

A banner weekend for civil religion

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg is planning ceremonies for the 9/11 anniversary without the participation of clergy. Jay Sekulow *et al.* think this is [an attack on religion](#). Jim Wallis *et al.* are criticizing both sides of this debate and also calling for less criticism of others, or [something like that](#).

Variations on this headline are all over: "[Bloomberg bans clergy from 9/11 ceremony but Ground Zero mosque OK](#)." A lot of observers see this as an ironic or hypocritical inconsistency on the mayor's part. It isn't: religious freedom and a secular civil arena are two sides of the same coin. Thanks largely to this principle, Americans enjoy what's arguably the most robustly and diversely religious landscape in the world--at least when we're not too busy screaming about how we don't like the way this shakes out in a particular instance.

Meanwhile in Washington, the main 9/11 anniversary event planned for the National Cathedral [has been moved to the Kennedy Center](#) following damage to the cathedral by the earthquake and a subsequent crane collapse. Cathedral Dean Samuel T. Lloyd III said that while safety concerns require the move, "at the same time we will not let obstacles put in our way stop us from fulfilling our mission as the spiritual home for the nation."

A separate interfaith prayer vigil--now moved from the cathedral to a large Jewish congregation in DC--includes as Christian representatives Dean Lloyd and Episcopal Bishop of Washington John Chane. In response to Southern Baptist leader Frank Page's criticism about the lack of evangelical participation, cathedral communications director Richard Weinberg [said this](#): "The Cathedral itself is an Episcopal church and it stands to reason that our own clergy serve as Christian representatives."

The whole to-do points to the rather bizarre double role the National Cathedral plays in American life. The symbolic home of the nation's civil religion--ceremonial,

inclusive, nonsectarian--is also the place people in DC and suburban Maryland go if they want to, say, convert to Episcopalianism, as my wife did a few years ago. Then as always, my experience with the cathedral and its staff was quite positive. It's a magnificent church; I was sad to hear of the damages it sustained. And it's certainly as good a choice as any other single church or synagogue or mosque for an interfaith prayer vigil.

But for the day's main event--the secular ceremony headlined by President Obama--the Kennedy Center's a better fit. If our civil religion were less tangled up with *actual* religion, the event would have been planned there from the start.