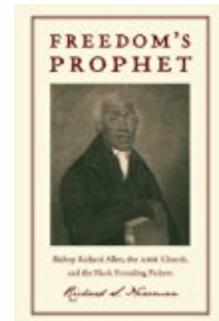


Richard S. Newman. *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. xiii + 359 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5826-7.

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Prophetic Founder

Freedom's Prophet, the award-winning biography of Richard Allen by Richard S. Newman, professor of history at Rochester Institute of Technology, offers a long overdue study of the important minister, community leader, and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Histories of African American religion and urban community life in the early Republic have not been short on references to Allen, but Newman's is the first scholarly biography since Carol V. R. George's *Segregated Sabbaths* (1973) and, before that, Charles Wesley's *Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom* (1935). For many of us, Allen's writings are required primary source reading in the classroom: his impassioned defense of African Americans following the yellow fever outbreak of 1793, his skillful eulogy of George Washington as an emancipator of both white and black, and his moving autobiographical narrative of his struggle to found an independent church open up the world of the early Republic for our students. In *Freedom's Prophet*, Newman skillfully knits together these familiar strands of Allen's life with others that Allen took less care for us to remember. Most strikingly, we learn of Allen's emigrationist thinking, his openness to the possibility of securing redemption for African Americans beyond the shores of the United States if necessary. The Allen that emerges, Newman argues, is not only a founding father for Philadelphia's African American community but also a prophetic founder for the entire nation.

The field of founder studies has been booming over

the last few decades, although as Newman rightfully points out, African Americans are largely missing from its pantheon. Rather than reject the utility of the founder concept, Newman embraces it, making a case for why Allen deserves a place at the altar of great men. Newman's definition of a black founding father is more expansive than those to which we are accustomed. He seeks to locate such a founder both within the black community—as a race leader, as a community organizer, and as a builder of autonomous institutions—and within the new American nation as a true “republican,” willing to engage the question of abolition as a moral good rather than to avoid it like his white contemporaries. The challenges facing Allen, however, transcend the period, leading Newman to extend his conceptualization of a black founder a step further. Allen's struggle to be both African and American, that doubleness of being that ricochets across American history, made him the nation's first black prophetic leader. Unafraid to critique the nation and to offer his own vision of national salvation, Allen set the foundation, Newman argues, for black liberalism, communalism, nationalism, and conservatism. No innocent bystander, Allen was a determined, occasionally stubborn, and politically savvy leader who paved the way for future leaders as diverse as David Walker, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King Jr.

We know little about Allen's youth because he chose to share little, believing that public accomplishments, not

private circumstances, made the man. That said, Newman has done an excellent job synthesizing what we do know: from Allen's birth to an enslaved mother in either Philadelphia or Delaware through his achievement of spiritual and legal freedom via his and, through his influence, his master's, evangelical conversion. Allen's struggle for independence occurred against the backdrop of the colonies' own struggle, although Newman says little about whether the wartime loyalty of Methodists reflected Allen's own political feelings. After the war ended, however, there is little doubt as to Allen's loyalty to both Methodism and the nation. As Allen rose from an itinerant exhorter to the first bishop of an African American Methodist denomination, he remained committed to providing fellow African Americans with a space in which to praise God and to warning those who held them in bondage that they imperiled the sanctity of the nation.

Over the course of the 1790s, Allen emerged as the spiritual and political leader of Philadelphia's African American community. To the longstanding debate as to whether the walkout of African American worshippers from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church represented the push of white discrimination or the pull of black self-determination, Newman adds an interpretive spin: Allen precipitated the whole incident to further his goal of founding an autonomous African American church. A fervent evangelical, Allen preached a gospel of moral discipline that he believed would combat white prejudice. Redeeming America for African Americans, however, also required political mobilization and nationalist thinking. The outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793 promised an opportunity for blacks to demonstrate their spiritual devotion and civic virtue by caring for the sick, but their efforts were repaid with accusations of exploitation and wrongdoing. Allen and Absalom Jones met the slanderer, printer Matthew Carey, on his own terms and defended the city's free black population in print against white ingratitude. Allen and Jones's printed response, Newman persuasively shows, went beyond a simple defense of African Americans to a full-fledged public challenge to the nation's support of the institution of slavery.

