

# **ATHÉE OKIE**

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## **SYMBOLISM, SLAVERY AND THE DIVINE LAW** [barJesus@OklahomaAtheists.org](mailto:barJesus@OklahomaAtheists.org)

Recent political stirrings have brought the question of Oklahoma's (mixed) Confederate heritage to the fore, as Edmond's State Representative Wayne Pettigrew has proposed legislation to fly the Cherokee Braves battle flag at the Oklahoma State Capitol.

By their very nature, national flags convey no formal meaning beyond symbolically signifying their respective nations. As a result, they are not apt tools with which to impart historical knowledge, but rather honorific devices with which we pay homage both to the nations they represent and the principles for which they stand.

Bearing this in mind, it behooves us to consider which specific moral principles we honor by hoisting a Confederate flag (or any other flag) into an official place of honor at the seat of our State government, where the citizens and legislators of Oklahoma may salute it as they pass, and where they cannot but help to notice it proudly waving.

As Rep. Pettigrew has repeatedly stated that he put forth his legal initiative for the sake of historical accuracy, it would seem appropriate for us to go directly to the relevant primary sources rather than relying on the second-hand interpretations of professional historians.

On February 2nd, 1861, not long after the inauguration of the Republican party's first president, our neighbors immediately to the south proclaimed their intention to leave the United States in what they called "A declaration

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of the causes which impel the State of Texas to secede from the Federal Union." The full text of this document may be found online:

<http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ref/abouttx/secession/>

In this document, the secessionist Texans proclaim their intention to continue "holding, maintaining and protecting the institution known as negro slavery — the servitude of the African to the white race within her limits — a relation that had existed from the first settlement of her wilderness by the white race," and condemn the federal government for its alleged attempts at "destroying the institutions of Texas and her sister slave-holding States."

The Texans go on to make their racist position painfully clear, denouncing the "debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color — a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of the Divine Law" and furthermore claiming that "the African race...were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race, and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable," and that "the servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator." (continued on back page)

# THE DIVINE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY

OUR BIBLICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL HERITAGE – [leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org](mailto:leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org)

At the very outset, Holy Writ establishes itself firmly in the camp of the slaveholder in the ethical battle over the institution of slavery. When Noah realizes that his son Ham has seen him naked and in a drunken stupor, he cursed his grandson Canaan and all of Canaan's descendants (Ham himself goes unpunished). Genesis chapter 9 depicts Noah's fulmination, "May Canaan be the slave of Shem!"

Christian leaders invoked this passage to justify the perpetual enslavement of Africans, assumed to be the descendants of Canaan carrying "the Curse of Ham." The humble God-fearing slave-owner, it was held, was dutifully implementing God's ineffable and perfect will.

The Judeo-Christian deity held the abominable practice of owning another human being in such high esteem that he enshrined it in the so-called 'Ten Commandments,' ordering his followers to respect the institution of human slavery just as they do other recognized forms of property, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's." (Exodus 20:17)

In the five books of Moses, Yahweh provides many specific instructions on the proper implementation of the institution of slavery. Exodus 21:1-11 provides extensive instructions on the treatment of Hebrew slaves and the proper way for a man to sell his daughter into slavery (either as a worker or a wife) while Leviticus 25:44-46 instructs on the purchase and inheritance of gentile slaves, "You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance."

In Biblical times, warfare provided boundless opportunities for slave acquisition. Yahweh instructs the ruthless Israelites to slay the men of any community they invade and take the women and children as slaves in Deuteronomy 20:13-14, "And when the Lord thy God hath delivered [a city] into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself..."

Not to be upstaged by the Pentateuch, the gospel writers paint a disgraceful portrait of Jesus vis-à-vis slavery, an institution integral to life in Palestine against which Jesus utters not a single word! In fact, he allows that debtors (and their families) may be sold as slaves, "Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt." (Matt. 18:25)

Likewise the epistles of the New Testament enjoin slaves to act with complete subservience to their masters, even if their masters are cruel and unjust:

"Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh." – 1st Peter 2:18 (NIV)

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." – Ephesians 6:5 (NIV)

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord." – Colossians 3:22 (NIV)

"Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them..." – Titus 2:9-10 (NIV)

"All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them." – 1 Timothy 6:1-2 (NIV)

The biblical position on slavery is clear enough, but what of the history of the Christian church? Manichean Christians, adherents of the third century Persian heretic Mani, incited slaves of the Roman Empire to revolt. In response, the Christian Council of Gangra issued a statement in support of slavery: "If anyone, on the pretext of religion, teaches another man's slave to despise his master and to withdraw from his service, and not serve his master with good will and all respect, let him be anathema." The Catholic Church adopted this resolution as part of its canon law; this barbaric pronouncement was widely quoted as an authoritative pronouncement down the centuries.

