

A Letter to President George W. Bush

Colleagues,

On Wednesday, the day before Yom Kippur 2001, I sent this e-message to President Bush apropos of national repentance. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

President George W Bush	September 26, 2001
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YOM KIPPUR FOR ALL AMERICANS – CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS TOO!

Dear Mr. President,

1. My email to you last week about national repentance was acknowledged by the White House Autoresponder. "Thank you for emailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him. Unfortunately, because of the large volume of email received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns." If my ideas and concerns have gotten to your desk (granted a very big "if"), they've not yet surfaced in the public messages we've been hearing from you. So I write to you again.
2. The repentance call I proposed—clean contrary to Jerry Falwell's recent words—cited a powerful precedent from almost 500 years ago. As Christian Europe confronted super-terrorist Suleiman (The Magnificent!) in 1529,

Martin Luther urged Europe's leaders to see the two enemies laying siege to Vienna. One Suleiman, the other God. And the connection between the two: Suleiman as "the rod of God's anger," the very language from the prophet Isaiah when Jerusalem was under siege two millennia before.

3. That was indeed a wake-up call. Yes, God as Christian Europe's "enemy!" God finally fed up with Europe's phony Christianity and the Holy Roman Empire's tyranny over other peoples.
4. Two very different enemies call for two very different strategies, of course. Rightful warfare to confront the terrorist enemy, but repentance in confronting the divine one. Most important:, better deal with the Infinite Enemy first, or else the finite enemy will win for sure, since the Infinite One continues as Suleiman's ally.
5. As a committed Christian yourself you know that such a call to repentance in the face of catastrophe comes on good authority. It's central to Jesus' own analysis of disaster. Example: Terrorist Pilate butchers people while they are at worship, a tower at Siloam falls and kills 18 more—all of them "no worse" than anybody else—and Jesus addresses the survivors: "I tell you . . . unless you repent you will all likewise perish." What message FROM GOD do the survivors hear when terror strikes, and others perish? That is THE question for them.
6. Biblical repentance does not mean breast-beating. Both the Hebrew and Greek words mean "turn around—Change your words and actions, a 180-degrees switch." Voices in the secular media in recent days are picking it up. They ask the "Emperor's-clothes" question: Why do so many people hate us? Their answers focus on past words and actions coming from our nation toward many in the world. It's bad stuff that clearly calls for a turn-around—even if God did not.

7. You have been using the presidency as a “bully pulpit,” as did Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican of a century ago. That’s good. In the early aftermath of our own September apocalypse, you commended words of scripture to us. Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me.” And a day or two later the words from St. Paul that even this horror “will not be able to separate us from the love of God.”
8. Good stuff, but From the God-confidence you genuinely commended to us, you had a solid platform (bully pulpit) for calling us all to repentance. That didn’t happen. As far as I’ve heard in the last two weeks, it’s not happening yet. You might have gotten to repentance with the very next words of your Psalm 23 citation: “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” A shepherd’s rod and staff are used to whack the sheep on the butt—I think you Texans call it kicking something—to head them in the right direction. Despite the “ouch,” that’s great comfort. You can trust the shepherd to protect you from your own penchant to self-destruct.
9. Granted, this is all frightfully theological. Especially for the president of a nation committed to separation-of-church-and-state. Yet you are “doing theology” nonetheless these days, and getting away with it!
10. Yes, politically it’s very dicey. “God our enemy” will not get a majority vote. At least, not yet. For two weeks “God Bless America” has been our national anthem. Its unprecedented popularity expresses our people’s prayer for our future. But it also says more. It expresses a conviction of the whole nation about our past: God has ALWAYS been blessing America. So how can there be any talk of God as enemy, any grounds for national repentance? It doesn’t compute. It’s unpatriotic, maybe even treasonous.

Just to speak about God as our critic would already be a major turn-around.

