IR Leader receives cinema directors - 13 /Jun/ 2006

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

I found this meeting very useful and pleasant and benefited from it in different respects; I benefited both from the content of the remarks that were made by the friends and from the differences of opinion that exist in the field of cinema.

The remarks that were made at this meeting are expected to be summed up. It is true that they were recorded, and I also took notes of the main points. However, it is up to the friends to sum up these remarks so that, in addition to the knowledge that we obtain through this meeting about the issues that are related to cinema, a major step forward will also be taken and, God willing, certain obstacles will be removed.

As for the differences of opinion that exist in the field of cinema, unlike Mr. Ra'isiyan I do not consider these differences to be to the disadvantage of cinema. On the contrary, I regard them as indicative of the fact that there is freedom of thought in the field of cinema, so much so that sometimes quite opposite views and opinions are expressed.

Still, those who express these contrary opinions all view themselves as the children, or rather the owners, of cinema and seek to defend the rights of cinema. I consider this to be something very pleasant and interesting.

Of course I have known for years that those who are engaged in this sphere of activity hold different views and attitudes, and there are some indications of this reality as well. However, despite these differences of opinion, the view that is held in common by all is that efforts should be made to further raise the status of the Iranian cinema. This is what everybody wants, and I also believe that there exists such a necessity.

When we decided to hold this meeting, I intended to attain two objectives. My first objective was to honor the Iranian cinematic figures, or indeed to commemorate the Iranian cinema. I regard this meeting and its external reflection as homage to the art of cinema and cinematic artists, and I would like this attitude to spread in the country so that the significance of cinema will become evident to all.

It is quite natural that everybody should have his own outlook as well as his own demands and expectations. Nevertheless, there should be this consensus among all that the extremely complicated and distinguished art of cinema is a necessity and requirement for the country.

The second objective that was pursued by holding this meeting was to hear your views and opinions, and this objective was, by the favor of Allah, to a great extent accomplished. Of course I really would prefer not to talk and only listen to you and hear more of your views as long as this meeting lasts.

Prior to this meeting, I spent about two or three hours reading the writings that some friends who are attending this meeting - Mr. Majidi and a number of other friends - had prepared for me, and I took detailed notes of them. I am not sure to what extent I will be able to refer to these notes during this meeting. But anyhow I read the views that had been expressed by those friends.

The first point that I would like to mention is the concern that was expressed by many of the friends. It is a sense of insecurity or worry of insecurity or fancy of insecurity that I have noticed is besetting some of our friends. Even one can notice that such a concern exists at both ends of this broad spectrum.

I can really see no reason for this concern. It is true that we may object to certain films. I myself - to the extent that I now understand films and enjoy watching them - may have an objection to some films, including those that are shown on television and those which are screened in cinemas, some of which are sometimes brought to me so that I may see them. However, I do not blame the director.

There are different factors contributing to an error in the direction that a film takes, one of which may be the role of the director - later I will tell you more about the role that is played by the director. Therefore, there are different factors involved.

If we feel that a deep knowledge and insight has not been imparted by a director through a certain film, we should try to find out how that deep knowledge and insight could be infused into the heart of that director, so that he would be able to impart his own insight and internal knowledge to the audience. Art should be influenced by what one feels and understands and realizes oneself. Otherwise, art will turn into something shallow and superficial.

The fact of the matter is that the film producer and in particular the director aim to convey an insight and a mental vision to the audience. Now the question is, how is it possible to impart this insight and perception to the director the way the film viewers like, and why has this not been done? This is the question that should be asked.

I remember that sometime before the revolution, a number of poets were expected to take part in a ceremony and compose poems about a certain topic. One of the poets, a young and also very talented poet, did not really know anything about that topic. One of our friends talked to him for about five or six hours and gave him adequate information about the topic. This young talented poet then composed a long and elaborate ode based on that information.

