

Christian Faith and Social Policy in the Thought of Richard Allen

The relationship of the church to social and political concerns within communities has been a continuing issue for church leaders since the beginning of the Christian movement. Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees in Matthew 22:15-22 over the problem of Caesar vs. God has often been interpreted to mean that a definite distinction exists between the secular and sacred. The Apostle Paul offered his own solution in Romans 13. In this passage, Paul begins by maintaining, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." For Paul, the church and its people were not to engage in any form of conflict with the secular government. If he is taken seriously at this point, it is difficult, if not impossible, to use Paul as a frame of reference for initiating a program of social policy reform.

Martin Luther seized on the Pauline concept and made it the pivotal issue in his theory of the "orders of creation." Luther believed that the domain of the church was restricted to the sacred order. The civil authorities were to administer the realm of the secular.

A substantial portion of the thinkers within Protestant theology have been very uncomfortable with Luther's doctrine of the "orders of creation." For example, the "Social Gospel" advocates and the "Responsible Society" theologians consistently contended that the church should not limit itself to only issues in the "sacred order." The contemporary liberation theologians evidence a common interest in rejecting any notion that the church should avoid active involvement in seeking to reform unjust social structures.

What should the church do about the society in which it exists? Does involvement in social policy issues function to detract from fundamental issues of Christian faith? Even though these questions are not novel within the arena of Christian theology, they are still crucial issues for concerned church people as they consider the mission of the church.

This discussion shows how Richard Allen's experience and interpretation of Christianity resolved for him and his Afro-American church that he founded the tension between Christian faith and social policy. Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was

both a denominational leader and a forerunner of the Black theology movement. The manner in which he dealt with the major social issue of his day within the context of his understanding of Christian faith is of vital importance to Christians of the 1980's.

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In 1786, Richard Allen led a small group of Black Christians from St. Georgia's M E Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From this humble beginning, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has grown into the largest Black Methodist religious body in America.

The establishment of a church based on the issue of protest was not particularly new, even in Allen's time. Oppressive conditions had motivated many other Christian groups to leave parent churches. What was unique for Allen and the early African Methodists was their understanding of the role of the church in relation to the society. These people, as a matter of course, were vitally involved in the social and political concerns that impacted on them as Black people in America. It would be an overstatement to suggest that the original African Methodists were totally consumed by the mission of social change for an unjust order. It would be, however, accurate to say that Allen and his people's participation in social and political events provides an outstanding illustration of a church's struggle with the fundamental crises involved in relating Christian faith to constructive social policy.

In order to appreciate what Allen meant to this struggle we must take a brief look at his own religious heritage. Allen was born a slave on February 14, 1760, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At an early age, he and several members of his family were sold to a man who lived near Dover, Delaware. It is on this farm that Allen was introduced to the Christian faith. At the age of seventeen, he was converted as a result of the preaching of an itinerant Methodist evangelist named Freeborn Garretson. Allen described his conversion, which was not unlike the experiences of other church leaders, in vivid language:

I went with my heart bowed down for many days. My sins were a heavy burden. I was tempted to believe there was no mercy for me. I cried to the Lord both night and day. One night I thought hell would be my portion. I cried unto Him who delighteth to hear the prayers of a poor sinner, and all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled. I cried—enough for me—the Saviour died.¹

Soon after his own conversion, Allen set about the task of helping others to find God. He was instrumental in bringing his brother and sis-

¹Richard Allen, *The Life Experiences and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 15.

ter to accept the Christian faith and he also helped lead his own master to Christianity. At this point, Allen encountered his first setback concerning his new-found faith's relationship to secular authority. He had to deal with the criticism that Christianity was not good for slaves. Some people said that slaves should not be allowed to participate in any form of religious worship because they might become less effective workers. In response to this criticism, Allen advanced the notion that it was not the case that Christianity made the slave less productive. In addressing this issue, Allen said:

