

Introduction

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois, hardly a denominational partisan, described “the great African Methodist Church” as “the greatest Negro organization in the world.” Only the National Baptist Convention, recently organized in 1896, exceeded the half million membership that the African Methodist Episcopalians claimed. But the Baptists, an aggregation of autonomous state conventions and local congregations, lacked the hierarchal structure of this black Methodist body. The bishops, presiding elders, pastors, and many other officials of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church forged a cohesive infrastructure that proved to doubtful whites that African Americans were fully capable of effective self-governance. In addition to Du Bois’ praise for the institutional achievements of the AME Church, he was equally impressed with its longevity. Already a century old at the time of Du Bois’ comments, African Methodism had become a venerable religious body with bishops who were “among the most powerful Negro rulers in the world.” In 2004, Gayraud S. Wilmore, a Presbyterian and an African American religious intellectual, confirmed Du Bois’ descriptions of the AME Church and called it “America’s premier ... predominantly black denomination.”¹

Just as African Methodism drew Du Bois’ and Wilmore’s admiration, other scholars discovered crucial liberation themes in the AME narrative which explained, defined, and reflected the discourse and strategies that

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, New American Library, 1903, 1969), 85, 215, 217; Gayraud S. Wilmore, “[A Review of] Dennis C. Dickerson, *A Liberated Past: Explorations in AME Church History* (Nashville, TN, AME Sunday School Union, 2003), in the *AME Church Review*, Vol. 119, No. 396, October–December 2004, 114.



Figure 0.1 Oil painting of Richard Allen by V. Yvonne Studevan, great-great-great-granddaughter of Richard Allen. The painting, titled *Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree*, was painted in 2016 for the Mother Bethel AME Church, Philadelphia, PA (Used with permission from the artist)

African Americans pursued to attain their freedom. Horace Mann Bond, for example, credited the Church with making “no compromise with the essential idea of human liberty” and for inspiring President Abraham Lincoln to insert this ideal into the Emancipation Proclamation. Eddie S. Glaude showed how the Exodus theme shaped black political discourse and viewed AME founder Richard Allen’s exit from Philadelphia’s St. George Church in 1787 as a reenactment of Moses and his followers’ epic departure from slavery in Egypt. Allen’s act defied the racism of Wesleyan whites and led to the rise of the AME Church and black congregations that either were independent or affiliated with white ecclesiastical bodies. Just as Moses led ancient Hebrews to their “promised land” in Canaan, the St. George incident was replicated in other episodes in the African American experience, and became a metaphor for ongoing efforts to find safe havens for the enslaved and oppressed.²

² Horace Mann Bond, “Richard Allen: His Contribution to the Sense of Human Liberty and to the Emancipation Proclamation,” *AME Church Review*, Vol. 119, No. 389, January–March 2003, 101; Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 58.

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For denominational adherents the perspectives of Du Bois, Bond, and Glaude echoed their own view that African Methodism embodied an emancipatory ethos that blacks throughout the diaspora embraced and emulated. George A. Singleton, a prolific AME scholar, observed that “the very idea of former slaves resenting social injustice to the extent that they break away with the old organization is startling.” In Allen’s “philosophy,” he declared, “there is no room for color discrimination or segregation,” and that explained their separation from white Methodists. The AME founder, Singleton noted, rose “above caste and proscription” and sought liberation for the black population. Charles H. Wesley, an AME historian, added that “Richard Allen regarded the Negro people as an oppressed minority who needed an aggressive leadership to achieve its emancipation.” The AME Church, Wesley declared, was Allen’s vehicle to realize this objective. Hence, as the denomination grew and the organization was strengthened, the march toward black liberation gained momentum. When planning expansion in Maryland, a slave state, Allen hoped “that the example of free Negroes who had their own preachers and churches would have the effect of keeping slaves dissatisfied with their condition.” That was precisely the point that Allen aimed to articulate. He clearly envisaged African Methodism as a part of a freedom movement to liberate slaves and secure black freedom throughout the Atlantic World.³

