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EAST-WEST DIALOGUE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Speech by Herr Richard von Weizsäcker,
President of the Federal Republic of Germany,
on receiving the Appeal of Conscience Award

New York, 4 June 1989

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Mr Chairman,
Rabbi Schneier,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much indeed for your kind words.

I am delighted and greatly honoured to receive today the award bestowed on me by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation. I accept it with deep gratitude and with a sense of commitment - not only because of the impressive list of previous recipients but because I subscribe wholeheartedly to the aims and purposes of your Foundation. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. It is tied up with the notion of religious tolerance.

In Rhode Island around 1640 Roger Williams founded the first modern community to practise religious tolerance. That was at a time when, according to the great American historian George Bancroft's account in 1862, Germany, during the cruel religious wars, was the battlefield of the whole of Europe, when even Holland bled to death in a struggle between hostile groups poisoned by revenge, when France had to endure a terrible battle against superstition and England groaned under the despotism of intolerance. At that time, he recalled, Roger Williams translated the great doctrine of spiritual freedom into practice. It has been rightly said that that Rhode Island community was the Western hemisphere's first major contribution to the development of Western civilization.

Since then the right of religious self-determination has been increasingly recognized. It became a principle of international law - and in many countries it is enshrined in the constitution. It has been incorporated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In the defence of that right an important role is played by non-governmental organizations like yours which stand up for religious freedom and the right of religious minorities throughout the world. In pursuing this goal the Appeal of Conscience Foundation has developed many ideas and activities. In recent years you have devoted increasing attention to the East-West dialogue and have played a large part in intensifying relations between religious

organizations in the United States and the Soviet Union. And I know how very much your Foundation has been endeavouring for many years to improve the situation of the Churches in the other part of Germany.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For a long time freedom, democracy and human rights seemed to have been forced onto the defensive all over the world. In the Northern hemisphere that trend has now been reversed. We are witnessing the gradual retreat of totalitarianism. People in Central and Eastern Europe are becoming aware of and are claiming their basic rights. Their rulers are beginning to realize that they have to take this development seriously for their own sake.

Is this positive trend solely due to a change of attitude among the ruling factions in those countries? Are we deceiving ourselves as to their motives in allowing the people more freedom? Are we becoming the victims of uncritical Gorbymania? I think not.

In pursuing a more constructive reform policy the Soviet leadership no doubt still hopes to maintain its country's world power status, which at present stems solely from its military strength, not from its economic, technological or cultural influence. In order to achieve this goal it needs to comprehensively modernize the Soviet system. It therefore has no choice but to motivate the people and grant them more freedom of action and more rights. Whether or not the Soviet Union becomes capable of holding its own on a global scale depends not only on its leadership but above all on the people themselves. Not until they feel that their willingness to respond is being honoured, that their human rights are being protected, and that their wishes are being taken seriously in the political sense as well, will they increase their efforts and perform the task on which the Soviet leadership depends.

Thus by encouraging a Soviet reform policy we are also enhancing the aims and ideals with which we in the West too identify. Precisely because the free development of the people in Eastern Europe meets those countries' political and economic needs, their reform movements are based on Western models. Should we not use the opportunities thus created? In this reform process the

countries concerned are again falling back on their own intellectual traditions which have helped to develop our common Western culture. Were Pushkin and Solzhenitsyn lesser exponents of that culture than Whitman and Singer, Heine and Böll?

As a result of these developments religious freedom as an elementary human right in a free society again becomes the focal point of an evolutionary process in Eastern Europe and of the negotiations between East and West. Here the CSCE^{*} process is of central importance. It was this process in particular on which the people in Central and Eastern Europe whose religious freedom was still being suppressed or restricted pinned their hopes. The linking of tangible rights and practical improvements for the individual with aspects of security and co-operation between East and West is what constitutes the Western concept of CSCE.