Our neighbors, seeing that our master indulged us with the privilege of attending meetings once in two weeks, said that Stokley's Negroes would soon ruin him; and so my brother and myself held a council together, that we would attend more faithfully to our master's business, so that it should not be said that religion made us worst servants; we would work night and day to get our crops forward, so that they should not be disappointed.²

Even though Allen abhorred the institution of slavery, he had to deal realistically with the societal situation in which he found himself. It was only in recognizing the constraints placed upon him that he was able to make certain that the liberating gospel was preached to those in slavery. Personal salvation and confrontation with Jesus Christ were crucial elements in Richard Allen's understanding of religious experience. Thus, in the early days of his ministry, he was willing to accept the harshness of the slave system so that the slave might have the opportunity for conversion.

After his master was converted to Christianity through the influence of Allen and Freeborn Garretson, Allen was allowed the opportunity to work his way out of slavery. When he had obtained his freedom, he went to live in Philadelphia. There he helped organize the Free African Society. This organization was basically a benevolent group designed to assist the freedmen in times of need. The preamble to the society's constitution stated that:

... it was proposed that a society should be formed without regard to religious tenets, provided the persons lived an orderly and sober life in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.³

Although Allen and his co-founder, Absalom Jones, were careful not to make the Society a part of any religious denomination, it was patterned after the Methodist class meeting. There was a pressing need for such a benevolent society because there was very little social welfare help available to Black people during this time.

²Ibid., p. 16.

³Gayroud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), p. 112.

Gayraud Wilmore has suggested that the Free African Society's organizational principles point to the problem of relating religious and secular concerns. Although he used slightly different language, Wilmore called attention to the tension between religious faith and social policy in the thought of Allen and other Black churchmen. In referring to that portion of the Free African Society's preamble mentioned above, Wilmore says:

The closing words of the preamble indicate the concerns which are uppermost in the minds of Allen and Jones. One finds in this statement of purpose a certain ambivalence about religious and secular objectives which has been a distinctive characteristic of Black religion in America.⁴

The manner in which Allen dealt with the "ambivalence" suggested by Wilmore is the key issue for this paper.

Although actively involved with the Free African Society, Allen also traveled throughout Pennsylvania and Delaware preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In preaching and evangelizing, Allen measured his success in terms of the number of souls "saved" and the converts recorded. He found the Methodist Church's form of worship and its doctrinal emphasis to be the most effective means of bringing the gospel to Black Americans. He even chose to separate from Absalom Jones and other members of the original group in the Free African Society when in later years they decided to affiliate with the Anglican Church. Allen contended:

The Methodists were the first people that brought glad tidings to the colored people. I feel thankful that ever I heard a Methodist preach. We are beholden to the Methodists under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high-flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine.⁵

In speaking of the uniqueness of Methodism, Allen said:

... the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people; for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand, and the reason that the Methodist is so successful in the awakening and conversion of the colored people, the plain doctrine and having a good discipline.⁶

The above statement shows that Allen was very much interested in the souls of individual Christians, but what about the other side of the issue which was suggested earlier? Did Allen's work in the Free African Society mean that there was a vital connection between the religious and the secular, or was he just providing some needed community services? In other words, what did his theological position lead him to say specifically about social policy? Carol V. R. George, a biographer of Allen, contends that social concerns were always a part of Allen's theological orientation.

⁴Ibid., p. 113.

⁵Ibid., p. 30.

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

She says that,

... despite the fact they (Allen and his colleagues) were nominally identified with the doctrines of their particular denomination—in his case Wesley's Methodism. Their published homilies . . . reveal a developing open-ended system of Black theology, a system built around a dialectic, involving the personal and the collective, the individual and the community, or stated another way, an oppressive culture and a liberating God.⁷

Although George is clearly mistaken about how "nominally identified" Allen was with Methodism, she is correct in saying that Allen's theological position involved a dialectic. That is, it involved the tension suggested earlier—religious faith vs. social action. Allen would have perhaps been more comfortable with this dialectic if it had been stated in terms of a heavenly reward with the accompanying notion of eternal life vs. earthly justice which insured equal treatment for Black Americans. His entire ministry, including the admonitions concerning hard working Christian slaves, reflects how deeply he felt the tension of this dialectic.

