

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton
Speech given at the Liberty Awards Dinner
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Thank you and good evening, and welcome to those who have not been here before to this beautiful room in the Russell Senate Office Building, which is part of the Capitol complex. It is a special honor for me to have been asked to speak here tonight. I greatly admire the work so many of you do both as a vocation and an avocation on behalf of religious liberty, and it is a great pleasure to be among you.

I want to thank James for that introduction. He and I met about a year or two ago now. We have been working together on behalf of religious freedom issues, and I was delighted when I was asked some months ago to speak here this evening. I know that you've had a series of speakers. This is the 3rd annual dinner, and it has also been a great honor to welcome a new Senate Chaplain, Dr. Barry Black, who is a Seventh-day Adventist, and to have that presence in our midst after his distinguished career in the military. There are so many of you who are from other countries who I've had the opportunity to greet in the time that I've been here. I think that's a wonderful tribute to this dinner and to the cause that it represents. So to everyone who is responsible for starting this annual event and continuing it, I am very grateful. There are so many people here whom I know and some who I have worked with in the past. I particularly want to acknowledge and thank everyone associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church work in the world, the *Liberty* magazine, and the International Religious Liberty Association, and of course the World Headquarters. And to all of you, it is so appropriate that this dinner be held under the auspices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. With 14 million members worldwide, 1 million here in the US, you understand very well the importance of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. It is your work often in the frontlines that helps to tell the rest of the world the story of those who are oppressed and in so many ways denied their rights to live and believe as they choose. I also want to thank the church for the work you do for the people in need here in our country and indeed around the world. Your health care system, something I care deeply about is a great example of living your faith; running more than 600 healthcare institutions around the world, including 52 hospitals here in the US.

Some of you may remember I had a few things to say about healthcare a decade ago, and I still have the scars to show that, but there isn't a more important mission than trying to care for the physical and mental needs of those who are often left out of our healthcare system, who often cannot get access to the care that they so deserve. So for all the work here and around the world, I thank you.

Now much of that work is very tangible in my life as a senator. I know just a few weeks ago a Seventh-day Adventist congregation from Pearl River, New York (I don't know if anyone here is from Pearl New York) came to recognize the extraordinary efforts that church members have made on behalf of hunger. That particular church's soup kitchen and soup pantry served over 1,800 children and more than 2,100 adults. I thought it was fitting and appropriate for them to come and give thanks for their ability to provide that necessary service to so many people.

The work that is done is often quiet and without drawing attention to oneself, but believe me it is appreciated, and I personally want to thank you.

Now as look at this important issue of religious liberty; I wanted to put it into a broader context, because from my perspective, religious liberty is one of the most important issues on the world's agenda today. James was very kind in his introduction to talk about the work I have tried to do, but it is a small part of what goes on every day throughout our country and in the world today. And of course we know that we lost a great force for religious tolerance and understanding with the passing of the Pope. I just spoke to my husband who is in Rome with President Bush and former President Bush to attend the services that are being held. And I think the outpouring of affection and appreciation for John Paul II is a reflection of the yearning people have to be connected, to believe, to have some greater purpose and meaning in their lives. I know one of his most important insights came in his understanding during his years in Poland. That religious freedom is often the bell weather for respecting human rights.

Earlier today I spoke to the Orthodox Union, which is the association of Orthodox Jews in the U.S., and we were speaking actually about these same subjects. As I was leaving, a rabbi stopped me and said he wanted to tell me a story. There is a man in my congregation who as a young baby was given up by his Jewish parents to Catholics in Poland in order to save him from the concentration camps. And this child then lived with this family that had taken him in and treated him as one of their own. And some years later, after the war, after things had settled down and stabilized in Poland, this family took the young boy to be baptized in the local Catholic Church, and presented the child for baptism and the priest said, "Tell me about this child" (he was obviously older than the usual baby would be for baptism). The parents explained his story, and the priest said, "But do we know what his parents would have intended for him?" And that priest was the future pope.

