

# LOWLY SINNER

PAUL KENGOR

The faith of President George W. Bush is an issue of intense debate. Supporters of a conservative religious stripe admire the man's Christian faith, and some have even expressed a belief that God may have dropped Bush into this current historical moment for a grand purpose — a post-September 11 mission. For every evangelical who proffers such an assertion, there is a liberal Christian or agnostic who begs to differ.



of this administration." That is just a sample of some of the fire Bush has drawn.

A common assertion by critics is that Bush's faith makes him arrogant. They contend that the President self-righteously believes that God called on him to invade Iraq. "The conviction that we might benefit by removing Saddam is not the same as believing that God

wills it — except in George Bush's mind," wrote Garry Wills in a March 30, 2003 op-ed piece in *The New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> His sentiment is typical.

Yet, despite the perceptions of his detractors, the president himself has avoided such self-grandiose claims. I posed the following explosive question to those who work with Bush: "Have you or anyone you know of ever heard President Bush claim that God called on him to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein?" Typical was a May 2004 response I received from a White House source: "That quote does not exist; he [Bush] has never said that."<sup>2</sup> Dan Bartlett, Assistant to the President

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There is no issue where the two sides diverged more sharply than the invasion of Iraq. "President Bush: Your war would violate the teachings of Jesus Christ," declared a December 2002 *New York Times* ad by Religious Leaders for Sensible Priorities, a group of liberal Christians. "The Bush administration's war on Iraq violates every value we hold as people of faith and conscience," added Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit at an anti-war rally organized by liberal Christians in March 2003. He was joined by Dave Robinson of Pax Christi USA, who said: "[We need] to draw the world's attention to the immorality of this war. We can't stand by as men, women, and children die because of the callousness and greed

for Communications, and an old Bush friend, told me the same. "The President actually said," said Bartlett in a June 2004 written statement: "Going into this period, I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will . . . [But] I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God."<sup>3</sup>

These were also Bush's words to reporter Bob Woodward: "I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that . . . [i]n my case I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible. And then, of course, I pray for personal strength and forgiveness."<sup>4</sup> Bush similarly told NBC's Tom Brokaw:

I ask God to help me be a better person. But the decision about war and peace was a decision I made based upon what I thought were the best interests of the American people. I was able to step back from religion, because I have a job to do. And I, on bended knee to the good Lord, asked Him to help me to do my job in a way that's wise.<sup>5</sup>

While the remark to Brokaw conforms to the record, Bush did not step back from religion totally. He said he relied on God for wisdom and strength. His point to Brokaw was that he did not remove Saddam because the Bible instructed him to or because he felt God was prodding him. Critics should be comforted to know that Bush does not believe that God speaks to him in unmistakable language every morning, nor does he flip open the Bible, close his eyes, and land his finger on a passage that decides the latest crucial national security matter before him.

In his 2003 State of the Union speech approaching war in Iraq, the president laid out a lengthy case against Saddam Hussein. He finished with this:

We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence. Yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history. May He guide us now.<sup>6</sup>

Three critical points in those sentences reflect on how faith affects Bush's decision-making: 1) faith provides him confidence; 2)

faith offers him guidance; and 3) faith does *not* mean that he can automatically think he knows all God's ways. There is also a fourth point: God, says Bush, is behind all of life and history. While human beings are instruments of His will, they cannot always know that will ahead of time; Bush has consistently expressed that very human inability. His theology does not count on God for a crystal ball. Ironically, it is *because* of his faith that he does not make statements like: "The Lord has asked me to kill the evil Saddam." The humbling nature of his faith tells him he cannot know such things ahead of time; even if he *senses* such things, he cannot *know* them.

### Humble Faith

Indeed, then, Bush's critics miss the most important and reassuring aspect of his faith: Bush's faith actually makes him humble; it makes him tolerant. In a campaign year as emotional and politically charged as this one, where many Bush opponents not merely disagree with the man but detest him, the claim that Bush is humbled by his faith may fall on deaf ears; nonetheless, it is unquestionably true.

