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Pacifist churches under fire for Ahmadinejad dinner

G. Jeffrey MacDonald Religion News Service | Sep. 19, 2008

Keepers of Protestantism's pacifist traditions will showcase just how far they've come from their humble roots in Europe's persecuted peasantry when they share an intimate dinner in New York next Thursday (Sept. 25) with a world leader.

It's not just any world leader, however, but Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who's been labeled an international pariah for his nuclear ambitions, denial of the Holocaust, saber-rattling toward Israel and alleged support of terrorism.

But for Quakers and Mennonites who'll be at the table, breaking bread with this controversial dignitary means drawing deeply on the same spiritual roots that sustained their embattled ancestors long ago.

"Jesus ate with lepers and with tax collectors, and in the United States right now, Iran would be in that category," says Arli Klassen, executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee, an outreach arm for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the United States and Canada.

"The criticisms levied at Jesus were that he ate with ... people of ill repute, and we're getting similar criticisms."

The New York gathering, an Iftar dinner to commemorate the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, will mark the fourth time since 2006 that Ahmadinejad has met with American religious leaders. Each time, Klassen says, it's been at Ahmadinejad's request.

Mennonites and members of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker outreach group, have attended each meeting. This year other Quakers, plus representatives from the World Council of Churches and the New York-based group Religions for Peace, will take part along with their invited guests.

This newfound camaraderie, however, isn't appreciated everywhere.

"Ahmadinejad represents a rejection of everything these religious groups stand for," said Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Their breaking bread with President Ahmadinejad is a perversion of the search for peace and an appalling betrayal of religious values."

Enduring scorn, however, is nothing new for these historic peace churches.

Since the 16th century, Mennonites and other Anabaptists have raised ire by refusing to take up arms under any circumstances. Citing biblical calls to love one's enemies and pursue peace, they refused to fight -- even when conscripted or attacked. For this and other nonconformist practices, they faced widespread persecution.

Four centuries later, their spiritual descendants served prison terms in the United States during wartime until the government began permitting nonmilitary service for conscientious objectors.

Quakers, who trace spiritual roots to 17th century Britain, also approach peacemaking as a duty. Theirs flows

from an understanding of every human being as possessive of a divine spark. This "inner light," believed to be present in every human being, forms a basis for hope that peace can be achieved with even the most hostile of foes. Violence is never an option for Quakers.

Coming from these traditions, Quakers and Mennonites feel a sense of mission to forge peace on a global stage whenever possible. That means being open to long-term dialogue, even with a figure who holds reprehensible views, according to Mark Graham, director of external affairs for the American Friends Service Committee.

"You can't just engage with people with whom you agree on all issues," Graham says. "That leads to a very myopic view of the world. And you miss a lot of opportunities with that approach."

At this point, some pacifists see Ahmadinejad more as an outcast -- at least when he visits the United States -- than a prestigious host or esteemed guest. That leaves them with only one option whenever he extends a dinner invitation.

"At this point in time, there are virtually no other places for the president of the Iran to have discussions with people in the U.S.," Klassen says. "There's an opportunity for discussion, and we don't believe we can just step out and say, 'no.' God has given us an opportunity, and it's our responsibility to say 'yes.'"

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