

Myths in Stone, by Jeffrey F. Meyer

reviewed by [Missy Daniel](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

Like many writers and historians who have come before him, Jeffrey Meyer argues that religious metaphors have loomed large in American history, and that there are implicit religious messages in the monuments, memorials and museums of the nation's capital. Washington is our sacred and secular center; the city's public art and architecture, its axial plan, diagonal streets and processional avenues represent a compendium of symbolic values; and the capital, "a repository of myths in stone," gives physical expression to our republican virtues and democratic ideals.

Meyer, a professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, leads readers on what he describes as a pilgrimage route: down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House ("the axis of power"); from the White House to the Washington Monument and Jefferson Memorial ("the axis of Enlightenment"); and from Arlington Cemetery back to the Capitol by way of the Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall ("the axis of memory").

His itinerary derives from the grand lines of French designer Pierre Charles L'Enfant's ambitious plan of 1791, still more or less in place, for a great capital that would enlighten the world. One piece of L'Enfant's original plan that is missing, Meyer explains, is a national church, "the victim of total disinterest on the part of the poverty-stricken new republic." Its surrogate, he suggests, is the cathedral-like National Archives, shrine for our documentary treasures, sacred relics and hallowed national scriptures--the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, "the greatest sacramental sign of the new republic."

But the meaning of monumental Washington and the interpretations of our national narratives and myths, Meyer acknowledges, are not immutable. The Capitol may still be the central temple of American civil religion and "the ark of the American covenant," as Henry James called it, but we know today that hundreds of slaves helped build it. Many of its paintings and pediments, and much of its mediocre art depicting the course of empire, seem little more than a glorified attempt at what Meyer calls "national self-justification."

For all of Meyer's attention to story and metaphor, his own exposition is mostly dry and droning. He begins each section of his pilgrimage with a self-conscious personal reflection written as he walks the capital "on the lookout for some sort of epiphany." The result is a book that opens with the line, "I am Louis XIV, the Sun King, standing on the west terrace of the Capitol gazing at the Mall." Meyer confesses in a footnote that he was warned about including these "fey" reflections, and his explanation for persisting with them--"as counterpoint to the potential banality of buildings and structures that have become boring and predictable national icons"--is as irritating as the self-indulgent writing itself.

Meyer is most moving when he writes about the ambiguities and ironies of the Lincoln Memorial, dedicated in 1922 by former President William Howard Taft as "a shrine at which all can worship . . . an altar upon which the supreme sacrifice was made . . . a sacred religious refuge," before an audience in segregated seating. Only decades later would singer Marian Anderson's Easter Sunday concert in 1939 and Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech at the March on Washington in 1963 begin to "rescript the meaning of the Lincoln Memorial as an icon for civil rights."

There is much learning and impressive research in *Myths in Stone*, and Meyer has marshaled many fascinating details, such as Benjamin Latrobe's all too familiar and contemporary-sounding frustration as chief architect of the reconstruction of the Capitol after the War of 1812. Latrobe complained of the "malice, backbiting and slander, trickery, fraud & hypocrisy, lofty pretensions and scanty means, boasts of patriotism & bargaining of conscience, pretense of religions and breach of her laws . . . and five thousand other nuisances that constitute the very essence of this community." Or tycoon-architect Cass Gilbert's shocking note to Mussolini, accompanying photographs of his 1932 designs for the Supreme Court, sent "with cordial wishes for your health and the prosperity of your great regime and the glory of Italy."

Meyer ignores not only Alexis de Tocqueville's unsurpassed observations on religion and democracy, but also his searching little chapter in *Democracy in America* on "why the Americans raise some insignificant monuments and others that are very grand." ("They have already rooted up trees for ten miles around lest they should interfere with the future citizens of this imaginary metropolis. They have erected a magnificent palace for Congress in the center of the city and have given it the pompous name of the Capitol," the Frenchman observed in 1831.) But he puts to good use the insights of many novelists and poets, from Henry Adams and Ralph

Ellison to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, into the meaning of Washington's grandiose marble piles--"full of reality, full of illusion," as Walt Whitman wrote.

In the end it might be best to think of this book as a bibliography that points to many other works on which Meyer relies. As Meyer concludes, it is easy to believe that in Washington "the departed are still present," and monuments speak. But after more than 200 years, the lessons they teach about our sacred history are not necessarily cast in stone.