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President Khatami of Iran urges religious leaders to rescue language of belief from terrorists

by Jonathan Cummings

(ENS) Linking the distortions of religion employed by Osama bin Laden and other terrorists with the nihilist philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, President Mohammad Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran told a panel of American interfaith religious leaders meeting in New York that they must wrest the language of belief away from those “who concoct weapons out of religions.”

Khatami, who has been president of Iran since 1997, keynoted a symposium convened by the World Conference on Religion and Peace (Religions for Peace), and hosted by the Right Rev. Mark Sisk, Episcopal Bishop of New York, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York November 13.

Along with numerous other heads of state, Khatami was in New York for a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, which he proposed in 1998 with the goal of achieving greater understanding and respect among the world’s diverse peoples. He said that religious communities must play a vital role in the dialogue.

Referring to terrorists, Khatami noted, “What we are witnessing in the world today is an active form of nihilism in social and political realms, threatening the very fabric of human existence. This new form of active nihilism assumes various names, and it is so tragic and unfortunate that some of those names bear resemblance to religiosity and self-proclaimed spirituality,” he said.

“Vicious terrorists who concoct weapons out of religions are utterly incapable of understanding that, perhaps inadvertently, they are turning religion into the handmaiden of the most decadent ideologies,” he added. “While terrorists purport to be serving the cause of religion and accuse all those who disagree with them of heresy and sacrilege, they are indeed serving the very ideologies they condemn.”

Safe haven

Khatami’s remarks were echoed by Bishop Sisk, who noted that “for too long, we in the religious community have been far too willing to allow those with the loudest voices to define the religious traditions that we each hold so dear. It is time—it is past time—when we should take this most treasured gift from those who use it for their own hate-filled purposes.”

In the wake of the September 11 attacks and in a world that he said is “on the verge of social chaos,” Khatami noted that “the role of religious scholars has become even more crucial, and their responsibility ever more significant...Religion goes beyond philosophy, theology and rituals. Religion provides both an origin and an end, a safe haven.”

In his response to Khatami’s speech, Dr. William F. Vendley, secretary general of Religions for Peace, added, “Our religious communities are the deepest repositories of human memory. It is a memory that calls us to labor to build communities of justice and mercy in every time and place. Partnership among the world’s religions must be a hallmark of our shared future.”

Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation and spiritual leader of the Park East Synagogue in Manhattan, identified education as the key way in which religious leaders can help bring down the barriers that separate the world’s peoples. “The challenge for the children of Abraham is not only to face heaven, each in our own way in our own tradition, but to face each other as brothers,” he noted. “This is not just a time for prayer; this is not just a time for discussion. This is a time for religious leaders not to lag behind the statesmen and the politicians, but to come forward and lead. And above all, teach. Many of [us] have been poisoned with messages of divisiveness, hatred, intolerance, racism, anti-Semitism. We need a new educational approach that will clearly tell our followers we are all the children of God, and we want to help God perfect an imperfect world.”

Deeper layers

President Khatami and the other panelists agreed that religions must be fully engaged in political efforts to resolve the Middle East crisis and the current terrorist threat, and that discussions of human rights must also take into account their groundings in religious belief. “Purely materialistic concerns cannot suffice in laying the foundation for human rights,” Khatami said. “The discourse of human rights is apparently a secular discourse, with no essential connection with the religious outlook. However, for those familiar with the deeper layers of religious reason and understanding, it is clear that the concept of human rights is both ontologically and historically rooted in religious thoughts,” he said.

“We should free human rights from the bounds of diplomatic negotiations and regard it as a discourse for defending human life, dignity, and culture. Doing so, we ought to realize its deep religious aspect. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, as well as thinkers from other divine traditions can collaborate on this important issue.”

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, primate of the Archdiocese of the Armenian Church of America, added, “Religious leaders can intervene in dangerous situations, and have had some successes in averting violence in the past. As we know, the opposite influence is also possible, where religious leaders direct their followers to further violence, thus escalating violence between groups or against an ethnic, political or religious minority.”

The Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, director of ecumenical affairs for the Orthodox Church in America, noted that the “Dialogue Among Civilizations” must necessarily be “a spiritual engagement, a spiritual commitment not simply a conversation, but a spiritual encounter [and], finally, a dialogue among people of faith and among religions.”

He said that “there are some who perceive interfaith dialogue as a commitment of those who are weak in their faith,” he noted. “In fact, authentic dialogue between and among religions occurs only when its participants are strong in their commitment to the fundamentals of their faith.”

The World Conference on Religion and Peace is the largest international coalition bringing together key leaders of the world’s major religions who are dedicated to achieving peace. Religions for Peace mobilizes religious communities to collaborate on programs in conflict transformation, children and AIDS, human rights, disarmament, and peace education.

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