

AMERICAN VALUES, RELIGIOUS VOICES:

100 Days, 100 Letters

“The letters in this remarkable collection, written by religious scholars representing Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions, remind us of fundamental American values sorely threatened today, as our nation is riven by deep socio-political divisions. . . . A clarion call, not only to our leaders in Washington, but to us ‘the people,’ to enact the values that have made our nation a beacon of promise—freedom, justice, hospitality, tolerance, respect, and equal rights for all people. Their call is both timely and urgent.”

— **William Madges**, John J. and Robert E. Beckman Chair, theology department, Xavier University



“This book beautifully demonstrates what a national narrative that includes all of our religious diversity could look like. Every letter is a powerful reminder from each writer’s own unique religious point of view of the sacredness of the American promise. In order to maintain our fidelity to this promise, the contributions of our different religions must become part of the broader American story. This book is an important contribution to that conversation.”

— **Zeenat Rahman**, Director, Inclusive America Project, the Aspen Institute

“In dark times of moral crisis throughout history, it has been the prophetic visionaries of faith who have imagined an elevated world and inspired humankind to create a more enlightened and just reality. This unprecedented multi-faith compilation of fearless truth-telling and unconventional wisdom is not only a testament to the evolved virtues of the modern paradigm of American religious values, its life-affirming dissent and collective innovation of next-level American liberty is a critical model and movement for our age.”

— **Rev. Jennifer Crumpton**, author of *Femmevangelical: The Modern Girl's Guide to the Good News*



“Every citizen interested in the spiritual life of our country will want to have this wonderful book. Considered together, these remarkable letters constitute an inspiring tableau of America’s unique religious diversity, challenging our nation to be true to its moral compass.”

— **Dr. Gary P. Zola**, Executive Director, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives & Edward M. Ackerman Family Distinguished Professor of American Jewish History, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion

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AMERICAN VALUES, RELIGIOUS VOICES



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100 Days, 100 Letters

ANDREA L. WEISS and LISA M. WEINBERGER



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RELIGIOUS VOICES

100 Days, 100 Letters





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IN MEMORY



MAY 19, 1964–MAY 5, 2018

Rabbi Aaron D. Panken, PhD
President
Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion





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RAISING 100 VOICES

By Andrea L. Weiss

On Thursday, November 10, 2016, two days after the election of Donald J. Trump, I walked into class at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in New York City. Scheduled to teach about the biblical concept of “an eye for an eye,” I quickly decided to scrap my lesson plan and instead share with my students the biblical texts I was thinking about on that day. I said to them: “We study Torah so that we can turn to our sacred texts at times like this, when we and those we serve need guidance, comfort, and support.”

That class got me thinking about the role Bible scholars might be able to play at this moment in our nation’s history, especially when many elected officials, like our vice president, publicly claim to bring a strong religious sensibility to their work. Throughout the tumultuous 2016 presidential campaign and in the wake of the election, I watched as many of the core values that had grounded and guided our country in the past were called into question or flagrantly disregarded: values like tolerance, inclusivity, and diversity, just to name a few.

An idea started to percolate: Could 100 scholars of sacred scripture be recruited to write letters articulating foundational American values rooted or reflected in our diverse religious traditions? What if they could send a letter a day to our president, vice president, and other leaders in Washington for the first 100 days of the new administration to remind them—and us—of who we are as a nation and how we should act moving forward?

At the time, I was eager to make progress on a book about metaphors for God in the Bible, and I possessed very few interfaith connections; so I had good reason to let this nascent idea go. Instead, I walked down the street and shared my scheme with my neighbor, Mark S. Smith, the Helena Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. When Mark, a mentor and distinguished Bible scholar, responded encouragingly and offered to help, I decided to explore the idea further.

A few days later, I had a chance to pitch my idea to HUC-JIR’s president, Aaron D. Panken, who offered to fund the project. For Rabbi Panken, this project represented the type of “thought leadership” that was

a pillar of his presidency. He encouraged his faculty to be engaged in key issues of our day and to bring our scholarship to bear on matters of concern in our contemporary world—just what the letter writing campaign aimed to accomplish.

The next week, while attending the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion annual meetings in San Antonio, Texas, I shopped my idea around to as many scholars as possible. In a small notebook, I started collecting what would eventually become a list of 255 potential contributors.

At the same time, on November 16, 2016, I sent an email to my friend Lisa Weinberger, the creative director and founder of Masters Group Design in Philadelphia. Not quite realizing the scope of my request, I described my initial idea and asked: “Would you be willing to lend your design expertise?” Lisa responded right away: “I’m in.”