Have efforts been made to impart a knowledge of Islamic values and principles, which I believe are not predominant in our cinema, to the film producer and to the director and even to the actors and they have not received due attention?

When I examine my own performance as well as the performance of our Islamic seminaries and our cultural management organizations, I come to the conclusion that not enough efforts have been made in this area.

There is a well-known poem which says:

Any misfortune that comes down from the sky,

Although it is destined for someone else,

Before it reaches the ground they ask:

Where is Anvari's house?

Therefore, it is not right to put all the blame on the director. I would, to some extent, address the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, to some extent the Islamic Propagation Organization, and to a certain extent the Islamic seminaries and the scholars who are characterized by religious thought - this same mystical thought and transcendentalism which you talked about - and ask them that what they have done so that the country will be able to benefit from the noble art which is possessed by those gathering here? What have you done?

If no effective measures have been taken in this area, I do not expect much of a director. I do not take to task our talented artists, whose works are devoid of our desired values, or at least in whose works these values are not predominant, just because of the fact that their works are not the way I like.

Therefore, it is unacceptable to me if our directors become the target of this insecurity. If there is such a reality, it is an unfair and unjustifiable reality.

However, I would like to say something to you, the dear brothers and sisters, as a clergyman. Naturally you would not expect me to comment, nor would I make the mistake of commenting, as a cinematic expert. As far as cinema is concerned, the likes of me can at the most be good viewers and listeners and enjoy watching films. Therefore, I cannot make expert remarks on cinema. It is up to you and the friends in the field of cultural management to do so. But as a clergyman and theology student, I can tell you something and make a few remarks.

The art of cinema, as you pointed out, is undoubtedly an exalted art, a very competent narrator - indeed no narrator among the different artistic methods of narrating a fact and reality has so far been so efficient - and an intricate and advanced and sublime art.

You have access to this window, namely the window of cinema on knowledge, and the light that comes in through this window. This window is at your disposal.

The significance of this art also increases your responsibility. What I would like to stress is that you are entrusted with a heavy responsibility. As some of the friends pointed out, nobody has ordered you to become directors or, in general, cinematic figures. It has been your own interest and talent and enthusiasm that have prompted you to enter this arena. But now that you have entered this field, you are expected to face up to your responsibility. You can be highly influential.

Look! I may address a clergyman or a preacher or a writer of religious books - who is also a narrator of facts and knowledge - and tell him to watch the content of his remarks or the words that he chooses, since if his words and remarks cause a youngster to lose his religious belief or misunderstand a religious fact, that clergyman or preacher or writer would be responsible before Almighty Allah.

Now what I would like to tell you, the dear brothers and sisters, is that considering this very effective artistic tool that is at your disposal, your influence is many times as much as the influence of that clergyman or preacher or writer. If I say that your influence is 10 times as much, it is surely more. Therefore, you can see that there is a great difference between the influence of a well-produced motion picture and the influence of the pulpit!

You are able to promote morality. The opposite is also possible. You are capable of imbuing the young generation with patience and perseverance, hopes and enthusiasm, motivation, honesty and integrity and all the qualities that an advanced society needs. It is also possible to infuse them with despair and disappointment instead of hopefulness and with stagnation rather than dynamism and vitality.

The issue of criticism was also raised by the friends at this meeting, one of whom said that criticism should not be construed as nagging. No, criticism is not nagging. Criticism - I do not intend to give the literal sense of this word -

is the same as faultfinding. Two kinds of faultfinding are possible. Now that we are sitting face to face, we can freely find faults with each other. But this may be done with either of two intentions.

Sometimes the intention behind faultfinding is to humiliate and affront and defame and take revenge on the other side. This action is not approved of by any noble - let alone 'Islamic' - standards.

But sometimes criticism is motivated by sincere intentions and a desire for improvement and the removal of faults and flaws. In other words, the purpose of this kind of criticism is to reflect the flaws and shortcomings of an individual or a director or the system or the people so that those flaws and shortcomings will be removed. This kind of criticism is approved of.