11. Yet—and here’s another if—if God actually IS in enemy-mode outside our gates, repentance is the very best of national policy, wise politics—to preserve America, lest the lesser enemy, the terrorists, win despite the massive response you are now orchestrating. The word from the prophets and from Jesus shake down to this: even if we should win the war you’ve declared on the terrorists—dicey as that’s going to be—we will lose the war with God.
12. So how to do “God-talk” to America today? That’s what bully pulpits are for. Of course, the congregation in front of your “bully pulpit” in 2001 is much more religiously complex than the congregation Teddy Roosevelt preached to in the early 1900s. But that could be an asset. Already you’ve been addressing three major American religious communities: Muslim, Jewish and Christian.
13. Despite the theological differences between these three religious traditions, they all have a common component, a central one, in our need for repentance. I write this on the day before Yom Kippur, the explicit Jewish day for repentance. The Koran calls for repentance. So does Jesus. Your theological counselors can assist in working out the details. Imagine the consequences if on tomorrow’s Yom Kippur, the president of the USA called all those whom he serves to join the Jews in their penitential practice. It might be a stretch to call us to hang a piece of sackcloth next to our flags. But Muslims, Jews, and Christians would see the wisdom.
14. The deeper theology of such inter-religious association relates to a Biblical notion of “God hiding his face from us.” That’s also a common religious experience. And because of its commonality, some voices in today’s world-wide inter-religious dialogue suggest this common turf as

the best place to start. Before debating the salvation proposals of different religions, they say, let's talk about the downside experiences, our pain and suffering, our tragedies and failures, the nitty-gritty common to us all. And then from that common base of our lived experience (Biblically labelled "hidden God") we surely will have solid ground for moving the discussion to the "good news" offered in our various faith communities. But that's another agenda.

15. So, use your bully pulpit to call us to repentance. Your election last fall, unique as it was, now "calls you to the kingdom for such a time as this," a time for penitential reflection. And when you do this, you can count on the repentance-faiths of America's Muslims, Jews, and Christians to give their response: Bully for you!

Sincerely yours,

Edward H. Schroeder

P.S. Should you want some religious music for contexting such a venture, here are three options (two of them brand new) that have been called to my attention.

1. WHEN SUDDEN TERROR TEARS APART

By Carl Daw Jr., Exec. Dir., The Hymn Society of the US & Canada.

[Tune: see info below.]

When sudden terror tears apart
The world we thought was ours,
We find how fragile strength can be,
How limited our powers.

As tower and fortress fall, we watch

With disbelieving stare
And numbly hear the anguished cries
That pierce the ash-filled air.

Yet most of all we are aware
Of emptiness and void:
Of lives cut short, of structures razed,
Of confidence destroyed.

From this abyss of doubt and fear
We grope for words to pray,
And hear our stammering tongues embrace
A timeless Kyrie.

Have mercy, Lord, give strength and peace,
And make our courage great;
Restrain our urge to seek revenge.
To turn our hurt to hate.

Help us to know your steadfast love,
Your presence near as breath;
Rekindle in our hearts the hope
Of life that conquers death.

Tune: C.M. (suggested tunes: BANGOR, DETROIT)
Or C.M.D. (suggested tune: THIRD MODE MELODY)

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2. DEAR GOD, BEHOLD THE CRYING

By Herb Brokering. Tune: O Sacred Head
Dear God, behold the crying, the anger in our eyes,
and danger reappearing as we cannot surmise.
Behold your world is mourning, we bow we bend we kneel.
O hear our grief unspoken and mysteries we feel.

We mold our steel to weapons, you turn them to plow shares.

We plan retaliation, you give us rules to care.

We bury dead remorseful, you raise us from the dead.

May we when finished crying believe the words you said.

Dear acorn in the forest, awake and face the light.

Dear children who are weeping, God holds you through the night.

For when the dark is over, there wakes a morning sun,
and what was dead is rising, and life again begun.

Dear Lord you chose the hillside to say the words we cry.

You know the hurt between us, you know the reason why.

When all our tears are finished and minds again hold still,

surround us with your mercy and lead us with your will.

For all who now go weeping with tears so deep inside,

give them a glimpse of seeing into the other side.

Forgiveness is the power you give us from the tree,

now open dim some beauty ahead for us to see.

And then, this older one—

3. O GOD OF EARTH AND ALTAR

By: G.K. Chesterton [Tune: King's Lynn. (Lutheran Book of Worship #428)]

O God of earth and altar, Bow down and hear our cry,

Our earthly rulers falter, Our people drift and die;

The walls of gold entomb us, The swords of scorn divide,

Take not thy thunder from us, But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, From lies of tongue and pen,

From all the easy speeches That comfort cruel men,

From sale and profanation Of honor, and the sword,

From sleep and from damnation, Deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether The prince and priest and thrall,
Bind all our lives together, Smite us and save us all;
In ire and exultation, Aflame with faith, and free,
Lift up a living nation, A single sword to thee.