Lisa and I met a few days after Thanksgiving with Elsie R. Stern, an old summer camp friend and vice president for academic affairs and associate professor of Bible at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Sitting around Lisa’s kitchen table, we came up with the campaign name:

AMERICAN VALUES RELIGIOUS VOICES

100 Days, 100 Letters

We then secured the domain name valuesandvoices.com. That gave us fifty-five days until the inauguration on January 20, 2017, to make this idea happen.

I quickly formed a multifaith advisory committee that included Deirdre Good (then theologian in residence at Trinity Church Wall Street), Herbert Marbury (associate professor of Bible and the ancient Near East at Vanderbilt University Divinity School), Hussein Rashid (founder of islamicate, L3C), Mark Smith, and Elsie Stern. The advisory committee finalized the contours of the project and sent out an initial round of nearly a hundred invitations. Over the course of the next month and a half—from early December until Day 1 of the campaign—we contacted 180 scholars until we finally secured our 100th letter writer.

Within days of our initial meeting, Lisa had created a visual identity. With the help of HUC-JIR rabbinic student interns Hilly Haber and Thalia Halpert Rodis, we established a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, and later on Instagram. Lisa’s creative team—Benjamin Brown, Vicki Gray-Wolfe, Matthew Muhlbaier, and Roni Lagin—joined the effort. They designed and built the website and, over time, created hundreds of visual assets to accompany the letters.

Early on, as the idea for this project took shape, I envisioned gathering photos of the 100 letter writers in a grid, as a way to celebrate the religious and racial diversity that has been a hallmark of our county. That image of 100 scholars is displayed on the homepage of the website (and on page 14), along with a statement that articulates the campaign’s motivation:

Individually, it is hard to feel that one can have an impact on events unfolding around us. Collectively, we have the potential to speak truthfully and powerfully to those making critical decisions about our nation’s future.



THE MECHANICS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Once the initial letters started to arrive in early January 2017, the editing phase began, and the first seven letters were selected for Week 1. Throughout the campaign, as I scheduled the letters a week at a time, I sought to offer a diverse selection of writers each week and also to respond in a timely manner to events as they transpired during the first few months of the Trump administration. Since the campaign began on a Friday—Inauguration Day on January 20, 2017—each Thursday on social media we posted a preview of the coming week’s letter writers that listed each person’s name, academic title, and institutional affiliation.

Day in and day out for fourteen weeks, at 5 a.m. eastern standard time, we electronically disseminated

the day’s letter in a variety of ways. With the help of MailChimp, we emailed the letters to our explicit audience: the president, vice president, members of the 115th Congress, and select members of the Trump administration. At the same time, the letter was uploaded to the website for our implicit audience: the more than two thousand subscribers who received an early morning email with a link to the letter, and the many others who learned about the letters through daily posts on our social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). In addition, each day I mailed two printed and stamped letters, one addressed individually to the president and the other to the vice president.

Each week, we posted a schedule on social media with a preview of the upcoming letter writers.

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
|  | DAY 1 1.20.17 Andrea L. Weiss Associate Professor of Bible, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, New York | DAY 2 1.21.17 John F. Kutsko Executive Director, Society of Biblical Literature; Affiliate Professor of Biblical Studies, Emory University | DAY 3 1.22.17 Eric D. Barreto Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament, Princeton Theological Seminary |
| | DAY 4 1.23.17 Hussein Rashid Founder, islamicate, L3C | DAY 5 1.24.17 Lisa Bowers Assistant Professor of New Testament, Princeton Theological Seminary | DAY 6 1.25.17 Uriah Y. Kim Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs; John Dillenberger Professor of Biblical Studies, Graduate Theological Union |

THE LETTER WRITERS AND THEIR LETTERS

In the invitation sent to potential contributors, the advisory committee asked scholars from different faith communities the following questions: “What issues animate you at this particular moment in our nation’s history? What passages from your religious tradition have you been thinking about in the wake of the election? How does your religious heritage speak to the matters that concern you most? What message—rooted in the texts you study and teach—would you most like to deliver to our national leaders and to a wider interfaith audience?”

We posed those questions to scholars of religion across the country, with the specification that all potential contributors possess a doctoral degree. In Letter 100, Elsie Stern captures the glorious diversity of the individuals who participated in the campaign: “We are men and women, from red states and blue states. We identify as African American, Asian, Latinx, Native American, and white. We are Buddhists, Christians of varied denominations, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs. Some of our families have been in this country since before it was ‘America’; others are immigrants ourselves.”

