

Peace hopes, angry words and Ahmadinejad: A dinner with the Iranian president

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Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dined with 300 religious and political leaders on September 25 in New York City, but the event, which 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 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 Jewish and conservative Christian groups, who said the Iranian leader was not an honest broker for peace, much less for dialogue.

The historic peace churches that helped organize 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 dialogue. The Iranian leader occasionally touched the evening’s theme—“Has Not One God Created Us?”—and held out hope for common ground, saying: “The religion of Islam is the same as that offered by Moses.” However, he also returned to points he made earlier at the United Nations, condemning Israel and the United States for the 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?” *-Chris Herlinger, Religion News Service*