Questions for Khatami
Will His 'Dialogue' on Faith Mention Iran's Intolerance?
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By Felice D. Gaer and Nina Shea

There is a troubling irony in inviting former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami to speak today at the National Cathedral on the role the Abrahamic faiths can play in shaping peace in the world. In his own country, Khatami held office as president from 1997 to 2005 while religious minorities - including Jews, Christians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Bahais, dissident Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians - faced systematic harassment, discrimination, imprisonment, torture and even execution because of their religious beliefs. During Khatami's term, Iranian officials persecuted reformers, students, labor activists and journalists for "insulting Islam" and publishing materials deemed to deviate from Islamic standards.

In 1998 student protests were followed by severe repression, and a series of extrajudicial murders of dissidents were committed in the years thereafter. In 2004 the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of expression concluded that charges against those detained for criticism of the government "lack any objective criteria" and are open to arbitrary interpretation by the judiciary. Women of all faiths have also suffered discrimination and repression.

Because of these recurring and egregious violations of religious freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom continues to recommend that Iran be included on the State Department's list of "countries of particular concern." Since 1999 secretaries of state in both the Clinton and Bush administrations have agreed. Iran was initially placed on this list during Khatami's tenure as president. The commission's 2006 annual report and the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report conclusively demonstrate that Iran's egregious, systematic violations of religious freedom did not significantly diminish during Khatami's administration.

Against that backdrop, we are prompted to ask whether President Khatami plans to use the pulpit at the National Cathedral to denounce and express regret for these offenses. Such a step would go a long way toward facilitating reconciliation among his own countrymen and women, as well as among the Abrahamic faiths.

We also note that the cathedral's description of the event mentions Khatami's call for a "dialogue of civilizations." Certainly it is useful to urge clergy and leaders in the West and throughout the world to respect a diversity of views, beliefs and cultures. We wish to inquire whether Khatami will use his address at the National Cathedral to call upon clerics in his own country to respect the universally guaranteed right to freedom of religion and belief, as well as the rights of those who hold diverse views and beliefs.

Furthermore, unconditioned "dialogue" between Iran and the West is precisely what is being urged by Iran's current president at this time as an alternative to its compliance with U.N. resolutions regarding weapons of mass destruction. Khatami's address at the cathedral on this very topic of "dialogue" could easily be manipulated to make it appear that the cathedral is giving the moral high ground to Iran on this critical issue. Dialogue and discussion require that more than one voice be heard.

It appears that the cathedral is providing a public platform to an individual who was responsible for implementing and administering policies that resulted in the severe persecution of religious minorities as well as dissident voices within Iran's own Shiite community. Chief among these victimized groups are the very Abrahamic faiths he will discuss in his address.

The National Cathedral is one of America's most significant moral symbols. It is a place where national leaders have been laid to rest, and it is where the nation grieved for the victims of Sept. 11, 2001. It is a place where the people - despite political differences - have come together to mourn, reflect and unify. It is a place where those from diverse faiths and backgrounds gather to worship. It is imperative that those responsible for the National Cathedral, as the caretakers of one of America's national symbols, preserve its unique role and not allow it to be misused or manipulated. The commission fears that Khatami's address, in its announced format, jeopardizes this important tradition and may ultimately undermine the cathedral's critical national role.

In the final analysis, it would be a tragic oversight for the former leader of Iran to be invited to give a lecture on these specific topics in such a prominent place of worship without being questioned openly and seriously on both the nature of diversity and the legacies of his own record on human rights and religious freedom.

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