It is possible that the one to whom the criticism is addressed will find it bitter. But this is a pleasant bitterness. There is nothing wrong with it. Now I would like to say that there is nothing wrong with it also from the viewpoint of the system. If you are in any doubt about this, I will tell you sincerely that there is nothing wrong with it at least in my view.

You see, the intention and purpose of criticism is revealed in the work itself. In other words, if we find faults and criticize with the first kind of purpose in mind, we cannot make people and our audiences think that we have been motivated by sincere intentions. As some of the friends at this meeting pointed out, our people are intelligent, and they will realize what our true intentions are.

Some films are critical, and their criticism is likely to displease or offend me, since my feeling toward the Islamic system is such that a finger flip against the system is like a fist blow against me. However, I never get offended by criticism itself, and I welcome criticism. My feeling is that this is also the attitude on the part of the system, but its extent may vary in different individuals.

Therefore, there is nothing wrong with criticism, whose issue was raised by some friends. What is important is that it should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility.

You see, today the realities of our society - free from propaganda or slogans or exaggeration - indicate that the Iranian people have achieved prominence in the world because of their self-reliance and their display of valor on the scene - their display of valor is a reality that cannot be denied. I am not saying that the Iranian nation is the most prominent, but it is a prominent nation in the world. Also today, our country Iran is not the way that it was under the former regime.

The fact of the matter is that in the present world and in the arena of the international relations and with respect to the balance of the world's great powers, our country Iran and our nation and our government are regarded by other nations and governments and by the international political circles as deserving respect, or rather as worthy of being taken seriously and held in high regard.

This is the condition of our country today. We have had many achievements and taken great strides. If I try to compare the country's present condition with its condition before the revolution, I should say without any exaggeration that it is not possible to make a comparison between what we have attained after the revolution and what existed before the revolution. We have now attained self-confidence; we have become aware of our talents and capabilities and fulfilled our potential to a great extent; also, we have made considerable progress in the scientific and industrial areas as well as in the social sphere and in the field of public affairs.

It is not possible to draw a comparison between the two systems. The first one was a dependent system that played no role in the international interactions and had no self-confidence, a system that suppressed its own people and whose high-ranking officials viewed themselves as the owners of the country. As many of us still remember, this was the condition under the former tyrannical regime, which regarded the country as belonging to itself and attached no status to the Iranian people unless under compulsion.

However, the officials of the present system regard themselves as the servants of the Iranian people, not as the owners of the country or as the masters of the general public. This is the genuine feeling of our government officials, as they really consider themselves to be the servants of the people and believe that their raison d'etre is working for the public.

Presently our country is trying to make progress, and it is making remarkable headway. What you have heard about our scientific achievements in the field of nuclear energy is only a small portion of what has taken place in this country. By the favor of Allah, we have a large number of talented youngsters. What we need is motivation, dynamism, self-confidence and intention to reduce our dependence on aliens - on their culture and lifestyle and intellectual and cultural directives.

This is what we need today. We need to exploit our inner resources and extract the treasures that are hidden in our cultural heritage. If our youngsters are going to be brought up in this manner, they need your presence on the scene; in other words, you should be on the scene so that this will happen.

What I mean is that presently the key to the country's progress is to a considerable extent in your hands. You are able to make our young generation a progressive, hopeful, motivated and self-confident generation believing in its Islamic and national values. You are also able to make the present generation an embarrassed and remorseful generation casting aspersions on its past glories and impugning the glorious achievements of the revolution and the Sacred Defense.

A few years ago at a meeting that was attended by a group of artists, including cinematic figures and painters and sculptors, I told them that, you as artists are always trying to discover and highlight the beauties and delicacies of the world. This is what an artist does; that is to say, with the tool of art and an artistic outlook, he discovers and gives prominence to the beauties and delicacies and realities that are invisible to inartistic eyes and shows them to others.