I tell that story because I think that John Paul II, throughout his entire life as a priest and servant of the Catholic church, spoke about religious freedom as a point of reference for other fundamental rights, and in some ways as a measure of them, and then worked to try and connect people of all faiths, and to promote inter-faith tolerance and understanding and respect. He touched many millions of lives. It is our responsibility to think of ways each of us can further religious liberty and freedom. It is up to each of us, in the roles that we individually play, to ensure that our nation has been, I would argue, an exemplar of religious freedom and tolerance, amongst a diverse population, and continues to be so.

It is one of the geniuses of our founders that they understood in our constitution that we had to simultaneously establish majority rule and still protect the minority, including the right to freedom of religion. In fact, in 1790, just one year after our Constitution was ratified; President Washington received a letter from the members of a Rhode Island synagogue looking for assurance that Jews in America would enjoy religious freedom. And President Washington replied with the guarantee that Jews would be protected, but that members of all faiths would be free to worship as they chose, and that the new government of the US, and I quote from President Washington, "Give to bigotry, no sanction; to persecution, no assistance." This was an extraordinary moment in history, wasn't it? Nothing like that had ever been said by a secular leader of any nation, and certainly not from someone who arose from the fomentation of the democratic process. So while our history is not perfect as no human history can be, we do have a record of consistent progress, and a striving to live up to challenge that our founders presented us.

So I think it is imperative that in the 21st century, we continue to search deeply, examine our own consciences about what religious liberty means today. What does freedom of thought, and belief and conscience mean? The Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which is currently pending in

the Senate, has been submitted for consideration in the Senate every year since 1997. I have been very proud to co-sponsor it ever since I have been a senator. You know that this law would protect employees from being penalized by their employers for taking time off from their work to observe religious holidays or Sabbaths, or being discriminated against in their work place on the account of religiously-required clothing.

I know that the Seventh-day Adventist Church suffers from this discrimination on a regularly basis. I was not aware of the statistics that James presented that three members of the church face discharge every day, being fired because of their religious beliefs, but we know that there are often many conflicts. Back in 1997 in the face of continuing opposition to this Act, my husband as President issued guidelines on religious exercise and religious expression in the federal workplace which enhanced protections to those who worked in the federal government. But this legislation would extend those protections to everyone. And that is what we are seeking. And we will continue to work on its behalf, and I hope that this year would be the year, James, that we are successful in passing this. It is in the line of the assurance that President Washington gave so many years ago.

There are many challenges to religious freedom around the world. I just came back a few weeks ago from my second trip to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Pakistan and India, and I was both heartened by the elections in Iraq, the elections in Afghanistan, the progress that is being made and sobered by the challenges that the people there confront. Those challenges are extraordinarily difficult. And we must hope, and we must support their efforts to create a democratic government that does protect religious freedom. It will be a very important issue in the upcoming constitutional deliberations in Iraq. As they attempt to fashion a constitution, a system of government that provides for their beliefs, for their tenets of faith, but does so in the context of respect for others. It runs against their traditions in many instances, and they have to be will have to be very statesman like in order to create new space for diversity, for pluralism, for tolerance, and we must help them accomplish that.

Other places in the world today are so far from the dream, as one of my predecessors and favorite in American history, Eleanor Roosevelt, who helped to draft the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is good to be reminded that following the horrors of World War II, Article 18 of the Declaration flatly establishes freedom of religion as a basic, inalienable right of all people. It states, *“Everyone (everyone) has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”*

Those of us who are people of faith are so aware of what that means in our lives, that it is sometimes a challenge for us to understand our obligation to create space for non-believers. Someone asked me some years ago if I was a praying person, and I said I was fortunate to be been raised by parents, who prayed, grew up in a church from earliest years emphasized the importance of prayer. I remember seeing my late father on his knees every night by the side of his bed, while he’s watching me by the side of mine. But that was at a particular time before our tenure in the White House, and I quickly added that had I not been a praying person, a few years, maybe a few days in the White House would have turned me into one.

