

# Washington National Cathedral as the Main Spiritual Landmark of America

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## Abstract

Washington National Cathedral, located in Washington, D.C., is one of the major landmarks of the United States. Formally, it belongs to Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States. Informally, it is the spiritual center of the nation.

The article discusses a number of factors contributing to this status of the Cathedral. Most of the Founding Fathers of the US were Episcopalians, as well as Episcopalians were the US presidents who played key role in the nation's political history (George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, George Bush, Sr.).

Episcopalian Church belongs to the Anglican community of Protestant churches. This branch of Christianity combines different doctrines of Protestantism, being divided into High Church, Broad Church, and Low Church. With teaching and appearance, High Church borders with Catholicism, whereas Low Church is close to Congregationalism. Thus, Episcopal Church encompasses the whole spectrum of Christianity represented in North America, being acceptable to the widest parts of society.

Built in Neo-Gothic style, located between Chesapeake to the South, the historical citadel of Anglicans and Catholics, and New England in the North, the stronghold of Puritans, Washington National Cathedral symbolizes the harmony and interrelationship between different spiritual doctrines, one of the facets shaping the worldview of society of the United States of America.

**Keywords:** Episcopal, landmark, spiritual, Washington National Cathedral

## Introduction

In 2007, the American Institute of Architects conducted the survey, which should reveal the top popular structures of American Architecture. With the Empire State Building ranking the first, and the White House the second, the third honorable place was given to the Washington National Cathedral, located in the Washington, D.C. (Clark, 2007).

The official name of the Cathedral is "Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the City and Diocese of Washington". This Cathedral belongs to the so-called Episcopal Church of the United States. Our task is to reveal why this very cathedral most precisely reflects the religious heritage of the United States, based on the history of religion, America, and its reference to the culture of Anglo-Saxon West.

When Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the famous architect of French origin, was designing Washington D.C., he specially allocated a portion of land in 1792 "for a great church for national purposes". Although, the original site was changed afterwards, L'Enfant's idea about the great national church did

not fade away and was kept in mind. However, the whole century should pass before the official permission for construction would be issued in 1893, and more than a century would pass before the start of actual construction in 1907. The fact that the idea lived unaccomplished for so long, but was finally realized just exactly as it had been conceived, only affirms the special importance of the shrine for the culture of the nation.

## Basic Arguments

Let us remember that the religious affiliation of prominent U.S. political leaders, the presidents, was not homogeneous. With this regard, let us remember just a few famous names:

1<sup>st</sup> President: George Washington (1789-1797) – Episcopalian

2<sup>nd</sup> President: John Adams (1797-1801) – Unitarian (former Congregationalist)

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3<sup>rd</sup> President: Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) – Deist (former Episcopalian)

4<sup>th</sup> President: James Madison (1809-1817) – Episcopalian

5<sup>th</sup> President: James Monroe (1817-1825) – Episcopalian

16<sup>th</sup> President: Abraham Lincoln (1860-1865) – no affiliation (allegedly Deist)

26<sup>th</sup> President: Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) – Dutch Reformed

32<sup>nd</sup> President: Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933-1945) – Episcopalian

40<sup>th</sup> President: Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) – Presbyterian

41<sup>st</sup> President: George Bush (father) - (1989-1993) – Episcopalian (Religious Affiliation of U.S. Presidents, 2016).

Although the US presidents were of various religious affiliations, the largest share of them, with each religious denomination taken individually, falls on the Episcopal Church (11 of them). It is notable that not only the majority of the first presidents, being the Founding Fathers of the nation, were Episcopalian, but also other presidents, who played the key roles in the US political history (except for Abraham Lincoln), such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, or George Bush, Sr., were Episcopalian as well.

The majority of the Founding Fathers, beginning from George Washington, were Episcopalian. That is why, even one century later, the honor for owning the cathedral for nation-wide purposes was granted to the Episcopal Church of the United States (United States Secretary of State, 1893).

However, the religious affiliation of the Founding Fathers is not the only factor, contributing to the “national” status of the Cathedral. There are other important reasons, lying in the specificity of religious heritage of American culture, which we will discuss.

The Anglo-American Protestantism was born and nurtured within the fold of Anglican Church. It was the Anglican Church which gave birth to literally all major religious (Protestant) denominations found in the British Islands as well as most of those found in the North America. From the very beginning, the Anglican Church became the cradle of thinking, which varied and ranged from the utmost conservative to the utmost liberal. Everyone nowadays is aware of such Protestant denominations as Methodism or Baptism, but not many are aware, probably, that these religious doctrines were conceived in the fold of the Anglican Church.

At first sight, it may seem incongruous. Indeed, Anglicanism was in some sense the step backward from the principles proclaimed by the Reformation in Europe, namely: rejection of Episcopalianism; denial of salvation through deeds; refusal of participation in luxuriant rituals; worshipping of the sacraments carried out by the clergy. In this sense, Anglicanism was different both from Lutheranism as well as Cal-

vinism, both of the latter stressing the salvation only through fate, and Calvinism going even further – the division of the believers into predestined to be salvaged, and predestined to perish. Some scholars of religious studies even nowadays consider Anglicanism as some intermediary religious form, located between Catholicism and Protestantism, reckoning Anglicanism as some “third” (in Western Christian tradition) direction of Christianity (Kueng, 1995). And they have the grounds of thinking so. Anglicanism rejected Roman Pope, but it preserved the Episcopal hierarchical structure with the King and the Archbishop at the top. Anglicanism condemned the luxury of Roman Catholicism, but it preserved beautiful and attractive rituals (in colonial times, some visitors of the American Anglican Church compared being in it with presence in real paradise as opposed to the strict and dry earthly atmosphere prevalent in more diehard Protestant churches) (Crawford, 2001). Anglicanism abstained from purely Catholic worshipping of the cult of the Holy Virgin, but it preserved the whole range of venerated saints, thus actually maintaining the cult. Finally, Anglicanism got rid of the yoke of Roman Catholicism, but it itself became the oppressor, not tolerating other forms of religion.