Journalist Joe Klein, a liberal, had several discussions with Bush while he was governor of Texas and considering a presidential run. He said the governor

never displayed the vaguest hint of dogmatism. . . . Quite the contrary: his faith was humble and, well, soft. . . . He used words like love and heart more than any other presidential candidate I've ever seen.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian gospel — which George W. Bush reads literally each morning and has read in its entirety numerous times — says that of all the gifts God gave humanity, the greatest is love. The greatest commandments of the law, said Christ, are to love God and love thy neighbor. Christ essentially said that people will know that Christians are Christians by the love Christians shows.<sup>8</sup> Bush fully subscribes to this love theology.<sup>9</sup> Brian Berry, manager of Bush's first gubernatorial campaign, remembers being struck at how "the guy really *loves*

people. I mean that. He is . . . a handholding kind of guy. He literally will hold your hand while he chats with you." Berry views Bush as "a New Testament kind of Christian — a Sermon on the Mount type. He is not fire and brimstone."<sup>10</sup>

That love-thy-neighbor mentality makes Bush accepting of others. In his acceptance speech at the 2000 Republican convention, Bush said something he would often repeat as president:

I believe in tolerance, not in spite of my faith, but because of it. I believe in a God who calls us not to judge our neighbors, but to love them.<sup>11</sup>

That convention signaled Bush's faith-based acceptance of religious diversity: The invocation one evening was provided by a Mormon — San Francisco 49ers' quarterback Steve Young — who is a direct descendant of Brigham Young. Many Christians consider Mormonism a kind of cult, but Bush gave no such inkling. During the four days of the convention, delegates heard prayers and speeches from clergy representing the Jewish faith, Catholicism, Greek Orthodox, and various Protestant traditions.

### **Tolerance of Other Faiths**

This openness to other faiths has been very evident in Bush's presidency. The pious Protestant has, for instance, embraced Catholics and Jews. He has appointed devout Catholics to key faith-related positions, such as James Towe as director of Bush's coveted Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He has immense respect for Pope John Paul II, whom he has called a "great man" and a "hero of history."<sup>12</sup> In June 2004,

Bush presented the Pope with America's highest honor — the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

In his first year in office, he observed eight separate Jewish events, including Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Hanukkah. (By comparison, he observed only two Christian holidays — Easter and Christmas.) Approaching the end of his first year, on December 10, 2001, for the first time in American history, Bush lit a Hanukkah menorah at the White House residence as a symbol that the White House is "the people's house" and that it belongs to people of all faiths.<sup>13</sup> Bush has had a number of Jewish staffers,

including Ari Fliescher, David Frum, John Bolton, Elliott Abrams, and key war advisers such as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Douglas J. Feith.

Yet, George W. Bush's tolerance of other religious faiths was never on greater display than when it came to his words about Islam after September 11. Despite the perception of many Americans who perceive Islam as inherently hostile, Bush has consistently preached that

Islam is a "religion of peace," whereas Muslim terrorists subscribe to a "faith of hate" completely disconnected from "real" Islam.<sup>14</sup>

This thinking has been rejected and ridiculed by many of Bush's own supporters. Billy Graham's son Franklin described Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion."<sup>15</sup> Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, reportedly labeled Islam's founder, Mohammed, a "demon-possessed pedophile."<sup>16</sup> Pat Robertson referred to Mohammed as "an absolutely wild-eyed fanatic" and "a robber and a brigand." To reach this conclusion, said Robertson,

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[A]ll you have to do is read the writings of Mohammed in the Koran. He urges people to attack the infidels. He urges his followers to kill Christians and Jews. He talks about eradicating all of the Jews.

"You read the Koran," Robertson cajoled,

it says wage war against your enemies. Kill them if you possibly can. And destroy anybody who doesn't agree with you. I mean, it's all laid out in the Koran.

