

# AOK | ATHÉE OKIE

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## OKLAHOMANS RALLY FOR FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

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**May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2004** – I would not have believed it had I not witnessed it with my own eyes and ears. On the south capitol steps in Oklahoma City, a sizable group of Oklahomans from nearly every major faith tradition (including at least half a dozen folks who stood firmly outside of *any* faith tradition) all came together at the state capitol in order to celebrate religious liberty and freedom of conscience for everyone, regardless of their beliefs.

Meanwhile, a far more sizable group celebrated at a very different rally inside the capitol building. Instead of religious leaders from various backgrounds, this rally featured strictly Christian politicians and officials from various levels of government, including Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallin, State Senator Bruce Price, county sheriff John Whetsel, a fire captain of a local city, and several officers of the U.S. Air Force, including a prominent leader from the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center.

Instead of promoting religious diversity and tolerance, the rally inside the capitol was limited

exclusively to a particular sect that openly promotes a message of religious intolerance, as in the words of National Day of Prayer speaker Anthony Jordan, “It is astonishing that any group of Baptists would join in prayer with...those who do not call upon the true and living God.” Mr. Jordan goes on to make the exclusive nature of the National Day of Prayer quite explicit, characterizing it as “a group of evangelical Christians who desires (sic) to pray to the Heavenly Father in the powerful name of Jesus!”



**Atheist Matt McNeil addresses the crowd**

A final difference between the rally held indoors and the one held outside is that the former event enjoyed considerable official support, as symbolized both by their location inside the rotunda, the state seal on their podium, the Tinker AFB color guard, and the official rank of over half of their speakers. Meanwhile, the outside rally neither requested nor received any help from the State of Oklahoma. Indeed, they were not even issued a permit to convene until after being denied their initial application and thereafter involving the ACLU.

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# TALKING TO THE DINNERWARE

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Talking to one's dinner plate is a strange and seemingly senseless practice. It is, however, a cornerstone of superstitions practiced throughout the world. In the Bible, the Gospels in particular, there is no satisfactory explanation of exactly what prayer is, how it works or why it's a good idea. It is, though, a consistent theme throughout scripture and we find numerous examples of people, including the mythical Jesus, praying and praising prayer. To this end, prayer seems to be a formal acknowledgment of, and almost a dialogue with, a god. God can, apparently, be persuaded, commissioned, argued with and questioned through prayer. Personally, I spent 15 years praying my heart out and never heard so much as a peep in return. I now have the sinking knowledge that I spent all that time merely talking to myself.

Prayer is, essentially, a form of meditation. We are given a focus, in this case Yahweh, and encouraged to vent and medicate all the demons and conflicts of the day. In this respect prayer is a useful and functional way of cleaning out the closet, expressing fears and needs, and being honest about the most intimate details of one's personal life. Prayer can serve as therapy for those who have neither the means nor the will to pursue help. It can calm and quite scattered thoughts and reassure the lonely and the hopeless. In fact, prayer can be shown to have many redeeming qualities, though in the end we must conclude that it is illusory – a cognitive masturbation and in the real world, nothing fails like prayer.

Epicures may have put it best when he noted that *"If god listened to the prayers of men, all men would quickly have perished; for they are forever praying for evil against one another."* Men pray that 2 and 2 will not equal 4, that death will not come to the dying and that minds will be changed from above. With zeal they leap at each coincidence as proof of divine intervention and marvel at the wisdom and patience of unanswered wishes. With prayer the mystified drown themselves in fantasy as though they were in fact conversing with a great, bearded sky god atop the snow capped mountains of paradise.

We are told to listen to our hearts to hear God's answer, yet the Bible plainly states 'for who can understand the heart, it is deceitful above all things'. You hear what you want to hear and fall victim to your own desires and fears. But it would often seem that the more nonsensical and even fanatical the practice, the more appealing it becomes. This is evident in the rituals of the three fastest growing sects today: **Mormonism** (praying for the dead), **Pentecostalism** (praying like a rabid baby) and fundamentalist **Islam** (chanting like Rainman). In a similar way, the evil empire of Catholicism tells it's ensnared exactly what words to pray as well as when, where and how often to pray them... numbing the weakened spirits of the duped into total submission.

We pray to pretend that we are not alone, that death is not the end and to imagine some means of higher order and influence... we are, after all, only human. To seek these comforts is quite natural. But to champion and cling to this image of an all knowing god who still needs our prayer requests and praise is frankly tragic, and ultimately rather frightening. The barbed hooks of superstition and fear are buried deep and grown over in our collective consciousness. Removing them is proving more painful and precarious than we might have imagined.



**INTERFAITH RALLY AT THE CAPITOL**  
(continued from front page)

For those unfamiliar with the history of these events, the involvement of freethinking Okies in the National Day of Prayer (NDP) began three years ago, when four of us had the gall and the guts to stand across from the rally at the capitol holding a huge banner emblazoned with the slogan “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” in letters over a foot high.

Despite the message carried on the signage, when asked about our motivations for protesting a group of evangelical Christians rallying on the capitol steps, most of us focused not on the inefficacy of prayer but on the inappropriate politicization of what ought to be an act of private devotion. As one protester asked, “Are these politicians or priests?”

This sort of response led the planners of the protest to refocus their efforts on church/state separation and freedom from religion the following year, during which Okie atheists and agnostics staged what was quite possibly the largest protest of an NDP event ever. The overarching message of this event was “Democracy Not Theocracy” and it was put together in support of the “National Day of Reason” concept pioneered by the friendly secular humanists from the [American Humanist Association](#). Both unbelievers and people of minority faiths came together to protest the Religious Reich’s radical agenda.

Just as the message broadened from the pointlessness of prayer to a protest of theocracy from 2002 to 2003, so also was the underlying theme broadened from 2003 to 2004, as this year’s rally focused on freedom of religion rather than freedom from it. While the event’s organizers never compromised the principle of an unbreachable wall of separation between church and state, they refocused their efforts on staging, instead of a protest, a rally which honored freedom of conscience and religious expression for people of all faiths and none.

One can only speculate as to what sort of events might be planned for next year, but I fully expect another broadening (and perhaps softening) of the original message that the government ought to get its filthy hands and filthy lucre out of religion, a business which is surely corrupt enough without the untoward influence of politicians and their ilk.

**May 2004 “AOK” Calendar**

**May 18<sup>th</sup> – Atheists meetup – 8:00 pm**

Please vote for your favorite location at  
<http://atheists.meetup.com>

**May 22<sup>nd</sup> – Agnostics meetup – 1:00 pm**

Please vote for your favorite location at  
<http://agnostic.meetup.com>

**May 28<sup>th</sup> – Galileo’s Bar & Grill – 7:06 pm**

Join us for food, fellowship, & fun!



Visit <http://www.CafePress.com/AOK1>  
(or AOK2, AOK3, etc. and so forth...)

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