When I say beauty, it does not mean that an artist is not able to discover and highlight ugliness. He can do so, since ugliness is also among delicacies. Then I told that gathering, how can you as artists that are looking for beauties ignore the beauties of the eight-year defense by an empty-handed nation of its homeland and country and government in a most difficult arena?

It is for a few years now that a number of books about the former war commanders are being published, and I am also one of the readers of these books. Although I knew some of these commanders personally, I find their biographies which are true accounts of their life - one can more or less realize what is a true account and what is an exaggeration - quite surprising.

One can notice that these prominent personalities went to the battlefield even in the garb of a laborer. For instance, Abdolhussein Bornosi was a young construction worker from the city of Mashhad, and I knew him before the revolution. They have written his biography, and I urge you and really would like you to read it. I am afraid that these books may not reach you at all. His biography is entitled ‘The Soft Soils of Koushk', and it has also been written well.

He went to the battlefield shortly after the war began, and I did not know this. After his martyrdom, some of our friends who had joined the academic circles and the Basij and who had talked to this not very educated young man said that he had spoken to them so fervently that his words had deeply influenced their hearts. He had done so because, as I said, he had been conveying to them an insight, a perception, a sincere feeling and an understanding of the universe.

Finally, after performing many valorous deeds on the battlefield and presence on difficult scenes, he attained martyrdom. Now the question is, where can you find the likes of these beauties that one can observe in the life of this individual or others such as martyr Hemmat and martyr Kharrazi? Where is it possible to find them?

As for the realistic cinema, which reality is more profound and more charming than the sense of self-sacrifice and devotion of an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old youngster from a well-off family who went to Ahvaz? I saw many of these youngsters, and I still remember a number of them, in particular those who were associated with me and whom I knew personally.

These youngsters had well-off families and kind parents and enjoyed comfortable life and suffered from no mental complex or deficiency. However, they went to the battlefield and fought with such devotion and self-sacrifice that they surprised others.

As a matter of fact, many of these youngsters had entered this arena on the recommendations of the likes of me, but they really surpassed us. Now these are beauties, and you are expected to extract and describe these beauties.

Mr. Hatamikiya noted that he does not know what to say about the war. You have lots of things to say. To what extent have you, war cinema directors, depicted what was going on behind the scenes of the war? What brought about this war? Which political or detective film can be more fascinating than the one that you depict? There are also enough documents at your disposal.

What happened that caused Saddam Hussein to act impudently and what dared him to attack Iran with the intention of dominating this country? Undoubtedly, he did not intend to conquer the whole country, but he intended to occupy Khouzestan and a couple of neighboring provinces in order to wield dominance, as a powerful neighbor, over the central government in Iran, whether it was the Islamic Republic or any other form of government, and he would wield this dominance.

Indeed, if the Iranian people had not put up that wholehearted and all-out resistance, and if Khouzestan had been occupied, any central government in Iran would have been forced to pay tribute to the occupier of an important part of the Iranian territories.

Well, what happened that they forced Saddam Hussein to attack Iran? How did they assist him? Which factories sold him chemical weapons? Who were those that built the octagonal and pentagonal entrenchments? Which countries provided him with airplanes? Who were those senior political and intelligence and military officials from different countries, including the United States, who went to Baghdad and met with Saddam Hussein and his men?

You have not dealt with these subjects yet. Who was Saddam in the first place? These topics provide enough room for writing fiction.

Some friends hinted at the issue of writing fiction. I also believe that we are weak in writing fiction. However, the spirit of story writing is not weak in Iran, as evidenced by the stories written by Ferdowsi and Mowlavi. Of course writing novels the way it has been done in Europe and Russia, especially in the 19th century when great and outstanding novels were written, has not been common in Iran. But I believe that we have enough talent for this.

It is true that we have achieved prominence in the field of poetry, but not so in writing novels. Sill, we are capable of doing so.

