

Iranian President Khatami on a 'Dialogue Among Civilizations'



EIRNS/Muriel Mirak Weissbach

The high point of the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York City September 4-6, was reached before the summit formally convened, at a roundtable on the Dialogue of Civilizations, co-sponsored by the U.N., UNESCO, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's speech to the roundtable included the following remarks.

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Without a discussion of fundamentals, and by simply confining attention to superficial issues, dialogue would not get us far from where we currently stand. When superficial issues masquerade as "real," "urgent," and "essential," and where no agreement, or at least mutual understanding, obtains among parties to dialogue concerning what is truly fundamental, in all likelihood misunderstanding and confusion would proliferate, instead of empathy and compassion. . . .

One of the most arduous pas-

sages in the road of dialogue among cultures arises when a party to the dialogue attempts to communicate with another by employing a basically secularist language in an essentially sacred and spiritual discourse. By secularism I mean the general rejection of any intuitive spiritual experience and any belief in the unseen. Such a dialogue would, of necessity, turn out to be absurd. The true essence of humanity is more inclusive than language, and this more encompassing nature of the existential essence of humanity makes it meaningful to hope for fruitful dialogue.

It now appears that the Cartesian-Faustian narrative of Western civilization should give way and begin to listen to other narratives proposed by other human cultures.

See the accompanying "Nicolaus of Cusa and the Search for Truth," for a report on President Khatami's presentation in Weimar, Germany.

The Ecumenical Principle

On condition that the representatives of Christian civilization rid themselves of the corruption which I have summarily identified here so far, the Christian will, and must evangelize accordingly, otherwise he is not honest with himself or herself. If he is not honest with himself in such matters, why should anyone else trust his good intentions? Thus, the expression of a certain truthful quality of Socratic, cognitive, not deductive, passion for what he or she believes, on that account, may not guarantee the success of an attempted ecumenical dialogue, but these Socratic qualities are indispensable for even the mere possibility of success.

Nothing is more abominable in an attempted ecumenical dialogue, than that representatives of differing faiths pollute the attempt in such ways, as putting themselves through the degrading spectacle of purporting to negotiate a plea-bargain respecting their differences, from the vantage-point of mere "sensitivity to the feelings

of one another." Such immoral plea-bargaining, with disregard for essential issues of moral principle, was the cause for the failure of the recently attempted Camp David negotiations.

Nothing offends me more on this account, and justly so, than that most morally degraded of all moralists, the one whose expressed commitments are not to truth, but, rather, to affecting sensitivity toward the "feelings" of others and requiring that the other should do similarly, in return. "If you say that, you will hurt my feelings," has no legitimate right to prompt me not to tell the truth as I know it, and am prepared to prove that my views on the point are truthful. To blame Chairman Arafat, that even publicly, for his failing to submit to the terms of a proposed plea bargain, may be lawyers' standard current practice of positive law, but it is all the more immoral for just that reason.

If the parties approach one another with the expressed view, that there is no truth, but only differing opinions, differing values, you must walk away quickly from that