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Illuminating Exclusion: Constructions of National Identity in the Washington National Cathedral's Stained Glass Windows

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Illuminating Exclusion: Constructions of National Identity in the Washington National Cathedral's Stained Glass Windows

**A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University**

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and Renée Crown University Honors**

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Honors Capstone Project in Art History

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Abstract

The Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. offers itself as a national monument and spiritual center for the American people. Thousands of tourists and worshipers visit the Cathedral every year to admire its Neo-Gothic style architecture, stained glass windows, hand-carved sculpture and the general splendor of the massive medieval-inspired structure. I argue that the imagery and iconography of this ornamentation presents American national identity as white and Christian, an ideal that is cultivated through the exclusion and domination of minority racial groups and alternative belief systems in the Cathedral's decorative program, through the stained glass windows.

In order to shed light on the ideological underpinning of the Cathedral's decorative program, I carefully analyze three of the Cathedral's most historically provocative and beautiful windows: the *Religious Freedom in Maryland* window, the *Servants of God* window, and the three stained glass windows of the War Memorial Chapel (*Sacrifice for Freedom*, *Freedom I*, and *Freedom II*). The contemporary construction of the Cathedral allowed for careful documentation of all aspects of the building. Archival research of these documents, as well as a comprehensive study of related theories yields insights into the creative process, iconographic decisions, and the intended messages of many of the windows housed in the national monument. My analysis discusses the historical, social and visual elements of the window designs that complicate the message of inclusivity constantly reiterated in texts generated by the National Cathedral.

Analysis of the imagery of the stained glass windows suggests a particularly exclusive and idealized notion of American national identity. The iconography and specific depictions of concepts, people, and ideas imply the superiority or dominate role of Anglo heritage and Christianity in the U.S. These implications are particularly clear when illuminated by a closer inspection of the discrepancy between American history as it is imagined in the Cathedral's decorative program and as is told by scholars. Christian symbolism, ideology and history construct and control the representations of U.S. history and cultural narrative depicted throughout the edifice. With the use of selective historical memory, the Cathedral sponsors a message of Anglo dominance through a national mythology that belittles and essentially negates the historical tradition of non-white American citizens. In addition, the very existence of a "national" cathedral challenges and even erases boundaries separating the bodies of Church and State, and the Cathedral's encouragement and support of a codependent relationship between the two entities.

My study of the Washington National Cathedral is one of the first to critically analyze the ideological program of the windows in terms of its cultural impact within our society. Through the conscious recognition of cultivated cultural hierarchy, particularly within a national monument, we can better understand the obstacles of tolerance necessary for social change.

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