Henry Young's analysis of Allen's theology provides some insight into the nature of this dialectical position:

Allen's conception of God was very much influenced by the social conditions of his day. He did not develop an abstract philosophical-theological conception of God detached from his everyday existential experiences. He conceived of God as being organically integrated and interwoven with all of life. For this reason, he did not make a disjunction between physical liberation and spiritual liberation. God for him was a part of both dimensions of life.⁸

Allen gives evidence that he first encountered the dimension of this dialectical stance in the life and work of Jesus. In a statement that is the best record of Allen's Christological position, he says:

Our Savior's first and great work was that of the Salvation of men's souls; yet we find that the multitudes who came or were brought to Him labored under sickness and disorders. He never omitted one opportunity of doing good to their bodies, or sent away one that applied to Him without a cure. . . .⁹

Allen considered that Jesus' ministry was fundamentally a combination of caring for men's souls and their bodies. For him, the care of Black people who had been victimized by slavery was a vital issue for the church. Notwithstanding his realistic appraisal of the social conditions that oppressed his people and notwithstanding his belief that insurrections and violence would bring liberation, Allen made demands to bring an end to the institution of slavery. One of his clearest statements re-

⁷Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches 1760-1840*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 102.

⁸Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders 1755-1940*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), p. 31.

⁹Allen, *The Life Experiences and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, p. 76.

flects the views held by prophets such as Amos and Micah. He shared the belief of these eighth century prophets that God did not intend for any of his children to be placed in a position of constant oppression. In "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve the Practice," he said:

I do not intend to make you angry, but excite your attention to consider how hateful slavery is in the sight of that God who has destroyed kings and princes for their oppression of poor slaves. Pharoah and his princes, with the posterity of King Saul, were destroyed by the protector and avenger of slaves.¹⁰

Allen saw God's activity in the liberation event of the Israelites as a model for God's continuing concern for the oppressed of any age. Carol George maintains that:

For people like Allen, God was a present reality, an immanent force, who could help them out of their present difficulties, just as he had aided Jews when they were in need.¹¹

By taking seriously the earthly ministry of Jesus as a liberating activity and drawing on the Exodus theme from the Old Testament, Allen had brought to this basic position of personal salvation an important counterbalance. He had, in George's word, seen the essence of a dialectical position. Since he was the founder of the first independent Black Methodist denomination, his theological position should be an example for the Black church leaders who have come after him. In Allen's thought, a Christian should not lose sight of the personal dimensions of faith when dealing with social concerns. Of equal importance, however, was the concept that a Christian should not avoid social problems because of a preoccupation with personal immortality.

It is clear that Allen believed that white churchmen had missed the central issue in theology. They had little interest in the liberation of Black people from oppressive social structures. He detected a basic inconsistency in the thinking of people who claimed to love God and yet continued to own slaves. He said, in speaking to slave owners:

If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clean your hands from slaves, burthen (burden) not your children or your country with them.¹²

Allen became even more explicit concerning the relationship between love for fellowmen and love of God. An essential element of his theology, as might be expected, is a fundamental belief in looking at the needy as the representatives of Christ in the world. Certainly during Allen's life,

¹⁰Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹George, Segregated Sabbaths, p. 108.

