

# APPEAL OF CONSCIENCE FOUNDATION

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EXCERPTS FROM THE REMARKS  
OF RABBI ARTHUR SCHNEIER  
APPEAL OF CONSCIENCE DINNER,  
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I have just returned from an unprecedented religious summit, sponsored by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, hosted by the Swiss government and attended by the heads of the three great religious communities of the former Yugoslavia -- the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church of Croatia and the Islamic community.

This was the first time these three religious leaders had ever met together. Despite that fact, they had no difficulty in finding common ground and in signing a declaration stating that the fighting in Bosnia was "not a religious war" and that "crime in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion."

In their statement, these three heads of religious communities denounced "the inhuman practice of ethnic cleansing," urged the immediate and unconditional release of all war prisoners, civilian detainees and hostages; denounced the exploitation of all religious symbols used with the aim to further hatred and called for a world day of prayer and solidarity for Bosnia and Herzegovina on December 23.

It is a remarkable document. In denouncing "all crimes committed in this war....regardless of their nationality and religions," the Serbian Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim leaders transcended religious differences in the name of a common humanity and a common repugnance to the atrocities that have horrified their countrymen and the world.

How rapidly and deeply this moral stand will affect the political and military leaders responsible for the bloodshed in Bosnia cannot be predicted. I believe, however, that this religious summit has made a noteworthy start in instructing the faithful, in clear and unequivocal moral terms, in what their religion requires of them, so that all of the peoples of that land may move toward peace, justice and reconciliation. And it demonstrates that men of different faiths can indeed join hands when they understand how terrible the alternative can be -- unending horror and cruelty, igniting flames of hatred that could consume their homeland perhaps all of Europe.

We did not expect this. Twenty-seven years ago, when the Appeal of Conscience Foundation was established, we dreamed of the day when religious believers could worship freely and teach their faith to their children. We did not foresee the tragic rise in fear and hatred of the other -- the other nationality, the other racial or religious or ethnic group -- that has accompanied these new freedoms.

We see it today in what had once been Yugoslavia, a country literally torn apart by ethnic strife and religious antagonism that have turned that beautiful land into a battleground. We see it in Germany, where the specter of a Nazi revival haunts the nation -- and the continent.. We see it in

the former Soviet Union, where one nationality denounces another, and does not hesitate to turn words of hatred into deeds of war. We see it in India, where blood has been spilled in mosques and temples, and revenge has spilled more blood in return, with no apparent end in sight. We see it in far-off countries on distant continents. And we see it in this very city.

The mounting fury of ethnic and religious hatred threatens to destroy whatever chances there were for democracy to emerge from Communism in Europe. From Bosnia to Baku and even to Bombay, xenophobia, intolerance, chauvinism and bigotry are rising. Freedom, which should have been a blessing for all, has become a curse for the few and the weak, the minorities and the different.

Religion does not serve God when it fans the flames of hatred and war. Ethnic pride and national sentiment shame themselves when they turn on those of another ethnic group to those of a different national origin.

There is tragedy in mankind's failure to grasp this fundamental religious concept. And so we in the Appeal of Conscience Foundation face a new challenge, no less difficult than the one we assumed at the moment of our founding 27 years ago. In those days the task was to win freedom of religion for those who yearned for it but who were denied it by the state. Happily, that struggle has been won in many places. Today our mission is to transmit a simple yet profound idea: tolerance, pluralism and respect for minority rights.

This respect for our neighbors, whether or not they look like us or talk like us or pray like us, is crucial to the success of the American democracy. We are far from perfect, but we try. Respect and acceptance of those who are different are embedded in our country's basic laws and historic documents.

So too are they reflected not only in the purpose but in the very composition of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation. Here men and women of many walks of life and many faiths have come together to pursue a common objective -- working for religious freedom around the world and seeking to strengthen ties among faith communities in the cause of mutual understanding, tolerance and international cooperation.

The new freedom that millions of men and women are beginning to enjoy can be a blessing for all. Let it not signal anarchy, hatred and fear. It is too much to hope that we will all love one another. But if we are unable to embrace each other, let us at least tolerate one another in peace. It is perhaps the most difficult task we have ever attempted. It is toward the achievement of this goal that we in the Appeal of Conscience Foundation pledge ourselves. Let us begin.

12/9/92

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