Robertson claimed that Muslim terrorists were not at all distorting Islam but, rather, "they're carrying out Islam." The Taliban in Afghanistan, said Robertson, were simply carrying out fundamental Muslim teaching.<sup>17</sup>

Robertson spoke for not just many Christians or many conservatives but for many people generally, regardless of faith. He did not, however, speak for George W. Bush.

Just six days after September 11, Bush averred: "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."<sup>18</sup> Eight days after the dread event, Bush told a group of reporters: "We don't view this as a war of religion, in any way, shape or form." In November 2001, he called the Koran a "holy" work that "teaches the value and the importance of charity, mercy, and peace."<sup>19</sup> In June 2002, he commended Muslim countries for their "commitments to morality, and learning, and tolerance." He claimed that, "those values are alive in the Islamic world today."<sup>20</sup> Such a statement about tolerance in Muslim countries was an extraordinary thing to hear from a Christian. It is a widely accepted, indisputable fact that nowhere in the world are Christians so routinely and mercilessly persecuted for their faith than in the Muslim nations of the Middle East.

As the first anniversary of September 11 approached, Bush sought to head off any anti-Muslim sentiment. On September 10, 2002, he held a roundtable discussion with Muslim-American leaders at the Afghanistan embassy in Washington, where he told them:

Islam is a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world. It's a faith

that has made brothers and sisters of every race. It's a faith based upon love, not hate.<sup>21</sup>

This is a very brief sample of Bush's praise for Islam.<sup>22</sup> A fair question is whether he has spoken so warmly of Islam in order to heal divisions after September 11, or because he truly believes Islam is a religion of peace. Judging from the extensive volume of remarks he has repeatedly offered, both seem likely.

Beyond words, Bush has hosted Ramadan dinners and regularly meets with Muslim leaders. He has sought to work with Muslim heads of state in rather extraordinary ways.<sup>23</sup> In his most sweeping gesture, in December 2002, he visited the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., where he celebrated Eid al-Fitr — festivities that mark the culmination of Ramadan. The Islamic Center is the oldest mosque in the nation's capital, with a congregation representing Muslims from seventy-five countries. This was the first time ever that a president visited a mosque to mark the end of Ramadan. Before he entered the mosque, the Texan removed his shoes as a sign of respect.

When it came time for Bush to approach the podium, the center's director told him: "your visit today is greatly appreciated." Bush then took a moment to explain Ramadan to non-Muslims before openly hailing American Muslims for their "many contributions" in business, science and law, medicine and education, and other fields. Standing aside six imams under a large bronze chandelier donated by the Egyptian government, he saluted Muslim members of the U.S. Armed Forces and his own administration, who "are serving their fellow Americans with distinction, upholding our nation's ideals of liberty and justice in a world at peace."<sup>24</sup>

Bush later told reporters that the one thing he did after September 11 that was "most important" was visit the Islamic Center. He did so to "send a signal" that the "evil people who hijacked a great religion" should not be used to condemn that religion. "Americans shouldn't hold Islam accountable for the deaths."<sup>25</sup>

Bush has been given due credit for reaching out to Muslims. "Bush has gone to great lengths to reassure them [Muslims] that he admires their religion," reported Howard Fineman.<sup>26</sup> The *New York Times*' Nicholas D. Kristof and Bill Keller admire Bush's distancing himself from the unflattering assessments of Islam by Graham and Robertson. Kristof went further: "Mr. Bush displayed real moral leadership after 9/11 when he praised Islam as a 'religion of peace' and made it clear that his administration would not demonize it."<sup>27</sup> The *Washington Post*'s Jim Hoagland said Bush had ensured no "McCarthyite persecution" of Arab Americans.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Bush's kindness toward Islam and incessant preaching about its peaceful nature may have gone a long way in preventing a backlash of violence against Muslim Americans after September 11. Attacks took place, but they were surprisingly rare. The Bush government did not respond in any way similar to how the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt mistreated Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor. This was the polar opposite of Japanese internment — a profoundly important historical fact.