Our objective from the outset was to make human dignity and human rights an essential element of détente. This concept has found expression in the Final Act of Helsinki. The Concluding Document of the CSCE follow-up meeting which was signed in Vienna on the 15th of January ¹⁹⁹³ had already benefited from the reforms taking place in Central Europe. That document, supported jointly by East and West, has developed and specified human rights and fundamental freedoms in an unprecedented manner. Owing to their importance it focuses attention on freedom of religion and on the freedom to live according to one's convictions. It makes explicit reference to tolerance. Substantial improvements were achieved with regard to the protection of minorities and freedom of movement.

At the Vienna follow-up meeting Central and East European States had become party to an intensified debate to secure tangible progress on many specific aspects of religious freedom. It was possible to reach agreement on a comprehensive list of the different manifestations of that freedom. It is now essential to ensure that those agreements are observed, everywhere. For this purpose a special, intensive procedure was agreed upon in Vienna which now has to be put to the test. The numbers of Jewish or ethnic German citizens leaving Eastern Europe give us reason to hope.

* Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe

The express undertaking by the participating States in the Vienna Concluding Document to take effective measures to prevent and eliminate civil, political, economic, social and cultural discrimination against believers and communities of believers is of crucial importance in this context.

The Soviet media are now openly reporting that believers in the Soviet Union are subject to fundamental and comprehensive discrimination. Jews, Moslems and Christians have been persecuted. Their only possible way of avoiding persecution was to leave the country, but that escape route was virtually cut off. Those who, after many years of chicanery, were allowed to leave were faced with a void. Many of them found a new home in your country. We are being level-headed about this development and we are no faith-healers, but we have reason to hope that the situation will gradually improve. Now it is we who have to respond. We must take in those who are allowed to leave their countries. We cannot demand human rights for these people and then refuse to help them.

The proposed law on freedom of conscience in the Soviet Union could lastingly improve the situation of believers. If all religious communities are granted and allowed to enjoy such freedom, this really would manifest a profound change in the system.

Another important provision of the Vienna Document expresses the right of religious communities to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structure and to appoint their own personnel. These communities now have another instrument they can invoke. This could prove useful in Czechoslovakia, for instance, where many bishoprics are still vacant.

In the Soviet Union and its allied countries religious freedom and tolerance are still remote. Furthermore, the situation differs considerably from country to country.

Poland is today perhaps the most Catholic country in the whole of Europe and the most faithful to the Church. The political leadership there cannot exist without a modus vivendi with the Church. In Hungary - where Cardinal Mindszenty had to spend many years in asylum in the American Embassy

In Budapest, there are today hardly any restrictions on religious freedom. A law on religion is in preparation as well as a new law of association intended to give religious communities more freedom of movement.

In the GDR*secularism is more deeply established than in Poland. The Protestant Church is the leading religious community there and bears the brunt of the conflict with the Communist leadership. Church charitable activities are increasing. The Protestants are speaking out more on the general political issues of human rights. But time and again they are hampered. This applies especially to education, religious instruction and confirmation classes.

The Soviet leadership is afraid of religious freedom especially for Moslems. It is afraid that they may increase considerably and that they will want the most political autonomy, and it is afraid of their intolerance. Time and again Jewish and Christian citizens and communities, too, have to suffer on account of the government's fears. Nonetheless, as I said earlier, more exit permits are being granted and the people are being allowed more freedom at home.

What is particularly important is that the Communist Party has waived untenable ideological principles. It really is a new departure in the evolution of dialectic materialism when Mr Gorbachov publicly states that the Party does not lay claim to the absolute truth, and that history is not predestined but evolves freely.

Complete religious freedom is a distant goal, but it cannot be abandoned and is no longer utopian. Its attainment calls for untiring efforts and far-sightedness on the part of our democratic countries to encourage the process of reform in Eastern Europe, also in those countries where it is just getting off to a hesitant start.

By supporting a policy of tolerance towards people of different persuasion in Central and Eastern Europe in a phase of historical significance, and by

* German Democratic Republic

promoting respect for human rights in all parts of Europe, the Appeal of Conscience Foundation is making a most impressive ecumenical contribution.

I deem it a special honour to receive the Appeal of Conscience Award here today. I also regard it as a recognition of my country's continuous efforts to help develop peaceful co-operation among nations.