

Three get First Freedom Awards Honorees have made contributions locally, nationally and globally

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By ROBIN FARMER
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Three champions of religious freedom were honored last night as recipients of the 2008 First Freedom Awards on the observance of National Religious Freedom Day.

About 300 people watched as the awards were bestowed by the Council for America's First Freedom during a dinner program at The Jefferson Hotel in Richmond. The council works to increase understanding and respect for religious freedom in diverse communities worldwide through education.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine presented the Virginia First Freedom Award to Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center in Arlington County and director of the center's educational program. Haynes is best known for his work on religious liberty issues in public schools.

"After 22 years on the front lines of the culture wars, here's the good news: First Amendment principles work, when we use them," Haynes said.

"Whatever the controversy, the Bible wars, the December dilemma, the student prayers . . . people in school districts from Ramona, California, to Mustang, Oklahoma, to South Orangetown, New York, have been able to find common ground using the civic framework provided by the First Amendment."

Recipient of the National First Freedom Award was John Witte Jr., the Jonas Robitscher professor of law and director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. Witte is a specialist in legal history, marriage law and religious liberty.

He said all religions must be heard and deliberated in the public square.

"All peaceable public religious services and activities must be given a chance to come forth and compete," Witte said. "Today, so-called 'Christian right' groups have seized on this insight better than most. Their recent rise to prominence in the public square and in the political process should not be met with glib talk of censorship or reflexive incantation of Jefferson's mythical wall of separation.

"The rise of the Christian right should be met with the equally strong rise of the Christian left, of the Christian middle and of various Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other groups who test and contest its premises and policies. That is how a healthy democracy works."

Weather problems prevented Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from personally receiving his 2008 International First Freedom Award. His son, Asher, accepted on his father's behalf.

Finci is president of La Benevolencija, the Jewish cultural, educational and humanitarian society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which provides aid to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless of religion.

The Rev. C. Douglas Smith, executive director of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, said the awards honored the state's historic role as "the birthplace . . . of religious freedom. It's important we celebrate Virginia's role in that."

National Religious Freedom Day marks the anniversary of the date when the General Assembly enacted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The 1786 law first guaranteed religious liberty and became the precursor to the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion.

Contact Robin Farmer at (804) 649-6312 or rfarmer@timesdispatch.com.

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