As contributors with varied religious backgrounds and diverse lived experiences responded in real time to the policies of the Trump administration and to President Trump, certain themes and religious texts gained prominence. Given the hostile attitude toward immigrants and refugees expressed on the campaign trail and reflected in early executive actions, it is no surprise that a sizable percentage of the letters contain scriptural teachings calling for the compassionate care of the vulnerable and a welcoming embrace of the stranger.

Given Trump’s words and actions in the early days of his presidency, it is no surprise that nearly a quarter of the letters offer religious teachings on the topic of leadership. Given the focus of our nation’s founding documents, it is no surprise that the word “justice” appears in almost one-third of the letters, often in conjunction with the word “liberty.” Given the task of articulating a faith-based vision of American values, it is no surprise that many letter writers concentrated on subjects like love, equality, empathy, truth, and tolerance.

When we uploaded the letters onto the website, we tagged them by category in order to allow readers to search the letters by a theme.

| | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| THE AMERICAN DREAM | | COMMON GOOD | |
| TOLERANCE | COMPASSION | COMPROMISE | |
| COURAGE | DEMOCRACY | DIGNITY | WISDOM |
| DIVERSITY | | HOSPITALITY | PLURALISM |
| FREEDOM OF RELIGION | | FREEDOM OF SPEECH | |
| GENEROSITY | THE GOOD SAMARITAN | GRACE | |
| GREATNESS | HAPPINESS | JUSTICE | HOPE |
| EMPATHY | HUMILITY | IMMIGRANTS | HONOR |
| KINDNESS | LEADERSHIP | RESPECT | LOVE |
| MERCY | NEIGHBORS | PEACE | EQUALITY |
| POWER | REFUGEES | LIBERTY | THE ENVIRONMENT |
| THE POOR | THE STRANGER | THE VULNERABLE | |
| COMMUNITY | TRUTH | UNITY | DISSENT |

Scholars drew upon a range of sources to address these topics. From the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), they most frequently cited the oft-repeated command to “not wrong or oppress the stranger” (Exodus 22:20 and elsewhere), as well as the charge to love both your neighbor and the stranger “as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18, 33–34). Numerous contributors quoted the creation story, with a particular focus on women and men being created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–27) and humans being appointed as caretakers of the earth (Genesis 1–2). Authors turning to the New Testament most often referred to Jesus’ teaching about the treatment of “the least of these” in Matthew 25:31–46 and to lessons from the Sermon on the Mount (mainly from Matthew 5). Muslim contributors quoted a combined twenty passages from the Qur’an, with several references to 49:13: “We made you different nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.” Hindu scholars cited several Sanskrit sources, including the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana, while other authors discussed Buddhist teachings, a Sikh prayer, various rabbinic texts, and additional ancient writings. Contributors repeatedly mentioned concepts and phrases from the Declaration of Independence, the Great Seal of the United States, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the Statue of Liberty. In addition, they quoted a range of more contemporary figures, like Mahatma Gandhi, Irving Berlin, Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, Cesar Chavez, and Ronald Reagan. (See the indexes in the back of the book for a list of subjects and sources found in the letters.)

Like the topics covered and the sources utilized, the tone of the letters varies. Some letters offer advice or admonition, while others contain prayers or pleas. Some letters convey a sense of outrage or urgency, while

others provide a modicum of optimism or a forceful reassurance of the enduring wisdom and moral vision preserved in our sacred texts. Many letters ask questions:

“What do we tell our daughters?”

Kimberly Russaw, Letter 12

“Will you be able to discern the wise and prescient voices among the cacophony of advice you receive?”

Corrine Carvalho, Letter 22

“Mr. President, what really is your vision for America?”

Mark S. Smith, Letter 28

“What can we do to create light together?”

Murali Balaji, Letter 36

“What would it mean...to call to mind our own experiences...and to empathize with a new generation of migrants and refugees?”

Judith Plaskow, Letter 44

“As elected officials in whom we have placed our trust, which path will you take to fulfill this higher calling?”

Tazim R. Kassam, Letter 91

.....☆.....

Reflecting on the multiple messages and moods exhibited in the 100 letters, Elsie Stern writes: “Yet, despite this diversity, our letters call attention to the same values: justice, compassion, protection of the vulnerable, hospitality, equal rights, and respect for all

people, regardless of gender, race, religion, or status. Our writers have prayed that you will govern with wisdom and humility, putting the common good above individual concerns. In our diversity, we agree that these are the American values that must guide us as a nation.”

..... “.....