Nevertheless, some measures have been taken in this area in the post-revolution era, but they have not been as exalted and as elevated as one expects. If they are followed by more measures, and if the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance makes a real effort in this area, positive results will be attained.

Some friends also asked whether they should write fiction for cinema. I do not know. You are more acquainted than me with this subject. Is fiction really supposed to be written for cinema? Many great cinematic works are based on classical works and old fiction. It is not known whether any novels were written for this purpose.

Supposing they were, if we make progress in the field of writing stories and novels, that also will be done. Then, you will be able to introduce these topics into cinema. They will surely rise to prominence. There are lots of things that still must be done by us with respect to the war.

I would also like to tell you one more thing. I previously said that you are responsible - all of you have this responsibility because your works can be very influential; now I tell you that you will be remunerated by Almighty Allah for this responsibility. Therefore, you should really try to do anything with the intention of working in the way of Allah.

This lady said that she is concerned with her personal feelings. There is nothing wrong with it. You can make films based on your personal discernment. But you can still do so for the cause of Allah and with the intention of making the Almighty pleased with yourself, so that you will evoke the divine reward. You are engaged in an important activity; therefore, why should you deprive yourself of the divine remuneration?

This does not mean that you should only make films about prayer and fasting! What this actually means is that whatever promotes moral values and social discipline and perseverance and earnestness in efforts and deep faith and a sense of responsibility among the youth will evoke the divine reward and remuneration.

The Commander of the Faithful (greetings be upon him) told his sons to work for reward. The reward that he meant was not financial recompense and money, since to the Commander of the Faithful even a fortune was less in value than a shred of soil. What he meant was the divine reward and remuneration.

It is worthy of mention that all of us are in need of the divine recompense. When we cross the border of death, we

will come to need this reward. Whether we want it or not, we will ultimately have to cross this border. On the other side of this border, there is nothing we can count on except the divine requital.

Thus, as elite individuals and artists who have a penetrating eye on society and on the county and on human beings and who feel a sense of responsibility, you should try to work for the cause of Allah, and you will be rewarded by Almighty Allah.

Anyhow, I have taken many notes of what the friends said at this meeting and of the reports and analyses that they presented, and I hope that they will prove beneficial to me. In my view, the outcome of this meeting is that, in the first place, we all agree on the significance of cinema in terms of its exalted artistic status and its great influence and also on the responsibility that this influence entrusts to those who are in the cinema hierarchy.

Perhaps I am also in this hierarchy because of my responsibility in the system; the minister of culture and Islamic guidance is surely in this hierarchy. Anyway, we should all feel responsible. We all agree on the significance of cinema.

Secondly, we all agree that cinema should aim to improve and ameliorate things in the country and society. If there is criticism, it should be made with this purpose in mind. Then I think the differences of opinion about whether we should criticize or not or whether criticism is nagging or not will be reduced. The reason is that when the intention behind criticism is to bring about improvement and progress, this intention will be visible in the cinematic work itself.

Mr. Hatamikiya asked me to confer ranks on you. Almighty Allah has already conferred ranks on you. Your ranks are of a divine nature. The artistic taste and talent that you have is the rank that has been conferred on you. We will spoil it if we try to grade it with material tools.

But of course we express our appreciation to you. We both express our appreciation and have certain expectations of you. As a clergyman, I really have certain expectations from you, cinema directors. You are expected to promote and bolster up religious and national values. When we talk about national values, the custom that is observed on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year should not immediately cross your mind. What we mean by national values is the sense of independence - cultural independence - of a nation.

It is really a valuable phenomenon when a nation comes to rely on its own culture despite the Western cultural indoctrination that has been going on for the past 200 years. You should try to consolidate this. Now sometimes it may be consolidated by going to the international festivals, sometimes by not going there. When it is necessary for you to go to the international festivals, you should go there with this intention in mind.

