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International Coalition for Religious Freedom
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I want to welcome all of you to our second International Conference on Religious Freedom and the New Millennium. I am an attorney with a firm of 500 lawyers in 11 offices in the United States. Also, I am an adjunct professor at George Washington University Law School.

We are trying through the International Coalition for Religious Freedom to bring together lawyers, human rights activists, clergy, persons generally interested in the issue of religious freedom, and those in the media and elsewhere to work for a broad-based coalition to further the issue of religious freedom. Few organizations really focus on that exclusively as a human rights issue. We are not concerned about just one particular denomination. We are concerned about working on the issue of religious freedom all across the globe. We are very grateful for the funding that we have received from individuals and institutions associated with the Unification Church, which, as you can understand, has a concern in this area. In particular we are grateful for the support that we have received from Mr. Dong Moon Joo, the president of the Washington Times Foundation.

Abuses of religious freedom are probably most severe in countries like Sudan, where Christians and animist religious persons are being murdered because of their faith and their children sold into slavery. This is happening as we speak. Tens of thousands of Christians and others in that country have been murdered because of their faith.

We know of the problems in China and in Tibet. At our last meeting, the North American representative of the Dalai Lama spoke movingly about the problems of Tibetan Buddhism and the lack of freedom in China. I know that the Dalai Lama and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were recently in Tokyo speaking about the issue of religious freedom in China and the importance of China opening their doors and coming to grips with this problem.

But while we are concerned about the hard-line communist nations and the fundamentalist Islamic states that deny religious freedom, we are also concerned about the problems in Western industrialized democracies and in the new democracies in eastern Europe, such as Russia. In the latter case, economic development and some measure of political

democratization have occurred, but there continue to be problems with religious freedom. For example, Russia passed legislation that essentially says that a community of faith cannot have rights as a religion unless it was registered under the Brezhnev regime. In other eastern European countries the law states that a religious organization must have 20,000 members before it can be considered a religion. Austria just passed such a law, which states that an organization must have 16,000 members to be considered a religion. This revokes the recognition that had previously been granted to the Mormon Church in Austria.

In France, the National Assembly recently issued a report that named 172 so-called destructive sects or cults. These include the Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and not surprisingly, many Buddhist and Hindu groups originating in Japan and in India that were considered somehow to be destructive and suspect in France. One effect of this is that many people have lost their jobs. Furthermore, legislation has been passed to have educational centers set up across the country to teach people about the dangers of the groups that are on this list

Belgium went one step further. Its Parliament issued a report on 189 "destructive" groups. These included, again, many Buddhist groups that are considered mainstream in Japan and many Hindu groups that are considered mainstream in India. It also included groups like the Young Women's Christian Association and the Assemblies of God, which is a large American Christian denomination.

In Germany, charismatic Christian churches were told they could not register as a religion because they were not considered to be for the public benefit because of their strong evangelical tendencies. The same is true of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Muslim faith, although it has similar levels of membership, does not have the same status as the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish faith communities.

In Japan, the founder of the Unification Church, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, has been denied entry by the government. More than 200 members of the Unification Church in Japan are forcibly kidnapped and "deprogrammed" each year, and the Japanese police refuse to stop this practice or intervene. These practices were outlawed in the United States in the 1980s.

There are also problems in Burma, Thailand, and Singapore. In Singapore, the Jehovah's Witnesses are outlawed.

There are problems all over this globe, and we want to work to resolve some of those issues. This is our second conference. At our first, held in Washington a few weeks ago, we had, among other speakers, Nobel Prize winner Oscar Arias, the former president of Costa Rica. We believe that these gatherings can focus our energies, can help us to communicate and share the information that we need to better strategize and move forward with our agenda of broad religious freedom. Religious toleration is not enough. Our goal is not just that we tolerate each other, that we just allow each other to exist, that we just make some wide statesmanlike decision that we are going to allow others to have their faith. Rather, our goal is to actually celebrate and embrace religious freedom.

In addition to sponsoring these conferences, we publish a newsletter on a regular basis and we have a Web site that is probably the leading one in the world on questions of religious freedom. Our Web site contains reports on the status of religious freedom in every country in the world, up-to-date links to current news articles, as well as links to a variety of sources on human rights, religious freedom, and religion. We are constantly looking for ways to expand our efforts and hope to establish an ongoing presence here in Japan focusing on problems in Asia.

I want to thank you again very much for attending this critically important conference as we prepare to move into the new millennium. We look forward to a culture in which each person can follow his conscience, enjoying the freedom to believe, worship, maintain, or change his faith as he desires. In other words, we look forward to the full implementation of religious freedom as expressed in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Thank you very much again, and I wish you a good conference.