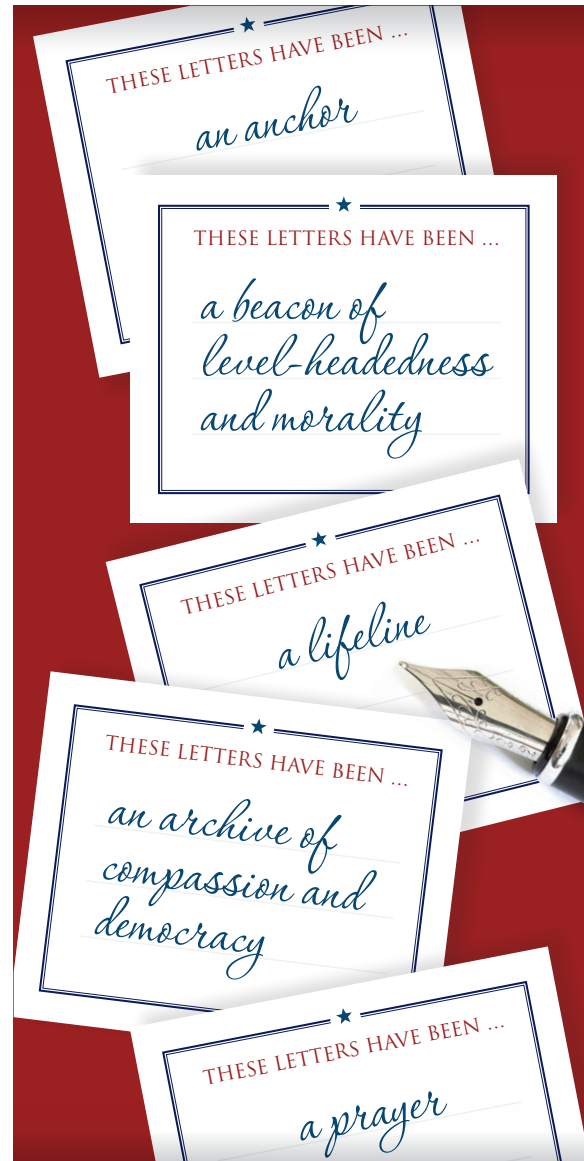
This project aims to contribute constructively to our national discourse, reaffirming who we are as Americans and modeling how we can learn from one another and work together for the common good.

.....

WHAT THE CAMPAIGN ACCOMPLISHED

From the outset, the advisory committee explained to potential contributors what American Values, Religious Voices was attempting to accomplish: “This project aims to contribute constructively to our national discourse, reaffirming who we are as Americans and modeling how we can learn from one another and work together for the common good.”

Feedback we received during the campaign proved that the letters achieved this goal. On Day 20, a follower wrote: “I am loving my daily inspirational letters from voices I am not accustomed to hearing.” A few days later, a contributor relayed a conversation with a member of her church, a Manhattan Democrat who during the campaign had stopped speaking to his brother, a staunch Republican in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The



letters provided a means of reconciliation and, in his own words, “created dialogue and healing.” Another reader described how the letters provided “living waters of sustenance and courage from deep ancient wells.” Others characterized the campaign as an “archive of compassion and democracy” and “a beacon of level-headedness and morality.”

These voices and many more testify to the impact the project had on a wide general audience. But did any of those directly addressed in the letters respond? Although we sent the president and vice president 100 printed and electronic letters, we received no response from the White House. Although we emailed 100 letters to the chiefs of staff and legislative directors serving 441 members of the House of Representatives and 100 members of the Senate (an initial list of 1,023 congressional staffers), we heard from only one individual.

On February 12, 2017, Katherine McGuire, chief of staff for Illinois Republican Congressman Randy Hultgren, sent an email challenging the concluding sentence of Letter 24 by Bryan Massingale. She expressed disappointment in the way the letter about our “house divided” ended by directly addressing the president and holding him responsible for healing the divisions in our nation. McGuire observed that “the conclusion seemed to press for continued divide” instead of “driving home that we—the nation’s people—should do all we can to rise above our current selves and create again that important notion of ‘together.’” In response, Massingale explained in an email that since the president “wields enormous symbolic power . . . the quality of the nation’s public discourse will depend greatly on Mr. Trump’s example and the kind of respect he grants to those who disagree with him.”

More meaningful than the substance of this exchange is the mere fact of its existence, a point Massingale made when he wrote: “If only this kind of dialogue was the norm. We can only hope, pray, and continue to work toward that end.” In a follow-up email, McGuire provided a welcome message of encouragement, especially in the early days of campaign: “Keep the letters coming. People are reading them. They help to make sense of the world we live in today and remind us of the world we all want to live in tomorrow.”