Mr. Ayyari showed favor toward the friends at Cannes and defended them, saying that they had told him that they could not screen his film because it was displaying a dark image of our country. Now we should see what Mr. Ayyari had done that caused them to take pity on the Iranian nation.

I do not mind your defending them. But I am informed through various channels - as you know, our information is not limited to the channels that are at your disposal, since we have access to other sources of information as well - that these international film festivals, including the Cannes festival which you mentioned, and some other festivals are making every effort to take political advantage of the presence of prominent Iranian artists in those festivals.

Now I do not know to what extent they screen the works of Mr. Majidi and bring them before the eyes of their general public. It is true that they show respect for our artists at their festivals. But I will believe their admiration for our artists only when they publicize their films by bringing them before the eyes of their general public, by screening them in their cinemas and on their television. They either will not do this or will do it to a very limited extent.

Therefore, when their praise and encouragement is only limited to their festivals and award-giving ceremonies, one would not so much believe that they have sincere - or as we say ‘divine' - intentions; after all, there are political intentions behind these events, and it is no wonder. We also have political intentions with respect to certain international cultural issues, and we do not hide our intentions. Our cultural activities with respect to many countries are politically motivated, and they are doing the same thing with respect to us. Thus, we should remain watchful and vigilant.

The late Mr. Hajji Ahmad Khomeini once told me that they were ready to pay some 80,000 dollars so that the late Imam Khomeini's message on the hajj pilgrimage would be published in one of the famous American newspapers. He said that despite all the efforts that they made, those newspapers did not agree to publish the message even as an advertisement.

Mrs. Ebtekar, who was formerly a vice-president, has written a book about the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran - the so-called U.S. den of espionage. She was herself among the students who took part in the takeover of the embassy. She had spent her childhood in the United States. Her father, the late Dr. Ebtekar who was among our friends, had lived in the United States for many years. This is why Mrs. Ebtekar has a good command of English. She wrote this book in English, and it was later translated into Persian by a translator.

She told me that no publisher in the United States was willing to publish her book! But they insist on portraying the embassy takeover as an unhealable wound.

During my presidency, I traveled to the United Nations Organization. A famous interviewer conducted an interview with me, and it was given wide media coverage. The first question that he asked me was, "Why did you take over the U.S. embassy?"

I told him, "Look! I have come to the United Nations, and you have asked me for an interview; why are opening the interview with this question?!"

They would not let go of that incident. They have been trying to portray it as a cruel act of terrorism. Now an intellectual and educated young woman who had taken part in that incident has expounded on the incident in her book, but the American publishers are not willing to publish it.

You can see what the situation is. Well, they are taking their own interests into consideration. In the United States, this façade of lack of censorship is maintained as long as it does not pose a threat to the American principles. If there is such a threat, whether to the American principles or to the immediate American interests - for instance, in the case of the Persian Gulf War which took place during the presidency of senior Bush, there will be censorship, complete and official and open censorship without any secrecy.

They are furthering their own cultural interests. Well, we should also try to promote our own cultural interests. We do not expect them to further our interests, but it is up to us to do so.

Therefore, you are expected to take your country's cultural interests into consideration whenever you decide to go to one of the international film festivals. It is quite clear that whenever your presence at the international film festivals furthers their interests and harms your country's interests, then you should not take part in those festivals.

Well, there are still lots of things to say, and it will take a long time just to talk about what I have noted down. Three hours and five minutes have passed since our meeting began. It has been a very pleasant meeting, and I am pleased and happy that it was held.

I express my sincere gratitude to those who organized and those who attended this meeting, to dear Mr. Majidi who took the trouble and actually directed this meeting, to the friends who expressed their views in a clear and eloquent manner, and to the esteemed officials of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance who extended the invitations and were the real organizers of this meeting.

If it were not almost prayer time, I would stay longer at this meeting. However, it is prayer time, and I must go.

Greetings be upon you and Allah's mercy and blessings