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**ORIGINAL DIVERSITY:
BISHOPS ALLEN, ASBURY AND BLACK METHODISM**

H. LEE CHEEK, JR.

Richard Allen's personal and spiritual struggles to remain within the Methodist tradition demonstrated the poignancy and resilience of the African-American understanding of religious life and the unique contribution of African-Americans to American evangelistic efforts at the beginning of the 19th century. In Allen's autobiography¹ the reader is offered a compelling portrayal of the tensions between Allen and his ecclesiastical supervisors, the larger Methodist Episcopal church, and the difficulties associated when the African-American worldview—imbued with American cultural trappings—confronted the limitations such a culture also placed upon the personal freedoms of the African-American participants in the society. Allen's life also gives an account of the successful reconciliation of the African-American worldview and evangelical "European" Christianity. The evocative power of such a faith remains intact for many white and black Americans today. This essay will argue that such a rapprochement was possible due to the love Allen exhibited for the Methodist tradition, his respect for its gifted Bishop Asbury, and the close proximity of that tradition to the demands of personal piety and community that the African-American worldview deemed essential for the development of a church and for life in the church.

The life of Richard Allen gives our enterprise ample evidence of his love for the Methodist tradition. He was born in 1760 as a slave of a Quaker master, but eventually became a Methodist. Allen, therefore, provides a personal example of the assimilation of worldviews into a coherent whole. As a product of a slave environment, Allen obviously looked for a world beyond the dismal confines of a life of drudgery, which Allen described as ". . . poor, wretched and undone." By his own account he was "lost."² Before he reached the age of twenty the limits of such an existence were overcome in part by his conversion to Christianity and his reception into a Methodist society. Allen's evangelistic conversion and need to exhort follows the pattern of early Methodism and from John Wesley's demand for "saving souls" throughout his ministry. In essence, Allen's excitement mirrored the religious enthusiasm

¹Richard Allen, *Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Philadelphia: Martin and Boston, 1833; reprint, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960).

²Allen, 15.

shared by many Protestants, especially Methodists and Baptists.³ Asbury, for example, instructed John Kobler, a Methodist missionary who was sent to the Northwest Territory, to share the simple, transforming message of the Gospel.⁴ The Church served as a canopy, encompassing and supplying guidance to all aspects of life. At the core of this insight was the promise of eternal life with God as a source of hope beyond the current deprivation, whether it be slavery or poverty or any other limitation.

The theophanic "turn," namely, the subjugation of the earthly for the Divine, offered a dynamic alternative to the Enlightenment claims of a consuming historical consciousness and the rationalist critique of the mystical. The older African and Christian traditions held that humans could be directly guided and nurtured by God. The African influence provided for an open hierography that was closely related to the evangelical Christian's diverse modes of depicting the necessary conversion event, and Allen's use of this openness serves as an imaginative restatement of the evangelicals' stress on religious experience as the *sine qua non* of the movement towards God:

My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me—the Saviour died. Now my confidence was strengthened that the Lord, for Christ's sake, had heard my prayers and pardoned all my sins.⁵

The structure of human existence must now undergo new requirements based upon the spiritual discernment that has been nurtured by God. For Wesley, who shared such a transformation at Aldersgate, it was the combination of an amenableness to a more pietistic spiritual life and the recognition of the great soteriological claim: "And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."⁶ As with Allen, the canopy stretches over all aspects of life and directs the movement towards a natural opposition to the prevailing cultural norms. Of course, Allen encounters the harsher dimensions of the existing order, but the responses of Allen, Wesley and to a degree Asbury, demonstrate the desire to move towards Heaven in the form of Christian perfection as an essential part of the spiritual mission. Allen's master, although imperfect, preferred for his slaves to attend the class meeting than to miss the gathering due to an overzealous work regime.⁷ The combination of the need for openness and the personal call to holiness as part of the African and Wesleyan worldviews obligated Allen to remain within the Methodist communion.

³Timothy Smith argues that by 1855 Methodists and Baptists comprised seventy percent of all Protestants in America, with Methodists as thirty-eight percent of this figure. *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 22.

⁴Quoted by J. B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: Biographical, Historical and Miscellaneous*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1855), 169.

⁵Allen, 15–16.

⁶John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Volume 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 103.

⁷Allen, 17.

The personal and spiritual momentum to remain within the Methodist communion exceeded any clerical or ecclesiastical limitation to such a movement. Allen was adamant in his depiction of the Methodist's integration and communicability vis-a-vis the African-American. Methodists were the first to share the faith with them and the Methodist preaching was appropriate for the audience, as it avoided the pedantry associated with the preaching of other denominations.⁸ The Methodists combined the movement of the Holy Spirit and the promise of spiritual freedom. The message became more evocative when it was delivered through an able preacher who made the element of opposition to earthly limitations more vivid. This served as a recollection of the African tradition and the "good old way" of the evangelical Methodism.⁹

The tension between the worldview of Africa, premised upon a spiritual and institutional openness, and the centralizing tenet that arose within early American Methodism would suggest Bishop Asbury served as Allen's nemesis throughout the period of development among the African-American Methodists. However, upon closer examination Allen and Asbury possessed great areas of agreement and engaged in closely related quests. At the center of this mutual effort was a commitment to Methodist form of worship and presentation of the Gospel, which as we have noted, was easily reconciled with the African worldview.¹⁰

Asbury's motivations were certainly multifaceted. As Frank Baker has suggested, in almost all concerns Francis Asbury was a "... religious pragmatist."¹¹ But all of his activities were grounded in a deliberate effort to present the gospel of Jesus Christ and advance the Methodist movement. While possessing an affinity for the historic forms of worship and Christian life, Asbury realized that he had to rearticulate this understanding to a new and "unchurched" world. In the course of his ministry Asbury made a number of practical decisions of both an ecclesiastical and personal character that Wesley could not have comprehended, but these alterations allowed for a reconciliation of American Methodist and the African tradition. The dismissal of the *Sunday Service*, the substantial revisions of the communion liturgy, as well as the limitation of occasional services are prominent reminders of this habit.¹² As bishop, Asbury also appreciated the importance of retaining the authority of the church. The desire to provide for order explains much of the

⁸Allen, 29.

⁹Allen, 30.

¹⁰Allen, 25-30.

¹¹Frank Baker, "Francis Asbury—Master Craftsman," chap. in *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early Methodism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1976), 120.

¹²In the specific case of sacraments, see Paul S. Sanders, "The Sacraments in Early American Methodism," *Church History*, Volume 26, Number 4 (December 1957), 355-369.

success of the early Methodist movement under Asbury's leadership and why a compromise among its "branches," including Allen, was not possible.¹³

Amidst the intolerant tenor of 19th century American life Asbury offered the Gospel of Christ, the great liberation, and the practicality of personal freedom, even though it was not likely to become a reality in their lives. After an early refusal to assist Asbury, Allen invited the bishop to "open" Bethel meeting house.¹⁴ Asbury regularly praised Allen's willingness and need to predicate all his ministerial labors upon the ". . . doctrine and discipline of the Methodists."¹⁵ Allen remained a Methodist because Methodism was the coadunation of the African world he inherited and the American world in which he lived.

¹³Donald K. Gorrell, "'Ride a Circuit or Let it Alone': Early Practices that Kept the United Brethern, Albright People and Methodists Apart," *Methodist History*, Volume 25, Number 1 (October 1986), 4-16.

¹⁴Allen, 31.

¹⁵Francis Asbury, "March 9, 1807," and "April 9, 1807," in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Volume III*, ed. J. Manning Potts, Elmer Clark and Jacob Payton (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 365-367.