectation of the coming of the Mahdi, who along with Jesus will establish a reign of peace and justice on earth. When their turn came, the Christian panelists, representing mainline, Quaker, Catholic and evangelical churches, asked the president largely political questions—about his statements denying the Holocaust and calling for the destruction of Israel, about Iran’s nuclear plans, and about the treatment of religious minorities in Iran.

In his responses, Ahmadinejad generally deflected the questions or turned them back at the interrogators. Religious minorities are treated even better than the Muslim majority in Iran, he insisted, because each group—the Assyrian Christians, the Armenian Christians and the Jews—has one or two representatives in Parliament even though their numbers are minuscule. While there was little substantive engagement between these religious leaders and Ahmadinejad, participants got a sense of how he sees the world and of his deep Muslim faith.

Should Christians even be talking with a figure like this? The answer to that question is that we should not allow the government to dictate to us who our enemies are or how we are to relate to them. Christians are called to love and pray for enemies. At

a time when there are rumors of war with Iran, the meeting in New York was at least a symbolic gesture which pointed to the need to seek other than military means for resolving conflicts. When we're talking with each other, we're not shooting at each other.

Some claim that the religious leaders who met with Ahmadinejad were naive and that they were being used to bolster his status on the international stage and back in Iran. But that's a risk that people of faith must be willing to take in the search for peace. And it's just as likely that the inhospitable reception Ahmadinejad received in New York fed anti-American sentiments in Iran and bolstered his status there and in other parts of the Muslim world.

A year ago it seemed unlikely that the U.S. would be able to persuade North Korea to cease production of nuclear weapons, but an agreement was reached through tough negotiations and diplomacy. We need to continue to pray and work for a similar outcome with Iran.