

Bloomberg, faith groups face off over 9/11 prayers

by [David Gibson](#)

September 6, 2011

NEW YORK (RNS) Convincing the famously stubborn Mayor Michael Bloomberg to change his mind could require a minor miracle, but critics hope enough pressure will convince Bloomberg to allow clergy to speak Sunday at ceremonies to mark the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

Citing previous practice, Bloomberg has said the focus of the Ground Zero ceremonies will be on victims and their families, and religious representatives will not have an official role.

"The ceremony was designed in coordination with 9/11 families with a mixture of readings that are spiritual, historical and personal in nature," Evelyn Erskine, a City Hall spokeswoman, told CNN.

"It has been widely supported for the past 10 years and rather than have disagreements over which religious leaders participate, we would like to keep the focus of our commemoration ceremony on the family members of those who died."

As soon as the clergy ban was first reported by The Wall Street Journal, protests came in fast and hot -- mostly from religious conservatives who saw the issue as a classic case of liberal overreach.

Bloomberg's decision "demonstrates the mindless secularist prejudice of the political establishment on our nation's Eastern Seaboard," said Richard Land, the Southern Baptists' public policy director. Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy, said the mayor is "ignoring most Americans and most New Yorkers by pretending religion is unimportant, even when remembering mass slaughter and heroic sacrifice."

Michael Angley at the blog Big Government went the furthest, accusing Bloomberg of launching a "de facto jihad" on religion.

Rep. J. Randy Forbes, a Virginia Republican and co-chairman of the Congressional Prayer Caucus, also wrote to Bloomberg asking him to reverse his decision. Jay Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice called Bloomberg's decision "deeply offensive" and touted a petition to convince the mayor to change course.

The critics, however, face an uphill battle for a number of reasons. For one, Bloomberg is not one to second-guess himself, and he tends to get what he wants. When term limits dictated he couldn't serve a third term as mayor, Bloomberg convinced the City Council to rewrite the law.

Bloomberg's stubbornness can also come across as principled determination, such as his impassioned but civil defense of religious freedom when he championed Muslims' right to build an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero.

Moreover, the mayor rejected the advice of secular critics and defended the inclusion of a cross made of girders from the fallen towers in the new 9/11 Memorial.

Bloomberg can also make a strong argument for consistency. Clergy have never been part of annual 9/11 observances at Ground Zero, though family members have read spiritual or religious messages, and there have always been religious commemorations around the event, as there will be on Sunday.

"Everybody will do exactly the same thing," Bloomberg has said, noting the attendance on Sunday of former President George W. Bush and President Obama. "Nobody's going to give a political speech. This is much too solemn an event."

Another problem for those who want to alter the program is that victims' families who worked with City Hall to plan this year's memorial have been conspicuously absent from demanding that clergy be included. "Frankly, if the families are OK with the ceremony, what right does

anyone else have to tell them how to honor their loved ones?" the editors of USA Today wrote on Tuesday (Sept. 6).

The pressure on Bloomberg only seems to confirm his argument that opening this year's commemoration to clergy would also open another debate over which clergy to include, and would end up diminishing rather than elevating the religious tone of the day.

On the other hand, it may be too late.

Terry Jones, the Florida pastor who prompted international outrage by threatening to burn copies of the Quran last Sept. 11, has said he plans to show up at Ground Zero on Sunday at the same time as the services there to address "issues concerning Islam."