Bush has spoken so warmly of Islam that a case could be made that he has gone overboard, launching into hyperbole. It is impossible to identify another president or politician in all of U.S. history who has spoken so glowingly of Islam. It was charged after September 11 that mainstream Muslims had not done enough to purge the radicals from their faith and to show the world that Islam was in fact a religion of peace hijacked by extremists. It turns out that George W. Bush did the job for them.

And yet, most remarkable (and unrecognized) about Bush is his inclusiveness of Islam

before September 11. He was the first president ever to mention mosques in his inaugural address. Prior to September 11, the *Presidential Documents* list six Bush references to mosques, five to Islam, and three to Muslims. On March 6, 2001, he had even commemorated a Muslim holy day: Eid al-Adha.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Bush spoke this way prior to his presidency. In his Republican convention address in August 2000, he mentioned mosques, as he did in a March 1999 speech to a Baptist church in Houston. "We're all God's children," said Bush, "and faith supplies what we need to treat each other in a decent and civilized way."<sup>30</sup>

Bush believes that God wants all humans

to be free: "In every human breast, God has implanted a principle which we call love of freedom."<sup>31</sup> He does not exclude Muslims from that principle.

#### **Bush Without Grace**

To better understand how Bush's faith has improved him, one need only look at Bush without faith. A painful example occurred one April 1986 evening when he approached husband and wife journalists Al Hunt

and Judy Woodruff at a Mexican restaurant and cursed out Hunt in front of the couple's four-year-old. "You [expletive] son of a bitch," Hunt remembered Bush saying. "I saw what you wrote. We're not going to forget this." Hunt and Woodruff were embarrassed. Bush, rude and crude, was not. After all, he was drunk. He attacked Hunt because the columnist predicted that Jack Kemp would defeat his father for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination.<sup>32</sup> By his own admission, a reporter's criticism of his father could set him on "the warpath."

On that occasion, to Hunt and Woodruff and their innocent child, Bush acted like a wretch, blind to grace. (It is no coincidence that

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Bush's favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace.") This was before his conversion. This was still the "once-I-was-lost" George W. He was, in his own words, "a lowly sinner."

On a personal-spiritual basis, Bush admits that he remains a lowly sinner in need of constant redemption. He knows his faults: Among other shortcomings, he has a propensity for foul language, forgiveness can be a struggle, and he has a natural tendency to swagger. "We will kick his ass," Bush said privately of Saddam in 2003, just as he said of Osama and Al-Qaeda (behind closed doors) in 2001.<sup>33</sup>

"His faith has tamed him," writes biographer Peter Schweitzer, "but not completely."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, not completely. Brother Bush is a work in progress.

Bush's faith makes him a better person, not a worse one. His detractors have him reversed: Without his faith, Bush is arrogant; his faith tempers his arrogance and moderates him. Equally important, Bush's faith-based tolerance uniquely suits him for leading America in a global war against radical Islamic fundamentalism. He does not hold Islam against Muslims. Quite the contrary, he genuinely seems to respect the Islamic faith, and even seems to perhaps admire it.

Ironically, Bush's main targets in the war on terror have been Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein — few were so religiously intolerant. The true exclusivist, the real religious imperialist, was Osama, who began the battle by unleashing a "holy war" against Christians, Jews, and infidels. He and his minions targeted anyone who was not a Muslim, who was not a member of *their* faith.

Jesus Christ commands George W. Bush to love his neighbor, not to hate and kill him; the current President takes that love commandment seriously, and the more he does so, and the more he seeks to do what Jesus would do, the less his detractors should be concerned about his faith. The lowly sinner's faith humbles him.

