A tale of two simultaneously religious and civil institutions

By Steve Thorngate
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The National Cathedral's going to start doing same-sex weddings! Here's what prominent conservative blogger Allahpundit has to say:

> [The cathedral is] nominally Episcopal but I've always thought of it as the beating heart of ceremonial deism, so no surprise that it would shift as the wider public does.
>
> Say this for [Dean Gary Hall], too: He makes no bones about his political intentions. Although if you're head of the National Cathedral and reaching out to press a hot button, why bother doing that? Why pretend it's a purely religious decision when it's not?

Allahpundit is obviously right about the ceremonial deism part. And I'll be the first to admit that this strange American habit is bad for church and state alike.

But it's absurd to suggest that the National Cathedral is only "nominally Episcopal." It's the seat of the Bishop of Washington, who leads a large diocese. It's the seat of the presiding bishop as well. A whole lot of people worship there each week, at services that would be hard to mistake for blandly nondenominational. (Also: my wife became an Episcopalian there, in a move that seems to have taken.)

Nor is the cathedral's complex identity an accident of history. It's not like the feds or the District government had this nice building but couldn't pay the heating bills anymore, so the diocese stepped up. It's also not like someone was planning a presidential funeral one day and said you know, he wasn't Episcopalian or even particularly religious, but that big church up on Wisconsin is awfully pretty.

No, the construction of the cathedral was a joint effort between the Episcopalians and civil authorities. It's an institution that has long had both a sectarian function and a secular one.

You know, like marriage.

Every so often someone floats the idea that the best path out of the culture warring over same-sex marriage is to deal directly with the singular way the institution of marriage defies the American tradition of separation of church and state. Some pastors have stopped performing weddings, instead offering blessings to couples, gay or straight, and leaving the marrying to the civil authorities. Conversely, some people have called for civil unions available to all couples, gay or straight, with the government no longer making any official use of the word "marriage." The goal is roughly the same: break apart the tangle of claims on the word "marriage" in order to deal separately with the real issues, both legal and religious, underneath. The difference is who gets to keep the word.

In the past I've found a lot to like in these arguments. Equality under the law is important. So is religious freedom (the actual kind, not the euphemism-for-opposition-to-contraception kind). And so is the separation of church and state. Words? Maybe not. Let's do this!

Except that we never, ever will. Because marriage isn't just another word. It's a word that's incredibly important to a lot of people—including many who have long been unjustly excluded from its public meaning. And in terms of lived reality, it's artificial to speak separately of two kinds of marriage (contra Allahpundit's criticism of Hall for speaking politically about religious marriage). Whether or not religious and civil marriage *should* have much to do with each other, clearly they do.

So more and more I'm convinced by those who see marriage's complex identity—even though it's super weird philosophically, even if it has slowed the progress of civil marriage equality—as an asset for social change. Yes, many pro-LGBT churches are still prevented by law from performing same-sex weddings. But meanwhile, churches in places where same-sex marriage *is* legal have the opportunity to use their authority over religious marriage to help change hearts and minds on civil marriage as well.

And what church is better situated to do this than the National Cathedral? For better or for worse, it and marriage are perhaps the two American institutions most wrapped up in both religion and the state. So it's fitting to see them sharing headlines.

[Elsewhere, Wendell Berry supports same-sex marriage, to the chagrin of some admirers. More surprisingly, so does Steve Chalke.]