'Allah is my Lord and yours' Talking with Ahmadinejad: Talking with Ahmadinejad

by Paul J. Griffiths in the October 17, 2006 issue

What would the world look like if the primary solidarities that ordered it were religious rather than national? This is not the world we live in, though there are signs that it's the one we're moving toward. Among those signs, ambiguous and interesting, is the public letter sent last May by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran, to George W. Bush.

Ahmadinejad's letter received rather little sensible comment in the American media, and almost none that paid attention to the fact that it is framed as an address by one believer in God to another, and that it appeals to Bush to treat the faith he shares with Ahmadinejad as more important than what divides them.

Ahmadinejad begins the letter by asking whether U.S. foreign policy since 9/11, especially the war in Iraq, can be justified in Christian terms. "How," he asks, "can these actions be reconciled with . . . duty to the tradition of Jesus Christ (PBUH) the Messenger of peace and forgiveness?" (PBUH, or "Peace Be Upon Him," is a traditional Muslim honorific for Jesus understood as prophet.)

The same question is then applied to other matters: to U.S. support of Israel; to U.S. opposition to the election of Hamas in Palestine; to the history of U.S. involvement in Iran over the past century; to the invasion and reconstitution of Afghanistan; to the depiction of events in the Middle East by U.S. media; and to the military expenditures of the U.S. government.

The letter continues with an appeal to Bush to consider how the prophets from Moses to Jesus would judge all this. Ahmadinejad asks Bush to take his Christianity seriously, and to join with himself in seeking to discern the proper application of the teachings of these prophets to current events: "We believe that a return to the teachings of the divine prophets is the only road leading to salvation. . . . Surely

Allah is my Lord and your Lord, therefore serve him; this is the right path. . . . Service to and obedience of the Almighty is the credo of all divine messengers."

There follows an exhortation to Bush to return to his Christianity by taking the message of the prophets—one of whom is Jesus—seriously. Then, most strikingly, comes the claim that "liberalism and Western-style democracy" have failed and can no longer, if they ever could, serve the will of God as explained by the prophets. The future, says Ahmadinejad, belongs to those who are "flocking towards a main focal point—that is the Almighty God." Doesn't Bush want to join them? Doesn't the fact that he is a follower of Jesus suggest that he should? The letter ends with a traditional Islamic phrase, "Peace to whoever follows the path"—the path, that is, of belief in and faithful response to the one God.

This letter is a political document, of course, and like all such it is no doubt duplicitous, multilayered and deliberately deceptive. But suppose that Ahmadinejad means what he writes to Bush about the importance of their shared faith, and that his appeal to Bush to take his Christianity seriously as something that should bring him close to Islam and to Muslims is at least in part serious. Can we Americans, especially we American Christians, hear this appeal? What might the results be if we could?

The speeches given before the UN on September 19 by Ahmadinejad and Bush gave no sign that either side hears the other. Bush spoke entirely in the language of diplomatic negotiation and political advocacy, as Ahmadinejad also largely did. But the latter's challenge to Bush to take his own religion seriously remains before us as a stimulus to thought, no matter whether its offerer is serious about it.

Unfortunately, we're likely to be deaf to this aspect of Ahmadinejad's letter because we live in a world in which transnational religious solidarities make almost no sense. We Americans may call ourselves Christian or Jewish or Muslim, and some few of us may even think and say that this is the most important thing about us, and that the solidarity we share with our coreligionists goes deeper than any other. But in fact almost none of us really believes this, as is evident in the fact that almost none of us would do—or even thinks we would do—for our coreligionists what deep solidarity demands. And what is that? It is to be ready to shed blood, our own or that of others in their defense or service.

We might, some of us, be ready to do these things for our families, especially our spouses and children. Rather more of us will do them for those with whom we share citizenship. Over 3,000 U.S. servicemen and -women have died for their fellow citizens since 9/11, and many more have killed. Some have done so eagerly, no doubt, and some with deep reluctance. But they've done it, with whatever feelings and under whatever constraints. This shows deep solidarity, and we can all understand the kind of solidarity it exhibits. It seems natural: the world we live in is one in which this kind of deep solidarity makes sense. It does not seem natural—it seems fanatical, fantastical, crazed, primitive—for Christians to shed blood for other Christians, Jews for other Jews, Muslims for other Muslims, without respect to citizenship or national boundaries.

