

On "mere ceremonial deism"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Wendy Kaminer [argues](#) that while atheists have a right to be [up in arms](#) about the World Trade Center cross, in other cases they'd do well to pick their battles:

This

is the challenge for the Freedom from Religion Foundation and other irreligious advocates of secular government: accept or resign yourself to a little ceremonial deism, partly for the sake of focusing on the important distinction between it and ceremonial sectarianism. And when challenging arguable, official sectarianism, like the Trade Center cross, accept or resign yourself to the increasing foolishness and futility of "offended observer" claims.

While Kaminer's strategic point may be right, I don't buy her distinction between harmful "official sectarianism" and "mere ceremonial deism, like the vapid, non-sectarian references to God that decorate our currency and pepper presidential speeches." The word she wants for the latter category is "theism," not "deism." More importantly, I don't think it's benign.

When a state leader invokes God in this country--even while studiously avoiding giving God a specific name--he or she might not give explicit, quotable offense to Jews and Muslims, but the speech patterns tend to be Christian ones thinly veiled. What's more, not all theists are monotheists--and not all people of faith identify themselves as theists of any kind. From where these folks are sitting, Kaminer's "mere ceremonial" references to God might sound awfully sectarian.

Kaminer's post is about legal strategy for atheists; the interests of people of faith are outside its scope. Still, her argument implies a familiar and unhelpful binary: there are people who think it's just lovely every time the president ends a speech with, "And may God bless America," and then there are atheists for whom this is just irritating noise.

But there are also people of faith who find the language of a singular God whom one asks for things to be totally foreign to their sense of the divine. And then there are those of us who are monotheists but are also offended by least-common-denominator ceremonial monotheism in service of nationalism--not in spite of but because of the vapid, decorative qualities that Kaminer names.

When the narrative is theocrats vs. atheists, the focus is on how invoking the former's God might offend the latter and/or infringe on their rights--a legitimate and serious concern. But such invocations also offend my understanding of God.