Just as the liberation of black Atlantic defined the mission and ministry of African Methodism, its anchoring in Wesleyan theology also reinforced its emancipationist ethos. As a freedom church, AMEs developed as a different denomination from what whites in the Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church established at the 1784 “Christmas” Conference. Far more than their Caucasian counterparts, African Methodists adhered to John Wesley’s unyielding opposition to slavery and found within his “practical theology” a moral warrant to challenge sinful societal structures that sustained and perpetuated racial oppression. AMEs understood that personal renewal or scriptural holiness experienced through the salvific process of sanctification and perfectionism extended into and required replication into all of creation. Hence, saved and sanctified Methodists should practice social holiness and serve as a leaven to perfect society away from slavery and other forms of human subjugation. Commitments to these theological tenets spurred Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, and other AME founders, during the lifetime of John

³ George A. Singleton, *The Romance of African Methodism: A Study of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston, MA, Exposition Press, 1952), 18; Charles H. Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom*, (Washington DC, Associated Publishers, Inc., 1935), 7; 180.

Wesley, to develop an alternative version of American-based Methodism that was truer to the founder's intentions than what Wesleyan whites envisaged.⁴

The origins of the AME Church lay in the Atlantic World context in which diverse African peoples populated the ministry and membership of this emerging Wesleyan body. African Methodism, developing in Philadelphia out of the Free African Society in 1787, through Bethel Church in 1794, and as a denominational body in 1816, exemplified black self-determination, which shaped its identity and praxis as a freedom church. The denomination pursued liberationist activities on both sides of the Atlantic for marginalized peoples through church expansion into racially hostile settings and in strong opposition to slavery, segregation, and colonialism. This emancipationist ethos, however, matured through succeeding centuries in dynamic tension with the necessities and requirements of institutionalization. Though formal structures strengthened AME capacities to protect and protest on behalf of its black diaspora constituency, these same systems and their insatiable but justifiable appetite for institutional growth and preservation rivaled, and at times undermined, the church's ingrained insurgent impulses.

Daniel A. Payne (1811–1893), an early bishop, viewed these competing tendencies as complementary facets of his denomination's emancipationist ethos. At the same time, he thought that the fight against oppression, while dangerous, drew far more applause than founding churches and schools and expanding them into unfriendly territories. He fervently believed that his institutional activities fulfilled liberationist objectives that would sustain African Americans in their hard won freedoms. Carol V. R. George, in her assessment of antebellum black clergy, who selected institution-building over abolitionist activity, acknowledged the tensions between these two vocational paths and concluded that both choices involved emancipationist objectives.⁵

Earlier in his ministry, however, Payne faced the choice of building a denominational aegis for blacks or joining the abolitionist movement to achieve their release from slavery. Lewis Tappan and other colleagues in the American and Foreign Anti-slavery Society, after hearing Payne preach in

⁴ See Dennis C. Dickerson, *African Methodism and Its Wesleyan Heritage: Reflections on AME Church History*, (Nashville, TN, AME Sunday School Union, 2009), 40–42.

⁵ Daniel A. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (New York, Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1888, 1969), 67; Carol V. R. George, "Widening the Circle: The Black Church and the Abolitionist Crusade," in Timothy E. Fulop and Albert Raboteau (eds.), *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 157–173.

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1837, asked him to become a full-time lecturer at a generous annual salary of \$300. “Here was an inducement,” Payne said, to “an inviting field, yet [one] as laborious and dangerous as it was flattering to the pride and ambition of a young man,” like himself. He added that “heroism and consequent fame offered their laurels to any young man of talent and intelligence who might be willing to become the fearless and successful opponent of American slavery and the eloquent defender of liberty and human rights.” After a few years as a Presbyterian pastor, Payne transferred to the AME Church in 1841, was elected historiographer in 1848, and was consecrated as a bishop in 1852. Already a crusader for an educated ministry, the impecunious bishop purchased Wilberforce University in 1863, on a pledge of \$10,000, and then launched the mission to newly freed slaves in the former Confederacy in 1865. The development of African Methodism and its infrastructure, rather than abolitionist and civil rights activism, claimed the entirety of Payne’s energies. Though each endeavor was aimed at black liberation, Payne believed that his AME activities were foundational to other freedom initiatives in education, moral reform, and equal rights. African Methodism was itself a bulwark against the degradation of blacks. Therefore, he declared that “when the institution of Slavery was striking its root deep into the American State and the spirit of caste building its nest in the bosom of the American Church, the origin of the African ME Church was necessitated.”⁶