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

This book collects the 100 letters (some slightly edited for publication), arranged in ten sections. Each section begins with a listing of the authors who appear in the letters that follow.

★ *Read the letters sequentially*, as they appeared when the campaign took place from January 20 to April 29, 2017.

★ *Explore the letters by topic or by author* using the list of authors in the table of contents, the American values highlighted on pages 8–11, or the indexes beginning on pg. 162. This will allow you to put the letters and the letter writers in conversation with one another, connecting diverse faith traditions and sacred texts, comparing what different religions have to say about issues that matter, creating dialogues that bring people together around core American and religious values.

More than merely words on paper, these 100 letters can enlighten and inspire us, reaffirming who we are as a nation and guiding how we should act as individuals, one among many.

RELIGIOUS VOICES: DAY 1-10



LETTER 1 | JANUARY 20, 2017

Andrea L. Weiss

Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel
Provost & Associate Professor of Bible,
Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute
of Religion



LETTER 6 | JANUARY 25, 2017

Uriah Y. Kim

Dean and Vice President for Academic
Affairs & John Dillenberger Professor of
Biblical Studies, Graduate Theological
Union



LETTER 2 | JANUARY 21, 2017

John F. Kutsko

Executive Director, Society of Biblical
Literature & Affiliate Professor of Biblical
Studies, Emory University



LETTER 7 | JANUARY 26, 2017

Michael Peppard

Associate Professor of Theology, Curran
Center for American Catholic Studies,
Fordham University



LETTER 3 | JANUARY 22, 2017

Eric D. Barreto

Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of
New Testament, Princeton Theological
Seminary



LETTER 8 | JANUARY 27, 2017

Jean-Pierre Ruiz

Associate Professor of Theology and
Religious Studies, St. John's University



LETTER 4 | JANUARY 23, 2017

Hussein Rashid

Independent Scholar & Founder,
islamicate, L3C



LETTER 9 | JANUARY 28, 2017

Ellen T. Armour

E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter
Associate Professor of Theology,
Vanderbilt University Divinity School



LETTER 5 | JANUARY 24, 2017

Lisa Bowens

Assistant Professor of New Testament,
Princeton Theological Seminary



LETTER 10 | JANUARY 29, 2017

Bill J. Leonard

James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of
Baptist Studies & Professor of Church
History, Wake Forest University



DAY 1, LETTER 1

Andrea L. Weiss

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

At this time of transition in our nation’s history, the words of the Bible call to us with clarity and urgency, reminding us of the core values that have formed the foundation of American society in the past and should guide us now as we begin a new administration.

In the book *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers*, Daniel L. Dreisbach documents the Bible’s profound influence on American politics and culture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Records show that figures like George Washington, Thomas Paine, and John Adams invoked the words of the prophet Micah: “God has told you . . . what is good, and what God requires of you: only to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Explaining the popularity of this frequently quoted verse, Dreisbach writes: “A commonplace belief among the founding generation was that both individual and collective righteousness were prerequisites for divine favor and vital to the success of the American political experiment.” They believed that “a self-governing people must have an internal moral compass that would encourage individual citizens and the broader society to behave in a controlled, disciplined manner.”

The message of Micah 6:8 echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible, teaching us what it means “to do justice and to love mercy.” The book of Exodus commands: “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:20–21). Again and again, the Bible insists that we safeguard the most vulnerable individuals in our midst and treat them with dignity and empathy. The prophets voice this expectation loud and clear, as when Isaiah instructs: “Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourself to justice. Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan. Defend the cause of the widow” (Isaiah 1:16–17).

Still today, in the early twenty-first century, these ancient biblical teachings about justice and mercy should dictate how we act and determine the policies we enact. Together, let us work to preserve and make manifest the values upon which our democracy was founded.

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. . . these ancient biblical teachings about justice and mercy should dictate how we act and determine the policies we enact.

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★ DAY 2, LETTER 2

John F. Kutsko

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

The country was knit together like a quilt by compromise. It was the defining quality of those who composed America’s sacred contract, the Constitution of the United States of America. Compromise is a powerful word—a mark of wisdom, not weakness.

The main ingredient in America’s melting pot is pluralism, and this is possible only through compromise. How else can we find common ground and common good in a country as diverse as the United States? Compromise is the art of great and lasting deals in business, politics, communities, and religion.