## Notes

1. Garry Wills, "With God on His Side," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2003.
2. The source insisted on anonymity. He responded by email on May 11, 2004.
3. Letter to Paul Kengor from Dan Bartlett, The White House, June 2, 2004.
4. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 379.
5. President George W. Bush, "Interview with Tom Brokaw of NBC News," April 24, 2003.
6. President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 28, 2003.
7. Joe Klein, "The Blinding Glare of His Certainty," *Time*, February 18, 2003.
8. A reading of the Bible reveals that love is the foundation of both the Old and New Testaments. (Among these, see: 1 Corinthians 13:13, Luke 10:26, Matthew 22:37-40, and John 13:34-35, 14:15, and 23.) Writing in 1 Corinthians, it is Paul who uses the "gift" language, which was easily an appropriate conclusion based on Christ's own teachings.
9. His theology has been influenced by his own reading of the Bible and probably by Methodism's historical emphasis on ministering to the outcast. On the love theology, also see: President George W. Bush, "Remarks to Employees of Sears Manufacturing Company," Davenport, Iowa, September 16, 2002.
10. Interview with Brian Berry, June 18, 2003.
11. George W. Bush, "Remarks in Acceptance Speech at Republican Convention," Philadelphia, PA, August 3, 2000; and "Bush, other speakers give convention a Methodist presence," United Methodist News Service, August 4, 2000.
12. President George W. Bush, "Remarks to Catholic Leaders," March 23, 2001; President George W. Bush, "Remarks at the Dedication of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center," March 23, 2001; President George W. Bush, "Interview With Foreign Journalists," July 17, 2001.
13. President George W. Bush, "Remarks on Lighting the Hanukkah Menorah," December 10, 2001.
14. President George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President on the Jobs and Growth Plan," Indiana, May 13, 2003.
15. He said this in an interview on NBC. Graham provided a detailed explanation to his statement in an interview on the "Hannity & Colmes Show," Fox News, August 5, 2002.
16. Quoted by Nicholas D. Kristof, "Giving God a Break," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2003. On the

- pedophile charge, it is said that Mohammed late in life as an elderly man married a nine-year-old girl.
17. Robertson interviewed on the "Hannity & Colmes Show," Fox News, September 18, 2002.
  18. President George W. Bush, "Remarks at the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C.," Washington, D.C., September 17, 2001.
  19. President George W. Bush, "Message for Ramadan," November 15, 2001.
  20. President George W. Bush, "President Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," The Rose Garden, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2002.
  21. President George W. Bush, "President George W. Bush Holds Roundtable with Arab and Muslim-American Leaders," Afghanistan Embassy, Washington, D.C., September 10, 2002.
  22. For many more examples, see Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush: A Spiritual Life*.
  23. See: Deborah Sontag, "The Erdogan Experiment," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 2003.
  24. President George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President on Eid Al-Fitr," The Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., December 5, 2002.
  25. President George W. Bush, "Interview with Print Journalists," May 29, 2003.
  26. Howard Fineman, "Bush and God," *Newsweek*, March 10, 2003.
  27. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Giving God a Break," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2003.
  28. Jim Hoagland, "Putting Doubts to Rest," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2001.
  29. President George W. Bush, "Message on the Observance of Eid al-Adha," March 6, 2001.
  30. Governor George W. Bush, "Address to the Second Baptist Church," Houston, Texas, March 7, 1999.
  31. President George W. Bush, "President Bush Speaks at Goree Island in Senegal," Goree Island, Senegal, Africa, July 8, 2003.
  32. Bill Minutaglio, *First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty* (NY: Random House, 1999); and Lois Romano and George Lardner Jr., "Bush's Life-Changing Year," *Washington Post*, July 25, 1999, p. A1.
  33. Of those responsible for 9/11, Bush said, "we're going to kick their asses." See: Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 296; and Peter and Rochelle Schweizer, *The Bushes: Portrait of a Dynasty* (NY: Doubleday, 2004), p. 516.
  34. Discussion with Peter Schweizer, March 29, 2004.