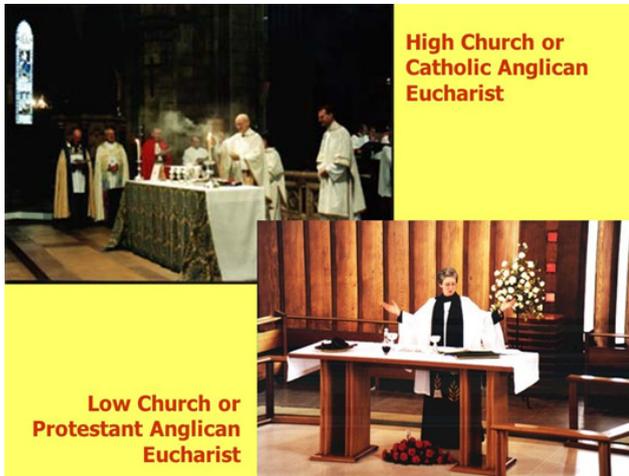
It is true, Anglicanism may not seem what we may consider as typical Protestantism. However, this conclusion is just only at the first glance. Exactly because of this ambiguous nature of the Anglican Church, its walls should become the cradle of the blooming of the branches of Protestantism, the scales and quantity of which had previously been unimaginable in the continental Europe. If in Germany, Switzerland, and Netherlands Protestantism took its peculiar, however stable, “national” forms (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Zwinglianism), then in Britain Anglicanism was to give birth to unprecedented number of Protestant branches, which would flourish first in Britain, and, later, in North America.

American Episcopal Church belongs to the community of Anglican churches. It confesses the same doctrine and worships with the same Book of Common Prayer, accepted in the Anglican Church. Essentially, it is Anglican Church, albeit with a slightly different title. Therefore, the American Episcopal Church contains all those characteristics, which are present in the Anglican Church, and its inner nature correlates fully with its elder sister on the British Isles.

The most striking fact regarding the Anglican/Episcopal Church is that it is not homogeneous. In fact, the Church reflects the whole spectrum of religious attitudes found in Western Europe, from the main creeds of Catholicism to the utmost beliefs of Protestant churches. Let us clarify what has just been said.

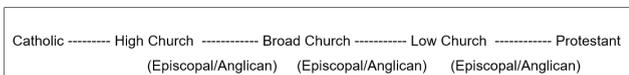
As the Anglican Church was being formed, two distinctive poles outlined within this original form of English Protestantism. One of those, strongly attracted by Catholic tradition, became known as the High Church, with its obsession with the role of the clergy and predominance of rich, luxuriant rituals. Indeed, it owes much to Catholicism, as it became renowned as Anglicanism bordering with the traditions and appearances of the Roman faith. Now, another pole of the Anglican/Episcopal Church, while adhering to the formal creeds of the Church, strongly disapproved any informal affiliations with Catholicism. It condemned the glorification of

the bishops, veneration of saints, and obsession with rich rituals associated with the sacraments. This branch of Anglicanism became known as the Low Church. It was exactly in this fold of the Church, which gave birth to Puritanism – the direction in Anglo-American Protestantism striving to purify Anglo-American Protestantism from its Catholic rudiments. It was this direction, which would eventually produce even those groups, which would totally separate from the Anglican Church, forming the denominations of Separatists/Pilgrims, Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, and numerous others.



High Church or Catholic Anglican Eucharist. Low Church or Protestant Anglican Eucharist, 2016.

Thus, the High Church and the Low Church represent the two poles of the philosophy of religious order in Anglo-American world: aristocratic and democratic. These are two philosophies of social/religious order formed not even in British, but also American society (let us not forget that not only most of the Founding Fathers were Episcopalians, but one of the leading post-revolutionary political parties – the Federalists – supported the state, which would be governed by the aristocratic ruling class of proprietors). However, there is even the third branch of Anglicanism/Episcopalism, which is located in between the High and Low Churches. That is the Broad Church. This Church has sought compromise between the aristocratic and democratic approaches towards the religious and social organization of the nation. The *Broad Church* is an ideal type of the Anglican/Episcopal Church. Following the given ideas, let us present a chart reflecting the position of main churches represented in England/America:



Thus, as we can see from the chart, the Episcopal Church kind of unites the opposing religious doctrines found in North American continent. It serves as a mediator, as an

intermediary link between for long time antagonistic religious traditions, and joins them together, serves as “liaison”, “cultivates peace and harmony between them”.

#### Anglican Episcopal Church

- Broke from Rome, rejecting its aristocratic spirit;
- However, it broke from the mainstream European Protestantism as well, now rejecting its plebeian spirit on the other hand;
- Still, it maintained and incorporated the aristocratic spirit in the form of the High Church; at the same time, it maintained and incorporated the plebeian spirit through the Low Church; and, finally, it synthesized these approaches in its ideal type – the Broad Church.

### Conclusion

Based on what has been said and discussed, we can conclude that the American Protestant Episcopal Church serves as a model for religious cooperation and collaboration. And it is exactly what American society – whether in its religious, economic, political, social, or cultural expressions – is built on and exists. All that may give us the right to assume that the American Episcopal Church is the one most typically representing the essence and peculiarity of American spiritual thinking. As a result, it leads to the conclusion that the Washington National Cathedral truly represents and in reality is the Main Spiritual Landmark of American nation.

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of German philosopher Max Weber.