¹²Allen, The Life Experiences, p. 71.

there were none more in need than Black people in slavery. He developed this notion by speaking about Matthew's account of the "last judgment:"

. . . consider further, that the real poor and needy are Christ's representatives. We cannot, surely doubt of this, if we look into our Savior's own account of the last judgment, 25th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which plainly shows us that the inquiry at that great and solemn day will be very particular about our works of mercy and charity.¹³

The merciful and charitable activity with regard to slaves was to liberate them from bondage. Allen, in this passage, provided a clear reminder to all who oppress others that the final decision on eternal life is vitally related to the nature of human relationships on earth. Again, speaking of the necessity of charity in human relations, Allen says:

. . . the absolute necessity of practising this duty is the very same with that of being Christians; this being the only sure mark by which we may be known and distinguished from such as are not Christians . . .¹⁴

For Allen, to be a Christian meant being concerned for all people but especially those who are in need. To be one with any hope of eternal salvation meant that one also has to show charity and mercy. By calling upon scriptural texts, Allen was able to use his own theological position to develop a basis for a critique on the social order of his time. The people in positions of power were simply operating in contradiction to the mandates of the scripture so far as he was concerned. Allen called for them to take careful note of where they had departed from the message of God and Jesus Christ.

By doing acts of mercy and charity, we acknowledge our dependence upon God, and his absolute right to whatever we possess through his bounty and goodness: we glorify him in his creatures, and reverence him by a due and cheerful obedience to his command.¹⁵

The slave owners and the supporters of the institution of slavery were certainly not "cheerfully" obeying God's command, and Allen told them about their disobedience. Even though Allen spoke directly to the ills of the institution of slavery, there was more to his theory of social policy than just the condemnation of slave owners and the slave system. He devoted much of his energy to explaining to Blacks that they were of dignity and worth in the sight of God. It is noteworthy that a freed slave would dare to speak out against his former owners. It is no less significant that a former slave, nurtured in the dehumanizing slave system, would be so totally convinced of the value of Black men and women. Allen's policy of change had two elements. On the one hand, he con-

¹³Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 79.

demned the slave system as being unchristian and, on the other hand, he counseled Blacks to get ready for a freedom assured to them by their God because they were of equal status with whites in God's sight.

Allen's policy for gaining freedom is difficult to express in specific detail. It has been suggested that he first spoke out against the institution of slavery as being a totally unchristian activity. He also called for the Blacks to rely on God and to be reassured concerning their own personal worth. In the latter case, Allen used his own life as a model. A religious experience had led to his own freedom. He had worked to improve himself during his struggle for freedom and once liberated he had achieved a great deal. Allen wanted other Blacks to gain economic resources, to buy their freedom and to support themselves once they were free. He encouraged Blacks to educate themselves in academic areas and in trades so that no one could say Blacks were innately inferior to whites. He believed a different attitude toward Black freedom would prevail if white people could be shown that Blacks were their equal. On one occasion, he proposed an experiment to prove his point. Addressing whites, he said:

... try the experiment of taking a few Black children and cultivate their minds with the same care and let them have the same prospect in view as to living in the world as you would wish for your own children, you would find upon trial, they were not inferior in mental endowments.¹⁶

Allen's challenge was to whites, and it is unlikely that he had any expectation of seeing this experiment carried out in a substantial way. These same words, however, had special meaning to Black people who, because of the cruelty of the slavery system, had begun to consider themselves to be mentally deficient or less than fully human.

Allen believed that self-reliance and self-help came from the recognition that all men were of equal worth to God. This sense of awareness came from being converted to the Christian faith. Allen depended on people who had come to "know" God and Christ and as a result had reevaluated their own place in the world. For Allen, this relationship between a converted Christian and a social activist was crucial. It is at the heart of his dialectical theology because it accounts for the affect which personal salvation has on social policy. Carol George speaks of the essential nature of this relationship when she deals with Allen's views about the struggle for justice.

The best soldier in the struggle for justice was . . . first and foremost the self-respecting convert, and then secondarily the concerned member of the community. The individual who did not know and accept himself could be of little service to anyone else.¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 69.