Payne offered an apologia for his vocational decision by comparing himself to his contemporary, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), the celebrated abolitionist and black equal rights champion. Douglass, who had been affiliated with Baltimore’s Bethel AME Church, escaped from slavery in 1838 and became an AME Zion exhorter in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Like Payne, white abolitionists heard him speak and immediately drafted the eloquent ex-slave into organized abolitionism. Payne believed, however, that he and Douglass were divinely assigned to their respective roles in the black freedom struggle. “Frederick Douglass,” he declared, “was fitted for his specialty; Daniel Alexander Payne for his. Frederick Douglass could not do the work that was assigned to Daniel Alexander Payne, nor Daniel Alexander Payne the work assigned to Frederick Douglass.” Du Bois agreed that Douglass and Payne, though different, both embodied a liberationist

⁶ Ibid., 67–68; Dennis C. Dickerson, *Religion, Race, and Region: Research Notes on AME Church History* (Nashville, TN, AME Sunday School Union, 1995), 35–48; Daniel A. Payne, “The African M.E. Church in Its Relations to the Freedmen,” *Bishop Payne’s Address before the College Aid Society* (Xenia, OH, Torchlight Company, 1868), 3–4 (copy in Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas).

persona. Douglass, Du Bois said, was “the greatest of American Negro leaders,” but Payne was “less conspicuous but of greater social significance.”⁷

Henry M. Turner (1834–1915), himself a leading black spokesman, Reconstruction politician, and AME bishop, recognized the dual spheres in which Payne and Douglass operated. When Douglass visited the 1884 General Conference in Baltimore, Turner declared “that as Frederick Douglass was the greatest colored statesman in the world, and as Bishop Payne is the greatest colored theologian, he would ask Bishop Payne” to present Douglass to the AME audience. Payne “in a very able and graceful manner introduced Mr. Douglass as the great statesman and advocate of freedom.” Douglass, in turn, acknowledged the influence and significance of the church. “Great is the press [and] great is the ballot,” he declared, “but still greater is the pulpit.” This nod to Payne validated the bishop’s institutional labors as integral to African American advancement as much as his own involvements in politics and protest. Payne and Douglass, in different but complementary arenas, authenticated each other as frontline leaders in the black freedom struggle.⁸

Payne envisaged the expansion of African Methodism as an affront to slavery and as a blow for freedom. Hence, those who undertook institutional tasks were obliged to relate them to emancipationist objectives. During Reconstruction several AME preachers did just that and became clergy/politicians. In this regard, Richard H. Cain (1825–1887) and others like him exposed Payne to both the lofty goals and the unpleasant practices of politics. On one hand, the bishop believed that “when a Christian approaches the poll he is morally bound to cast his vote for no one, but an open and fearless advocate of liberty, justice and all righteousness.” Therefore, “in all the reconstructed [southern] States, our Church is proportionately represented” by AME ministers in various legislatures and other public offices. For these reasons Payne endorsed their efforts to safeguard black civil rights and implement the freedom ethos of African Methodism. But Payne, on the other hand, criticized Cain and some others for bringing secular political methods into AME elections. He said these activities compromised their “usefulness” and integrity. Payne was loath to admit that Cain and other clergy/politicians like him legitimately embodied the denomination’s liberationist legacy even as they practiced the sometimes unsavory methods

⁷ Payne, *Recollections*, 68; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 86.

⁸ *Journal of the 18th Session and 17th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the World held in Bethel Church, Baltimore, MD, May 5–26, 1884* (Philadelphia, Rev. James C. Embry, General Business Manager, 1884), 59–60.

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of politics. Historian Reginald F. Hildebrand has described Cain as a proponent of the “gospel of freedom.”⁹ He built Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, into a congregation of 3,000 and parlayed his pastoral popularity into votes for public office. As a local official and later as a member of the US House of Representatives, Cain believed that his congregation and community were well served through his dual roles in the pulpit and in the public square. Payne, though recognizing the value of Cain’s public role, retreated from his earlier approval and disparaged him as a mere political operative. Despite this intended slur, Cain, who also became a bishop, included himself in the same AME liberationist tradition that Payne extolled.¹⁰