In 595 Pope Gregory dispatched a priest to Britain to purchase Pagan boys to work as slaves on church estates. Five years later Pope Gregory I wrote, in Pastoral Rule: "Slaves should be told...not [to] despise their masters and recognize that they are only slaves."

In 1454 Pope Nicholas V issued *Dum Diversas*, granting to the kings of Spain and Portugal the right to reduce any "Saracens [Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers" to perpetual slavery.

In 1537 Pope Paul III reaffirmed which type of persons could be enslaved: "hostile non-Christians, captured in just wars." In 1548 he confirmed that any individual has the right to buy, sell or own slaves, and that runaway slaves were to be returned to their owners for punishment.

Pope Urban VIII, in 1629, Pope Innocent X, in 1645, and Pope Alexander VII were all personally involved in the purchase of Muslim slaves.

In the late 17th century the Roman Catholic theologian Leander wrote the following:

*It is certainly a matter of faith that this sort of slavery in which a man serves his master as his slave, is altogether lawful. This is proved from Holy Scripture....It is also proved from reason for it is not unreasonable that just as things which are captured in a just war pass into the power and ownership of the victors, so persons captured in war pass into the ownership of the captors.... All theologians are unanimous on this.*

In the 18th century the Roman Catholic Church's *Sacred Congregation of the Index* placed many anti-slavery tracts on their Index of Forbidden Books.

Reacting to the passage of the thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, the Holy Office of the Vatican issued a statement in 1866 in support of slavery:

*Slavery itself...is not at all contrary to the natural and divine law....The purchaser [of the slave] should carefully examine whether the slave who is put up for sale has been justly or unjustly deprived of his liberty, and that the vendor should do nothing which might endanger the life, virtue, or Catholic faith of the slave.*

In 1888 the Roman Catholic Church at long last reversed its reprehensible stance on slavery "from the affirmation to the condemnation of..." That same year, Brazil abolished slavery, making it the last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so.

In as dishonest a document as one could hope to find issuing forth from a pontiff, Pope Leo XIII penned a cynical letter to the Brazilian Bishops; in blatant disregard of church's historical record, he wrote with shameless flourish:

*From the beginning, almost nothing was more venerated in the Catholic Church...that the fact that she looked to see a slavery eased and abolished....Many of our predecessors...made every effort to ensure that the institution of slavery should be abolished where it existed and that its roots should not revive where it had been destroyed.*

Protestant support of slavery was equally infamous, for example, in the pious statements of support by American spiritual and political leaders prior to and throughout the Civil War.

It is clear, then, that the church has historically stood steadfastly opposed the abolition of slavery; and that organized religion has played an instrumental role in the promotion of the institution. Anyone wishing to credit religious piety with being the driving force behind the abolition of slavery ought to take a second look at the record.

# SYMBOLISM, SLAVERY AND THE DIVINE LAW

(continued from front page)

It should be clear from these statements that the Texans so greatly valued the institution of racial enslavement as to make it their primary cause of seceding from the Union. Bearing in mind, then, those Native Americans of Oklahoma who chose to fought with the South were most closely allied to the State of Texas, it should be clear now what moral values we honor when we hoist and salute the Cherokee Braves' (or any other) Confederate banner.

In doing so, we pay tribute first and foremost the notion that "Divine Law" and "the revealed will of the Almighty Creator" have instituted the subjugation of one race by another. This morally repugnant notion is popularized throughout both Scripture and church history, and was quite current in the moral reasoning of the Southern secessionists:

*"[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts."*  
— Jefferson Davis

*"There is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting slavery, but many regulating it. It is not then, we conclude, immoral."*— Rev. Alexander Campbell

*"The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example."* — Rev. R. Furman, D.D., Baptist, of South Carolina

*"The doom of Ham has been branded on the form and features of his African descendants. The hand of fate has united his color and destiny. Man cannot separate what God hath joined."* — Senator James Henry Hammond

*"When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty*

*conversed, with whose names he emphatically connects his own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of 'perfect, upright, fearing God and eschewing evil' —that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy? — Rabbi M.J. Raphall*

The reasoning of these scholars is irrefutably valid: If one believes the Bible, there is no moral case to be made against slavery. What then are freedom-loving Oklahomans to do? We must learn to go outside of religious dogma to construct our ethics. A good first step in this process might be to treat the Bible with the same skepticism and critical thought that one would any other ancient myth.

## **Events Calendar, Feb '03**

### **Feb 5<sup>th</sup> – Movie night (TBD)**

Please check our [website](#) for details.

### **Feb 9<sup>th</sup> – Freethought book club**

Please join us at 7pm at [Barnes & Noble](#) (6100 N. May) to discuss Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

### **Feb 18<sup>th</sup> – Atheists meet-up**

See <http://atheists.meetup.com> for details and location.

### **Feb 28<sup>th</sup> – [Galileo Bar & Grill](#)**

Monthly dining out. Food, folks, & fun.

## **Oklahoma Atheists Contact Info**

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