The first step was a confrontation with Christ and the second step was the development of community concern. Allen could not conceive of a theological position which did not include both steps. For him, the only way to show that the conversion experience had occurred and to reinforce its efficacy was through charitable service in the community.

Allen's dialectic position provided the background for a major church denomination and it foreshadowed the work of many latter-day Christians who have sought to bring the individual and collective aspects of Christian faith into a dynamic relationship. Richard Allen's theology and his social policy are indispensable ingredients for developing an understanding of a theology of liberation which deals with individual and social freedom.

The religious experience of Richard Allen and the affect that it had on his social policy are striking examples of the manner in which one Black religious leader put his Christian faith into action both in matters of personal salvation and of political/social concerns.

It can be argued that when viewed from the perspective of later works in theology and ethics, Allen's work seems too simplistic. For example, he did not carefully demonstrate the connection between faith and works in any complete way. Initially, he appears to be in fundamental agreement with Martin Luther's position in the "Treatise on Good Works." That is, he says that faith in God is that which is not only the first good work. However, an inconsistency is seen in Allen's theory at the point of his exegesis of Matthew 25. In this analysis he comes very close to saying that the measure of Christian faith is charitable work. A thoroughgoing "works theology" would hardly seem compatible with the initial stance on the primacy of a personal faith commitment.

Allen's position is also vulnerable at the level of formulating a social policy. He did not adequately deal with human frailty and the propensity for evil. He based much of his strategy for change on his own experiences with the slave system. Even though he allowed for the possibility of a totally unresponsive slave master, he still had a great deal of faith in the capacity of white men and women to realize that Blacks were equal to them. It is also clear that Allen had no significant means of empowering his theory of social change.

Although criticism may be directed at Allen's position, his significance as a religious leader committed to social change is secure. He did not have the theological tools needed to develop a system that fully explored the problems of faith and works. One reason why he appreciated the Methodist Church so much was that it dealt with plain and simple statements about God and Christian service. It is also important to remember that Allen was preaching with a notion of bringing mass reactions. He was not a systematic theologian; he was an evangelist.

In dealing with slaves or recently freed Black persons, Allen was

aware that it was highly unlikely that they could operate from a position of power. His alternative was to advocate a doctrine emphasizing a sense of Black pride rooted in Christian faith and to point out that most white Christians had failed to live by the Christian principle of love. Other A.M.E. leaders of later periods were able to suggest a variety of policies to deal with racism. They were also better prepared to deal with the finer points of theological arguments that Allen was. Richard Allen's contribution, however, was a monumental one. He started as a slave and he became the founding father of Black Methodism in America.

In the process of developing an independent Black Church, his position was clear. Wilmore explains it this way.:

Allen believed that the Black community had to be organized to deal responsibly with its own problem as long as American prejudice and indifference refused to erase the color line. And he also believed that an independent Black Church, which made every aspect of life its field of witness, was the most widely accepted and effective instrument among Black people with which to pursue the twin goals of spiritual holiness and civil freedom.¹⁸ Many church people have lost sight of the dynamic tension which should exist between religious faith and social action. For this reason, Richard Allen's message needs to be restated today. The words of Allen's obituary catch the spirit of what his life meant and still means to the Christian community.

When the humble African was even dragged from the altar of God by the inhuman whites who disgrace the land, rendered sacred by the glowing recollections which arise at the mention of the name, William Penn, Richard Allen stepped forth as their defender and protector, built, at his own expense and upon his own ground, the first African Church in America. It was he that through persecution, through malice, and through envy, walked like the Savior upon the troubled waters, in favor of African Religious Independence.¹⁹

What this writer is saying is quite simple. Allen and his followers helped lay the foundation for the Independent Black church in America. In doing this, his work helped to prepare the way for the expression Black theology as we know it today. Allen's view of heaven never led him to overlook the problems of this world. In all his ministry, he showed that religious faith and a concern for developing a policy of social change were the essential elements in Christian theology.

¹⁸Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, p. 134.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 135.