For us, and for a long time now, citizenship rather than religion has provided the principal bond of solidarity in the service of which we shed our own blood and that of others. In the great slaughters of the past century or two in Europe and America, Christians have killed Christians and Jews have killed Jews because they were separated by citizenship in time of war. It would have seemed odd—treasonably, seditiously odd—for an English Christian in 1914 or an American one in 1941 to have refused to kill or die for his country because he might have to kill his coreligionists on the other side. A very few did object on these grounds, but what they had to say could be taken seriously as little as we are able to take seriously Ahmadinejad's appeal to Bush. We American Christians all know, deep in our bones, that when it comes to the shedding of blood, citizenship trumps baptism.

There's a history that explains why this seems obvious to us—why we don't find it odd, for example, that American Christians should have killed one another with (usually) the blessing of their priests and bishops in the U.S. Civil War. It's a history, extending now for more than 300 years, of the subordination of all loyalties, all solidarities—and especially those that have to do with the giving up of one's life or the taking of the lives of others—to those demanded by the bonds of citizenship. And it's in the service of those solidarities that the dead bodies have been and continue to be stacked very high indeed. Many, uncountably many more have been killed in the service of nation-states than in the service of religions during the past two centuries.

Nations are jealous: they don't want their citizens whoring after foreign gods, and the worst form of such infidelity is to exhibit primary loyalty to some polity or institution other than the one you're a citizen of. The forms and rituals of citizenship,

whether bred in the bone of the native-born or given as catechesis to the adult immigrant, always emphasize the importance of primary allegiance to the state and primary solidarity with fellow citizens.

All this feels natural. Anything else—a declaration of primary loyalty in all things to the Roman Catholic Church or to the Ummah, the worldwide community of Muslims—sounds odd to American ears, fanatical or crazy. The first Catholic president of the U.S. had to go to considerable trouble to make it clear that his primary loyalty would be to the service and safeguarding of the Constitution, and if this has to be said less forcefully now, 45 years later, it's only because everyone assumes that no sane U.S. Catholic would think anything else. We all know where primary loyalties lie and what the proper place of religion is—as private hobby, as neutered lapdog, as purveyor of branded consumer goods and, of course, as supporter and encourager of the virtue of patriotism.

Could it be different? Should it be different? I think it should, though I doubt that it easily or soon will be. Ahmadinejad's letter asks American Christians, in the person of our Christian president, to make an effort of imagination, and there are few signs that we are prepared to make such an effort, few signs that we have the linguistic or conceptual space even to understand how.

The effort would begin, for Christians, by taking seriously our own language about the bonds we share with all other Christians. These bonds go deeper and demand more of us by way of solidarity than any others, even than those of family. The bonds of citizenship are to them as cotton thread is to a steel hawser. Or so our liturgies of baptism and confessions of faith seem to say. Shouldn't this have some effect upon the question of whom we think it proper to shed blood for?

A second stage in the act of imagination called for has to do with our relations to those who are our ancestors and offspring in loving response to the God into whose death we Christians have been baptized. Might not our solidarity with them—I mean with Jews and Muslims—go deeper and demand more than our bonds with the pagans who repudiate or are ignorant of the God of Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad? Christians have overwhelmingly good reasons to think this true of our solidarity with the Jews. And although matters are more complicated with respect to the Muslims, there is at least a strong prima facie case for deep solidarity with them, too—as Ahmadinejad also appears to think.

It’s never clear where acts of imagination will lead, and this is certainly true of the one asked of American Christians by Ahmadinejad. But some results are likely. Beginning to imagine the world as if religious solidarities were more important than national ones would inevitably divert imaginative effort from depicting and ornamenting the glories of the nation and of citizenship. And this would be a very good thing. Among the principal problems of American Christianity is that it finds America altogether too interesting because it invests too much imaginative work into shaping and decorating its golden image. This is a mistake. America is just one more pagan nation, mired in blood up to the elbows; as such it is not very interesting. Paying attention to the imaginative challenge of Ahmadinejad’s letter might help us to see this more clearly.

Perhaps, too, we may hope that he will develop a fully Islamic critique of Iranian projects of the same order as the Christian critique of American projects he recommends to our president. Such a critique is desperately needed as Iran becomes more deeply involved in the violence between Israel and Hezbollah and moves, perhaps, toward its own nuclear capability.

How, our president might ask theirs, as one believer to another, can this be reconciled with faith in the God who created us all for the same end, and with duty to the message of Muhammad, his prophet? That appeal would not only be more Christian than the language of diplomacy that belongs to realpolitik; it might also have more chance of being heard. What, President Ahmadinejad, would Muhammad do, and will you let what you and your country are doing be put to that question?