

AOK ATHÉE OKIE

- THE NEWSLETTER FOR FREETHINKING OKLAHOMANS -

Volume 2, Issue 10

October 2002

THEOCRACY VS. CIVIL LIBERTIES

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The autumnal equinox has come and gone, and we Oklahomans once again find ourselves facing the looming fall season and its usual concerns, such as extracting leaves from our yards, gutters, and swimming holes while enduring the marathon sneezing sessions which such work is apt to provoke. While such raking of muck is typically messy, tedious and unpleasant, it pales in comparison to that which free-thinking voters must face in the coming election season.

The task before us is to find someone for whom to cast our vote, one who does not expressly desire to tear down the wall that has been wisely erected between the powers of government and the individual's right to absolute freedom of conscience. I am sorry to say that the outlook is none too bright come this November.

The front runner in the gubernatorial election is Congressman Steve Largent, who claims on his campaign website that "family issues, along with school prayer and an anti-abortion stance," are at the top of his agenda. Considering that voluntary student prayers have never been prohibited in public schools, it would stand to reason that Largent favors the sort of prayers in which a captive audience of students are told to bow their heads in prayer to the school administrator's deity of choice. This conclusion is bolstered by Largent's outspoken support of prayers voiced at public school events, such as football games, and his unwavering dedication to the U.S. government's most conspicuously religious ritual, the annual National Day of Prayer. It seems clear that this candidate is heaven-bent on making second class citizens of those few of us who will not bend our knees in supplication to a figment of the public imagination.

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One might suppose that the outsider in the governor's race might take a kinder approach to those who do not share his religious views, but this is unfortunately not the case. Gary Richardson has posted on his campaign website the revolting notion that we should follow "...black and white clearly written laws of God...against murder, sodomy and all other clearly described sexual perversions and witchcraft..." If we were to hold an intolerance competition among these candidates for governor, I would be at a loss whether to cast my vote for Mr. Largent or Mr. Richardson – it is unlikely I would vote for either of them in any other contest.

Turning now to the not-so-hotly disputed race for Lt. Governor, the incumbent Mary Fallin has earned a name for herself by endorsing popular Christian ministries such as Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and evangelist performer Carman, who have fought unapologetically against the principle of church/state separation, "If you want to see kids live right...start handing out the word of God in schools." Is this message part of Fallin's vision for our state? God save us!

In the running for Attorney General we have Denise Bode, who has stated that "As someone who holds two law degrees, I know better than most that we need to re-emphasize the basis for all laws, the Ten Commandments." Did Ms. Bode's keen legal eye miss the Mosaic law that recommends *death* for all who fail to live up to the first commandment by failing to worship the Hebrew deity?

Finally, in the U.S. Congress, we Oklahomans have recently enjoyed the dubious distinction of being one of the very few states in Union to receive 100% approval ratings from the Christian Coalition for each and every Congressman we have elected into office. In 2002, we will have the opportunity to return four of them to Capitol Hill: Representatives Sullivan, Istook, and Lucas, and Senator Inhofe. I would recommend we forbear.

Selections from James Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance*

We the subscribers, citizens of the said Commonwealth, having taken into serious consideration, a Bill printed by order of the last Session of General Assembly, entitled "A Bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion," and conceiving that the same if finally armed with the sanctions of a law, will be a dangerous abuse of power, are bound as faithful members of a free State to remonstrate against it, and to declare the reasons by which we are determined. We remonstrate against the said Bill,

1. Because we hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, "that religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence." The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men. We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance. True it is, that no other rule exists, by which any question which may divide a Society, can be ultimately determined, but the will of the majority; but it is also true that the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority.

2. Because Religion be exempt from the authority of the Society at large, still less can it be subject to that of the Legislative Body. The latter are but the creatures and vicegerents of the former. Their jurisdiction is both derivative and limited: it is limited with regard to the coordinate departments, more necessarily is it limited with regard to the constituents. The preservation of a free Government requires not merely, that the metes and bounds which separate each department of power be invariably maintained; but more especially that neither of them be suffered to overleap the great Barrier which defends the rights of the people. The Rulers who are guilty of such an encroachment, exceed the commission from which they derive their authority, and are Tyrants. The People who submit to it are governed by laws made neither by themselves nor by an authority derived from them, and are slaves.

3. Because it is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties. We hold this prudent jealousy to be the first duty of Citizens, and one of the noblest characteristics of the late Revolution. The free men of America did not wait till usurped power had strengthened itself by exercise, and entangled the question in precedents. They saw all the consequences in the principle, and they avoided the consequences by denying the principle. We revere this lesson too much soon to forget it. Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? that the same

authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?