The Bible teaches us the virtue of compromise; and that is meaningful in a country with deep beliefs in sacred texts. For example, the first five books of the Old Testament were composed by a community not unlike our own, one facing great challenges and differences. In response, at least four religious parties—twice as many as our two-party system—banded together and wove their stories to form one inspiring narrative. Instead of seeking to beat each other, or to ban the other, they joined to form a more perfect union.

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Compromise is a powerful word—a mark of wisdom, not weakness.

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There is no single Bible. As complex as the country is, as diverse its citizens, so, too, is the Bible. Jews, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Protestants each have different Bibles with different books. And these unique collections include books with very different points of view. The Bible, like democracy, cultivates competing ideas. The Bible teaches that alternative viewpoints coexist in healthy communities. The diversity in each tradition’s Bible models the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Our country’s

motto is *e pluribus unum*, “out of many, one.”

I encourage you to value diversity, to draw from the deep gene pool of America that fuels creativity and imagination, to promote pluralism, to encourage debate, and to lead with the strength of compromise.





★ DAY 3, LETTER 3

Eric D. Barreto

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

At their best, our religious traditions can point us to wisdom in moments of great uncertainty, comfort in times of grief, inspiration to act and speak when we would wish to hide in fear.

At its best, this country has stood for revolutionary ideals:

- The freedom to speak, protest, and worship;
- The transformative belief that all of God’s children are created equal;
- The hope that, as Dr. King showed us, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

It is in this spirit of belief and hope that I write.

At our best, Americans have been salt and light in the world. But, Mr. President, we know that we are not always at our best. Our collective histories are full of grave errors alongside shining examples of good news and grace. We fail. We fall short of our ideals. We harm others. We mistake prosperity for progress. We tend to misname privilege and call it a blessing. That is, we all are liable to sin, and our sinfulness is never just personal. Our sins reverberate in our neighborhoods, our nation, our world.

But Jesus and his church have taught me this good news: the reconciliation and repair of relationships we have broken do not rest merely on our good intentions or even our hard work. Instead, it is God’s grace that transforms the world. That grace infuses our frail efforts toward justice with the power of new, abundant life. Such transformations have happened before in this country: in the movements for women’s suffrage, for the undoing of Jim Crow, for marriage equality.

And so, I would exhort you to lean on that good news, not as a way to “let go and let God,” but as a deep wisdom we all must learn anew every day. Rest on the gift of God’s grace and the courage of prophets and protesters to inspire policymaking that will make a real difference. Let that good news inspire your words, your actions, even your tweets, to reflect what has been best about our country.

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At their best, our religious traditions can point us to wisdom in moments of great uncertainty, comfort in times of grief, inspiration to act and speak when we would wish to hide in fear.

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DAY 4, LETTER 4

Hussein Rashid

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

Muslims have been part of this country since its founding. Since nearly a third of all slaves were Muslim, this country literally was built on the backs of Muslims. We have remained important contributors to American history, serving to defend our nation and contributing culturally to what

it means to be American. Thomas Jefferson’s copy of the Qur’an sits in the Library of Congress as a testament to how important Muslim thought was to the founding of this country.

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The Qur’an argues forcefully for religious freedom (2:256) and encourages people of different faiths to compete with each other in doing good in the world (2:148). The Qur’an also speaks lovingly of Christ’s message (chapter 19); and it repeatedly reminds us that we have obligations to take care of the most vulnerable in our society: to “give away some of [our] wealth, however much [we] cherish it . . . to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars” (2:177).

Imam Ali, the successor to the Prophet Muhammad’s authority over the community, writes a letter to Malik al-Ashtar, the man he appointed as the governor of Egypt (c. 658). This letter is a manifestation of ethical and just leadership, which explains why, 1,400 years later, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan referenced it in connection to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Imam Ali’s letter offers several important lessons for any leader seeking to unite people working for a greater good. Some of the points that may be of greatest importance to you are: All people are of one creation; differences are divinely ordained, so they should not be punished. Forgive, because God is forgiving. Do not act rashly, and always seek multiple courses of action. Focus on justice. Remember the common people over the elites, because they are the ones who are the base of any society. Appoint to the head of your army someone who is slow to anger, quick to forgive, and avoids violence as a solution. Pay attention to those who have no access to you. Always set time aside to think, reflect, and remember God.

The president of the United States of America is responsible for all Americans, with liberty and justice for all.





★ DAY 5, LETTER 5

Lisa Bowens

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

This monumental moment of change in this country’s history necessitates reflection upon scripture in light of our nation’s past, present, and future. At the heart of Christian faith is the belief that the Messiah has come, and that we are called to bear witness to Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection in the midst of a suffering world. How do we do this?