So as we hold up the importance of religious liberty, we have to take both words in that phrase to heart – religion and liberty. And it is a powerful ideal that has been given lip service,

and certainly the Universal Declaration is very specific about that, but has not yet been embraced by so many around the world, by people who have no faith, and people who hold to their faith with great conviction. A number of additional agreements guaranteeing religious freedom have been reached, including the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in the 1975 Helsinki Accords. Amid all these international agreements, I think it has been notable that the United States has played a major role making sure that these agreements, these statements of belief, have some meat, have some actionable, implementable policies behind them.

One of the major accomplishments in the execution of this responsibility occurred in 1998 when Congress passed, and my husband signed into law, the International Religious Freedom Act. Now that Act incorporated as a foundational element of the United States Foreign Policy the ideals of religious freedom on which our own nation was founded. And it required our government to designate a nation or a country of particular concern if that nation's government had either engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom defined as systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom as outlined in human rights documents. That helped to put spotlight on countries that were not living up to the ideals or even their stated commitments in their own documents to religious freedom.

I remember when we went on a presidential trip to China, we went to a church for church services, and as was unfortunately the case in China (Harry Wu is here today; a man of great courage in the struggle for human rights in China), it was a church that was state-sanctioned, but it was still a church for believers. And we were able to make a point about the necessity for the government of China to begin to recognize, in any time in history, but in particular, now, one cannot contain, one cannot destroy, the spirit inside that yearns for a connection, for a belief, for being a member of a congregation of believers.

We also created the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom of whom we have members and former members of that Commission here. The Commission's annual report is a powerful instrument as it surveys the state of religious freedom around the world. And the work on the Commission on Security and Cooperation for Europe, known as the Helsinki Commission, of which I am honored to be appointed upon my election to the Senate, is an independent US agency, created in 1976 and a major part of its charge is to monitor the state of religious freedom around the world and to advocate for its expansion.

So we are working and we are making progress and we know that this is an ongoing obligation. There is still much work to be done, and I hope that we will continue to be motivated with the leadership and the inspiration of so many of you and those who stand on the frontlines in the struggle of religious freedom.

My work as First Lady and as Senator has given me the privilege of traveling to many of the countries that are represented here. And so often the intractable problems that I see are ones between people that divide along religious lines. And it is a struggle to have a dialogue for people who see each other so differently. Choose an example from the Christian community. In the work that my husband and I have tried to do in Northern Ireland, I remember so well holding a large meeting in Belfast, in which we invited Protestant and Catholic leaders. They said that for many of them this is the first time they had ever been in a room together. And as we began to talk (it was awkward at first), but slowly they began to find common ground. The moment that it crystallized for me was when one woman (now I didn't know what tradition she was) said that every time her husband left

the house, she was afraid that he would not return alive. And the women of the other tradition immediately said, “That’s how I feel too.” So part of America’s challenge and obligation in the 21st century is to continue to exemplify religious liberty here at home. To create the necessary framework for the respect for our diversity and to hold precious that space in which we are free to believe or not to believe. And to take that message, not just through our government, but individually the way that so many of you do around the world.

If religious freedom is to thrive in the 21st century, the United States must be a leader in that effort. And there is no group that has been more focused on the issue of religious liberty than the Seventh-day Adventist Church. You and the other faiths represented here today, other denominations that are here today, understand something that is still not accepted — that we can thrive as a community of faith and faiths if we are given the opportunity. If more nations understand that part of America’s strengths, its progress and its success is because we not just have a great free market system, not just a government created by our founders who understood as much about human nature as they did about setting up governments, which is why they put in checks and balances, but because we have always cherished that space between economic activity, the public governmental activity – that space that most of life takes place. The space of family, the space of faith, the space of associations, the space of religion and speech, the space in which we can become and live up to all our God given potential.

I am honored to be with you tonight. And I am grateful for your leadership in the most important undertaking there is – to free the human spirit, and to make sure that the religious liberty we take for granted in our country stays strong, and can be shared with so many millions more around the world. Thank you very much.