4. Because the Bill violates the equality which ought to be the basis of every law, and which is more indispensable, in proportion as the validity or expediency of any law is more liable to be impeached. If "all men are by nature equally free and independent," all men are to be considered as entering into Society on equal conditions; as relinquishing no more, and therefore retaining no less, one than another, of their natural rights. Above all are they to be considered as retaining an "equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of Conscience." Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, not against man: To God, therefore, not to man, must an account of it be rendered. As the Bill violates equality by subjecting some to peculiar burdens, so it violates the same principle, by granting to others peculiar exemptions.

5. Because the Bill implies either that the Civil Magistrate is a competent Judge of Religious Truth; or that he may employ Religion as an engine of Civil policy. The first is an arrogant pretension falsified by the contradictory opinions of Rulers in all ages, and throughout the world: the second an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation.

6. Because the establishment proposed by the Bill is not requisite for the support of the Christian Religion. To say that it is, is a contradiction to the Christian Religion itself, for every page of it disavows a dependence on the powers of this world: it is a contradiction to fact; for it is known that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them, and not only during the period of miraculous aid, but long after it had been left to its own evidence and the ordinary care of Providence. Nay, it is a contradiction in terms; for a Religion not invented by human policy, must have pre-existed and been supported, before it was established by human policy. It is moreover to weaken in those who profess this Religion a pious confidence in its innate excellence and the patronage of its Author; and to foster in those who still reject it, a suspicion that its friends are too conscious of its fallacies to trust it to its own merits.

7. Because experience witnesseth that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution. Enquire of the Teachers of Christianity for the ages in which it appeared in its greatest luster; those of every sect, point to the ages prior to its incorporation with Civil policy. Propose a restoration of this primitive State in which its Teachers depended on the

voluntary rewards of their flocks, many of them predict its downfall. On which Side ought their testimony to have greatest weight, when for or when against their interest?

8. Because the establishment in question is not necessary for the support of Civil Government. If it be urged as necessary for the support of Civil Government only as it is a means of supporting Religion, and it be not necessary for the latter purpose, it cannot be necessary for the former. If Religion be not within the cognizance of Civil Government how can its legal establishment be necessary to Civil Government? What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on Civil Society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the Civil authority; in many instances they have been seen upholding the thrones of political tyranny: in no instance have they been seen the guardians of the liberties of the people. Rulers who wished to subvert the public liberty, may have found an established Clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just Government instituted to secure & perpetuate it needs them not. Such a Government will be best supported by protecting every Citizen in the enjoyment of his Religion with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property; by neither invading the equal rights of any Sect, nor suffering any Sect to invade those of another.

9. Because the proposed establishment is a departure from the generous policy, which, offering an Asylum to the persecuted and oppressed of every Nation and Religion, promised a luster to our country, and an accession to the number of its citizens. What a melancholy mark is the Bill of sudden degeneracy? Instead of holding forth an Asylum to the persecuted, it is itself a signal of persecution. It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority. Distant as it may be in its present form from the Inquisition, it differs from it only in degree. The one is the first step, the other the last in the career of intolerance. The magnanimous sufferer under this cruel scourge in foreign Regions, must view the Bill as a Beacon on our Coast, warning him to seek some other haven, where liberty and philanthropy in their due extent, may offer a more certain repose from his Troubles.

11. Because it will destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects. Torrents of blood have been split in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy. Every relaxation of narrow and rigorous policy, wherever it has been tried, has been found to assuage the disease. The American Theatre has exhibited proofs that equal and complete liberty, if it does not wholly eradicate it, sufficiently destroys its malignant influence on the health and prosperity of the State. If with the salutary effects of this system under our own eyes, we begin to contract the bounds of Religious freedom, we know no name that will too severely reproach our folly. At least let warning be taken at the first fruits of the threatened innovation. The very appearance of the Bill has transformed "that Christian forbearance, love and charity," which of late mutually prevailed, into animosities

and jealousies, which may not soon be appeased. What mischiefs may not be dreaded, should this enemy to the public quiet be armed with the force of a law?

13. Because attempts to enforce by legal sanctions, acts obnoxious to go great a proportion of Citizens, tend to enervate the laws in general, and to slacken the bands of Society. If it be difficult to execute any law which is not generally deemed necessary or salutary, what must be the case, where it is deemed invalid and dangerous? And what may be the effect of so striking an example of impotency in the Government, on its general authority?

14. Because a measure of such singular magnitude and delicacy ought not to be imposed, without the clearest evidence that it is called for by a majority of citizens, and no satisfactory method is yet proposed by which the voice of the majority in this case may be determined, or its influence secured. The people of the respective counties are indeed requested to signify their opinion respecting the adoption of the Bill to the next Session of Assembly." But the representatives or of the Counties will be that of the people. Our hope is that neither of the former will, after due consideration, espouse the dangerous principle of the Bill. Should the event disappoint us, it will still leave us in full confidence, that a fair appeal to the latter will reverse the sentence against our liberties.