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus announces the two greatest commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:25–37). By juxtaposing these two commandments, Jesus insists that loving God is inextricably linked to loving your neighbor. We display love for God by the treatment of our neighbors, and we can love our neighbors because of our love for God.

After speaking these words Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He responds by telling the story of the good Samaritan who assists the victim of a violent crime. Through this parable, Luke teaches that a neighbor can be someone from a different ethnic group or someone with different beliefs, even someone considered an “outsider.” Christians bear witness to Christ’s advent by treating others—particularly the “other”—with love, compassion, and mercy. Religious texts from other faith traditions espouse similar principles.

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... *loving God is inextricably linked to loving your neighbor.*
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In our nation’s history, America has often ignored Scripture’s voice, as evidenced in the treatment of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. At such junctures, our leaders divided these two commandments, professing to love God but rejecting the call to love one’s neighbor. Yet we also have witnessed moments of divine grace-filled interruptions, when love of both God and neighbor prevailed, such as in the abolitionist and civil rights movements.

If this nation is a Christian nation, as many claim it to be, then we stand once again at the precipice of decision. Will we divorce love of God from love of neighbor, or will we embody both of these commandments in our laws, actions, behavior, and words? The Christ event, the Messiah’s presence, beckons us to do the latter.





★ DAY 6, LETTER 6

Uriah Y. Kim

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

Like millions of immigrants who preceded her, my mother believed that giving up her life in her native country would bring incomparable opportunities to her children in America. She came to the United States in the early 1970s and to this day has not once visited her homeland. I am a son of this woman who believed in the American Dream.

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... *America is great not only because of its power, but more so because of its generosity and compassion.*
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Like my mother, I also believed in the American Dream; but I had my doubts as to whether I would ever be accepted and perceived as an American rather than as a perpetual stranger. It was during such a time of doubt in my youth when President Ronald Reagan shared a letter he received before he left office: “You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey or Japan, but you cannot become a German, a Turk, or a Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the Earth, can come to live

in America and become an American.” You can imagine how relieved and happy I was to know that the president of the United States agreed with the idea that the United States is where foreigners not only can be welcomed but also can become Americans.

In my humble opinion, as someone who follows the teachings of Jesus Christ, America is great not only because of its power, but more so because of its generosity and compassion. Jesus taught that, in the end, nations and peoples will be judged not by what we say or believe, but by what we do for the most vulnerable in the world: the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–46). In fact, Jesus says that when we do not welcome strangers and do not help the least among our communities, we are actually rejecting Jesus.

Millions have benefited from America’s greatness in the past. I pray that as the president of the United States, you will continue to leave America’s door open and care for all those already living in the United States.





DAY 7, LETTER 7

Michael Peppard

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

The first time I saw a census form was as a young man doing genealogical research about my ancestors who fled Ireland during the Great Famine. At the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, when a volunteer showed me an early census from rural Illinois, I discovered what I needed to piece together my family tree. But I was surprised by something else about the census form. *Why did it not record my ancestors' religion?*

The librarian graciously explained why: In the United States, the government does not keep a record of the religious affiliations of private individuals. “It’s a principle of religious freedom,” she said, “and the potential for abuse of such records is too dangerous.”

That Mormon librarian was right—and she would know. Her people were chased violently across the country, from New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and ultimately Utah. Mormons thus champion religious liberty as the core American value. So should we all.

My own religion, Roman Catholicism, does not have an unblemished history on this matter. But it is currently in full-throated support of religious liberty—and better late than never. We Catholics view religious liberty as a bipartisan issue. Like Mormons, Catholics remember well when we were outsiders in America. Hence we take to heart the scriptural teaching: “You shall not mistreat or oppress a stranger, for you once were strangers” (Exodus 22:21).

Today, it is often Muslims who are marginalized in America, even though there need be no conflict between being Muslim and being American. In fact, there were about as many Muslims already on our shores at the founding of our country as there were Catholics. Yet those early American Muslims, brought here first as slaves, do not often appear in our history books.

The story of America’s religious diversity should always be written in our history books, but not in a census or registry. An individual’s religion is not the government’s business.

Mr. President, religious liberty demands that our government never register our fellow citizens by religion, nor allow surveillance on the basis of religious affiliation. To do either of these would be profoundly un-American, violating our sacred founding freedoms of religion and assembly.

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DAY 8, LETTER 8

Jean-Pierre Ruiz

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

Because I am a professor of biblical studies interested in the pervasive influence of the Bible on people’s minds and hearts, I read the sermon delivered by Rev. Robert Jeffress on Inauguration Day with great interest, especially because he made reference to the book of Nehemiah.

