

Atheists' slavery billboard raises tempers in Pa.

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March 14, 2012

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) The billboard is down, but the issue's not gone.

A billboard erected in one of the city's most racially diverse neighborhoods featured an African slave with the biblical quote, "Slaves, obey your masters." It lasted less than a day before someone tore it down.

Now, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission is investigating and is meeting with both the atheists who sponsored it as well as leaders of the NAACP who found it offensive and racially charged.

The atheists behind the sign said they were trying to draw attention to the state House's recent designation of 2012 as "The Year of the Bible" -- an action by lawmakers that the atheists have called offensive.

But there were concerns that erecting such a billboard is playing with fire.

"If this had been Detroit, there would have been a riot," said Aaron Selvey of Harrisburg, who visited the billboard site last Wednesday (March 7), the day after the sign was put up and later torn down.

"We don't want things to escalate into violence or community tension, so we try to address situations like that right away," added Shannon Powers, spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. "We would not recommend tearing down because it could lead to escalation. It hasn't, and we're tremendously thankful for that."

The billboard was quickly replaced with an ad for the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra.

Ernest Perce V, the Pennsylvania state director of American Atheists, said he won't press charges against whoever damaged the billboard he designed, and said he, too, is a victim after receiving death threats.

"We hope people can see just a little bit of discrimination we get," said Perce, who offended local Muslims last year when he dressed as a "Zombie Muhammad" in a Halloween parade.

Perce and the atheist sponsors of the billboard said they are dismayed that people were offended by the image instead of what he called injustices in the Bible and legislators naming 2012 "The Year of the Bible."

Perce said he will proceed with a 25-billboard statewide campaign against the Bible and the legislation.

"We ask that you turn your anger toward the (state) House of Representatives," he said, adding that his group does not support or condone slavery while the Bible, which he called "evil," does.

Brian Fields, president of the Pennsylvania Nonbelievers, understands the image was provocative.

"I want to say that I'm truly sorry that many people have misunderstood this billboard. It was never our intention to use race as our message itself," Fields said.

"I don't know if that would have had the impact, the same meaning if it wasn't tied into something visceral. The picture shows the consequences of the statement that the Bible makes."

Andrew Rebuck, general manager of the Lemar Advertising office in Lemoyne, Pa., said his firm will review all images from the atheists before posting any new billboards.

"We don't endorse the message," he said. "That is not my intent to have the community upset."

Stanley Lawson, president of the Greater Harrisburg Branch of the NAACP, said his group didn't advocate taking the sign down, "but, boy, was I pleased it was done."

"It caused a lot of hurt and a lot of pain in the community. I've gotten more phone calls about this than I have about any issues in the past three or four years. It wasn't just elderly people, it was young people, across the board."

Selvey, the man who visited the billboard site and made the comparison to Detroit, called the billboard a hit to his soul.

"That image, that was my ancestors. That represents their struggle and all the pain they went through," he said. "I don't think a lot of people understood how offensive that is. Schoolchildren will just see that black face and the words. They don't understand the context."