15. Because finally, "the equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his Religion according to the dictates of conscience" is held by the same tenure with all our other rights. If we recur to its origin, it is equally the gift of nature; if we weigh its importance, it cannot be less dear to us; if we consult the "Declaration of those rights which pertain to the good people of Virginia, as the basis and foundation of Government," it is enumerated with equal solemnity, or rather studied emphasis. Either the, we must say, that the Will of the Legislature is the only measure of their authority; and that in the plenitude of this authority, they may sweep away all our fundamental rights; or, that they are bound to leave this particular right untouched and sacred: Either we must say, that they may control the freedom of the press, may abolish the Trial by Jury, may swallow up the Executive and Judiciary Powers of the State; nay that they may despoil us of our very right of suffrage, and erect themselves into an independent and hereditary Assembly or, we must say, that they have no authority to enact into the law the Bill under consideration. We the Subscribers say, that the General Assembly of this Commonwealth have no such authority: And that no effort may be omitted on our part against so dangerous an usurpation, we oppose to it, this remonstrance; earnestly praying, as we are in duty bound, that the Supreme Lawgiver of the Universe, by illuminating those to whom it is addressed, may on the one hand, turn their Councils from every act which would affront his holy prerogative, or violate the trust committed to them: and on the other, guide them into every measure which may be worthy of his blessing, may rebound to their own praise, and may establish more firmly the liberties, the prosperity and the happiness of the Commonwealth.

James Madison
June 20, 1785

WEARING CLOAK OF RELIGION FOR POLITICAL GAIN

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These days, it's easy for a certain old song to come to mind while going through the city streets : "Signs, signs, everywhere there's signs--- blocking up the scenery, breaking up my mind." That's because as usual, the local candidates have been plastering their names along the major thoroughfares and intersections.

We'll also be seeing more and more of the commercials on TV as election time draws near, where they'll fork out the biggest part of their contributions to try to convince the public that they're the right man for the job. Oh, some of them will take the opportunity to try to tell where they stand on certain issues and what their main concerns are, such as better education, lower taxes or whatever, but quite a few aim to use that limited time slot to try to project a squeaky clean image of their being good Christians, concerned with family values and proper morals.

"Do people really buy that stuff?" I often ask myself when seeing a commercial of that type. I usually feel a bit repulsed by sensing the phoniness of it and how people are so quick to cloak themselves with holiness to hoodwink others into thinking that they're virtuous and can do no wrong and are greatly concerned for others, making them more deserving of your vote and better qualified to be a leader among society. To put it bluntly, I just see it as a cheap shot.

But it's nothing new. I've seen it all my life and it isn't all that startling. Something I was surprised to hear about though was the newly proposed legislation a few weeks ago that would allow churches to officially endorse their own candidate and support him through church funds. Frankly, that sounded a bit scary. I couldn't hardly believe that such a blatant infringement of our separation of church and state laws would have ever come up as an official proposal in the first place. I suppose though that the fact that it did is a good indication that the Religious Right is certainly right there, eager to have even more influential power in determining how we should live and how this country should be ran. I dread imagining what it might be like if such legislation were to be passed and churches were allowed free reign to actively participate in the

political scene, as if their clout isn't powerful enough as it is.

It seems that everyone holds the notion that religion should be a very personal thing. After all, when it comes to determining how our universe is structured, how can it be anything else than a mere guessing game of sorts? No one should be forced to believe any one particular thing, simply because there is no definite proof for any one particular thing, not even the collected guesswork of what man has written himself throughout the centuries throughout different parts of the world. Yet what we see in practice is that if someone rejects belief in unproved supernatural claims altogether, they are rejected by others who choose to believe in whatever faith that offers them the most comfort. It's as if you're free to believe in whatever god you choose, as long as you believe in one, and the closer your beliefs are to mine, the better the person you are.

So prevalent is this attitude that a recent poll indicated that the majority of American citizens would never vote for an atheist to be president, even if that atheist happened to be the brightest, most compassionate and most skilled leader around. To me, that indicates that people are highly likely to let their emotions and deep seated religious prejudices affect their reasoning capabilities, even to the point of determining the highly serious matter of what is best for their country.

The notion that faith in a god is linked to all things 'good' in life has always been so highly promoted, that it's assumed that those who do not believe must surely be associated with all things evil. Surely this is a childish way of looking at things, but it is popular.

Our country has managed to eliminate a lot of narrow minded thinking and prejudices toward those who makes up it's citizenry, such as eventually allowing women the right to an education and right to vote, blacks, gays and other minorities being thought of as human and deserving equal rights, etc. ...but as it is there remains a strong bigotry by the religious majority toward nonbelievers. Our society has a long way to go before reaching the level of maturity required to judge a person by who they are rather than whether or not they have belief in the supernatural.

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