As a young man, I was part of a group of religious leaders and grassroots organizers who took our inspiration from the pages of Nehemiah. In the New York neighborhoods of Brownsville and East New York, Nehemiah’s ancient words rang true: “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace” (Nehemiah 2:17). To this, the people of Jerusalem responded, “Let us start

building!” Then “they committed themselves to the common good” (Nehemiah 2:18) and together rebuilt their ruined city. Centuries later, the people of the interfaith community organization East Brooklyn Congregations likewise joined together to build affordable housing, an effort christened the Nehemiah Plan.

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***Together, then, let us
start building—not
walls but bridges, roads,
and communities.***
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Citing Nehemiah, Pastor Jeffress suggested that God smiles on you, Mr. President, and on the building of walls. Yes, God smiles on all of God’s children, both the meek and the mighty. Yes, God calls on all of us to work together in building for the sake of the common good. Yet, as Pope Francis insists: “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.”

President Reagan was the last U.S. president to speak forcefully about walls. Standing before the Brandenburg Gate during a 1987 visit to then-divided Berlin, he declared to Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union: “We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace . . . Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

There is much to be done in our time, the sort of hard work on which God smiles because it is done for the sake of the dignity and the well-being of all God’s creatures. Together, then, let us start building—not walls but bridges, roads, and communities.





DAY 9, LETTER 9

Ellen T. Armour

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

Among the serious challenges confronting us today is a growing global refugee crisis. Fear of terrorism makes some wary of welcoming refugees into the United States. As a Christian theologian, I ask: What would Jesus do?

The answer, I believe, is clear from the Gospel accounts of who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did. Matthew tells us Jesus was born a refugee. His parents fled their hometown to protect him from a cruel king who sought his death (Matthew 2:13–15). Like Moses, another biblical refugee whose own birth narrative finds echoes here, Jesus became a respected religious leader, an itinerant teacher who preached and practiced care for the most vulnerable. Jesus blessed those who extended themselves and treated others with compassion: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

Though other issues divide us, Jesus’ example compels Christians of all stripes to join people of other faiths and become deeply involved in refugee resettlement programs across our country, including in my hometown of Nashville. Many in our area eagerly await the premiere of *All Saints*, a movie based on the true story of All Saints’ Episcopal Church in nearby Smyrna, Tennessee. This small, dying congregation took the risk of welcoming in a group of refugees from Myanmar (Burma)—a decision that not only saved the refugees, but ended up saving the church.

No one is more vulnerable than refugees, those who are forced to give up all that they have and all they know in order to travel—often long distances and at great danger—in search of safety. May we—our elected officials and our fellow citizens alike—follow All Saints’ example and commit ourselves to greeting refugees with love and faith, rather than rejecting them with hate and fear.

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May we . . . commit ourselves to greeting refugees with love and faith, rather than rejecting them with hate and fear.

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★ DAY 10, LETTER 10

Bill J. Leonard

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Members of the Trump Administration and the 115th Congress,

The Baptist tradition that I claim and that claims me began in religious dissent. Thomas Helwys, Baptist founder, resisted all attempts by government or state-privileged religions to coerce individual faith. In *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612), he advised King James I that governments should permit all persons to “choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God . . . when it shall be no excuse for them to say, ‘We were commanded or compelled to be of this religion by the king.’”

In 1636, when the Puritan religious establishment exiled Roger Williams, America’s quintessential dissenter, into the “howling wilderness” of New England, he purchased land from the Narragansets and founded Providence (Rhode Island), the first colony to offer liberty to persons

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of differing religions or no religion at all. Williams called it “a shelter for persons distressed of conscience” and communicated his “purchase to loving friends . . . who desired to take shelter here with me.”

***Dissent remains
perilous.***

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Good citizenship, Williams insisted, was not limited to Christians, but “Jews, Turks [Muslims], or anti-Christians” could “be peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours.” Williams’ legacy continued with eighteenth-century Virginia Baptist John Leland, who

asserted that “Bible Christians and Deists” alike were free to resist “self-named Christians,” those who tyrannized “the consciences of others, under the specious garb of religion and good order.”

Across American history, such religious pluralism is often granted grudgingly, whether exiling Baptists, hanging Quakers, shooting Catholics and Mormons, jailing Jehovah’s Witnesses, or burning churches, mosques, and synagogues along the way. Dissent remains perilous.

I hope that, under your leadership, the U.S. continues to endure as “a shelter for persons distressed of conscience.” Those who prefer otherwise can blame the early Baptists.