Hence, we discover that the crucial issue facing AMEs, including Allen, Payne, Cain, and their posterity, was how the liberationist rhetoric and praxis of the denomination met the inexorable and multiple challenges of history: the abolitionist movement, the Civil War, Reconstruction, industrialization, urbanization, gender equity, colonialism, globalization, and other transformative events and phenomena. Despite a tightly organized structure, a disciplined polity, and a prominent institutional profile, the AME Church was neither uniformly influential nor determinative on many challenges that confronted the communicants and communities it served. Additionally, members of the AME Church, notwithstanding an ironclad commitment to its mission for freedom, constantly had to rethink and rearticulate their Wesleyan theology and reassess their grounding in African and African-American folk religion. Each contained theological tenets and liberationist principles, which required a vigorous social witness and incubated cultural idioms that affirmed the humanity of blacks. African Methodists blended these theological traditions and drew from them resources to critique and resist the powerful social, economic, and political forces that had enslaved and subordinated them.

Serious successors to Richard Allen, who explicitly linked their activism to the AME founder, especially in the twentieth century, included A. Philip Randolph, the pioneer labor leader and advocate of nonviolent grassroots

⁹ Reginald F. Hildebrand, “Richard Harvey Cain, African Methodism, & the Gospel of Freedom,” *AME Church Review*, Vol. 117, No. 381, January–March 2001, 42–44, and Reginald F. Hildebrand, “The Times Were Strange and Stirring,” *Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995), 33, 120.

¹⁰ Daniel A. Payne, “The African M. E. Church in Its Relations to the Freedmen,” *Bishop Payne’s Address*, 5–6; cited in Dickerson, *Religion, Race and Region*, 78; Reginald F. Hildebrand, “Richard Harvey Cain, African Methodism, & the Gospel of Freedom,” 42–44.

mobilization, Rosa Parks, the progenitor of the Montgomery bus boycott, and J. A. De Laine, the sponsor of a foundational case in South Carolina that led to the Supreme Court's landmark public school desegregation decision in 1954. These individuals, both clergy and lay, emulated Allen's emancipationist efforts even as denominational leaders, more concerned with institutional affairs, focused their support of liberationist objectives mainly through celebratory and hagiographical rhetoric. Though institutional development and preservation, themselves acts of black self-determination, increasingly preoccupied the AME hierarchy over two centuries, Allenite activism attracted the commitment of other rank and file ministers and members. Embedded within these phenomena were tensions between those who emphasized organizational governance and those who argued for a greater focus on social insurgency (often at the expense of governance). Hence Randolph, Parks, and De Laine, more than their denominational superiors, became energetic and authentic carriers of their church's emancipationist ethos.

Sustaining the balance between denominational involvement and liberationist activities existed in AME institutional life and within the hearts and minds of individuals. There were many ministers and members who embodied these "warring selves." And the battleground on which these tensions were addressed and resolved lay in the realm of lived religion. Hymnody, especially in the familiar lyrics of Wesleyan compositions and black spirituals, showed the direct link between the pursuit of spiritual and temporal freedom. Did the search for salvation culminate in personal piety and perfectionism, or did it also extend to "practical divinity" and the pursuit of "the new creation" embedded within Wesleyan theology? How did lived religion as informed by black folk practices in culture, worship, music, Biblical hermeneutics, and ecstatic expressions of spirituality steer the clergy and laity toward the sacred task of institutional maintenance and the sacred duty of spearheading societal transformation? How did AMEs understand and define ecclesiology, and in what ways did it influence how their faith was lived out in devotional practices, denominational engagement, and social activism? And what emancipationist themes, already intrinsic to black folk religion, spurred AME activism?

Did these tendencies in the lived religion of African Methodists over two centuries cause the clergy and laity to draw from their black religious experience blended commitments to liberationist practice and personal piety? Here the contributions of Cecil W. Cone, a theologian of AME heritage, in *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, and Dale P. Andrews, a scholar in the AME Zion tradition, in *Practical Theology for Black Churches*,

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are especially suggestive. Cone contended that black theologians and other scholars should historicize and construct “Black Theology upon the foundations of the black religious tradition.” Black theology for Cone was inauthentic unless black religion defined it. That included idioms drawn from the indigenous African/African American background and adopted Euro-American doctrine and discipline. Emancipationist efforts are a part of black religion and are, therefore, the salient concern in black religion and theology. In a similar vein Andrews was concerned with theological tasks that emancipationist scholars undertake and how they often misconstrue issues of faith, worship, and spirituality, important practices to pastors and parishioners, as tangential to liberationist objectives. Instead, “the self-image of black churches,” he argued, “involves a caring community that cultivates both spiritual and social liberation.” Scholars sometimes fail to appreciate these dualities of discourse within black religious communities, especially in historical context. Andrews observed that “faith identity” is core to African American religion. He asserted that “the domain of faith identity nurtures black personhood and embraces a sense of people hood in God. In turn, shaping black ecclesiology in the paradigm of “faith identity” offers a platform for readdressing black theology to black churches.” This gulf between black liberationist scholars and black church ministers and members can be bridged if black folk religion and its concerns with preaching, pastoral care, and spirituality inform how “liberation is functioning in black religious folk life” and how it can sustain emancipationist activities.¹¹

Historian Douglas Brinkley, in his biography of Rosa Parks, confirms the observations of Cone and Andrews. Parks, he contends, embodied social holiness and linked it to her devotional life at St. Paul AME Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Moreover, Parks’s defiance of sinful segregationist practices on local city buses reflected devotional practices that developed out of her experiences in private and public worship and her understanding of herself as a twentieth-century heir to Richard Allen. Parks, a stewardess who helped to prepare the Eucharist at her Montgomery church, also believed that memorializing Jesus’ sacrifice to conquer sin required the same demonstration of selflessness against the injustice of racism. Beyond her historical act in inspiring the Montgomery bus boycott, Brinkley challenged historians

¹¹ Cecil W. Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN, AME Sunday School Union, Revised Edition), 1975, 2003, 15, 59–61, 67–68, Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 8, 49, 130.

to probe the interior of Parks's lived religion as an AME and uncover how it connected to her social activism.¹²

Brinkley explored Parks' piety, spirituality, and devotional practices with insight, and tied them to social holiness. Robert Thomas, Jr., an activist AME pastor in Chicago and later Parks's bishop in Detroit, anticipated Brinkley's scholarship when he petitioned the 2000 AME General Conference to "beautify" this civil rights pioneer. Hence, Thomas petitioned the denominational body to insert in *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* the name of "Sister Rosa Parks" in the consecration collect for church deaconesses, an office reserved for "holy women" within African Methodism. Hence, Parks's name appears on the roster of Christian matriarchs along with Deborah, "Mary, the Holy Mother," Phoebe, [and] Lydia" as among those (who) give themselves . . . entirely to the ministrations of the Church and to suffering humanity." Parks therefore exemplified personal renewal, experienced through the Eucharist and holy living, as culminating in societal transformation through her fight against segregation.¹³

Although Parks and other AME women embodied the denomination's freedom rhetoric and praxis, they still experienced gender discrimination especially in the matter of female ordination. From Richard Allen's reluctance to authorize Jarena Lee to preach in 1809 to the overdue election of the first female bishop, Vashti Murphy McKenzie, in 2000, AMEs seldom saw gender inequality as a serious flaw in their liberationist identity. Despite a mostly male monopoly on influential leadership positions, women established themselves as productive pastors and parishioners who aided AME development. Sometimes through derivative authority flowing from their marriage to bishops and other high officials and at other times through female auxiliaries, AME women pursued liberationist objectives through their activities in education and missions and through womanist interpretations of scripture. As a result, they became crucial carriers of the church's emancipationist ethos, often exceeding the majority of males who were mainly involved in governance. Hence, Jarena Lee married the AME emphasis on Wesleyan piety and perfectionism with support for the abolitionist movement; Sarah Allen, a participant in the Underground Railroad, sustained fugitive slaves as they escaped from bondage; Charlotte Manye and

¹² See Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York, Lipper/Viking, 2000); Dennis C. Dickerson, "Review" of Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (2000), in the *AME Church Review*, Vol. 117, No. 383, July–September 2001, 96–97. Also see Dennis C. Dickerson, "Theologizing Rosa Parks," *AME Church Review*, Vol. 124, No. 411, July–September 2008, 29–37.

¹³ "The Consecration of Deaconesses," in *The Doctrine and Discipline of African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2004–2008* (Nashville, TN, AME Sunday School Union, 2005), 516.