In the aftermath of the yellow fever epidemic, Allen devoted his public life to redeeming America for African Americans, although we learn that he pursued seemingly contradictory avenues for achieving it. He capitalized on his new position as a leader of the black community to craft a hybrid course of black nationalism that involved advocating interracial efforts at reform while building autonomous African American institutions. Allen con-

tinued to petition and publish, writing eulogies of well-known southerners whom he believed to be supportive of abolition and publicizing the confessions of convicted black murderers to argue that theirs was a moral, not a racial, failing. Initially refusing to remove Bethel Church from the Methodist Episcopal fold, Allen relented in 1815 when white Methodist ruling elders put Bethel up for auction. Buying the church back did not bring Allen's troubles to an end, for soon after he had to take the Methodists to Pennsylvania's highest court to defend his right to control Bethel's pulpit. Victory gave Allen the mandate to found a new denomination, the AME, and launch a dramatic program of national expansion.

The course of racial uplift did not always run smoothly. One of Newman's great contributions is his recovery of Allen's various emigrationist schemes. As racial animosities hardened in the 1810s and 20s, Allen's hopes for interracial harmony diminished. Doubting whether the young nation could ever be redeemed for African Americans, he began to look elsewhere, successively wondering whether Africa, Haiti, or Canada might offer the racial equality denied to them in America. For all of Allen's conviction, his followers remained unconvinced. In 1817, they soundly rebuffed his proposal of African colonization, but this would not be the end of Allen's efforts. An invitation from the president of Haiti, Jean-Pierre Boyer, a decade later to immigrate drew Allen fire from both sides—from whites who feared a powerful republic of freed slaves so close to American shores and from African Americans disappointed that Haiti did not turn out to be the land of promise they had hoped. Despite the setbacks, Allen remained open to the belief that redemption might happen somewhere, anywhere, other than the United States. At the end of his life, he looked to Canada.

Today most scholars and students begin where Allen ended: with his autobiography. As the final accomplishment of a long life of religious and political activism, Allen's autobiography is a curious, if not terribly satisfying, creation, combining private spiritual autobiography with reprints of selected public writings. Nothing is said about his emigrationist thinking and little about his personal struggles with questions of faith and practice. The scholar who seeks to tell the story of Allen's life is left to restore what was purposely left out. Newman has done an admirable job of filling in the missing pieces, using a range of overlooked sources. Newman's interest in restoring Allen the community leader, however, sometimes leads him to slight Allen the spiritual leader. We learn much about what religion allowed Allen to do,

but less about what religion, especially evangelicalism, meant to him and his followers. Understanding Allen's faith is key to appreciating why Allen remained within the Methodist fold for so long, in spite of its rampant racism, or how he commanded the respect of African Americans. When Newman writes that after attending the inaugural conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore in 1784 Allen decided "that someone must convert blacks into a powerful Afro-Christian constituency," he fast-forwards through Allen's theological concerns to get to his political ones (p. 53). Before those Afro-Christians were a constituency of civic-minded residents, they were a congregation of sinners; and before Allen was a politician representing them, he was a preacher exhorting them to seek conversion. That said, Newman has some wonderful passages about Allen's faith, such as his description of the importance of the biblical story of Exodus to Allen's thinking.

A question that will engender much discussion and debate in the classroom is whether Newman's use of the category of black founding father ultimately gives us something more than we had before. Newman does not always push as far as one might want. Allen and the other men put forward for founder status—Jones, Paul Cuffee, and Prince Hall—are all "good guys," men whose legacies of church building and nonviolent activism positively inspired subsequent generations. But what about figures like Prosser's Gabriel? His legacy was arguably as important as Allen's, especially for someone like David Walker, but for different reasons. Is he also a black founding father? Newman mentions Prosser's Gabriel in passing, but does not explore how expansive the criteria for black founder status might be. By the same token, what about founding mothers? Newman is to be commended for bringing Allen's wives Flora and Sarah and his protégé Jarena Lee into the story, but they are not nearly as integral to the story as men like Jones. Sources remain a problem, but more discussion on life within the

church, instead of outside it, might have brought them more clearly into focus.

At times, Newman's decision to fit Allen into the mold of a founding father has the inadvertent effect of presenting an overly heroic image of the man. Allen clearly rubbed many people, white and black, the wrong way. His apprentices did not want to work for him. In the 1790s, blacks preferred Jones's Protestant Episcopal St. Thomas to Allen's Methodist Bethel. Upstarts inside and outside his congregation found his vengeance rain down on them when they challenged his authority and founded their own churches (a particularly ironic response given Allen's commitment to fostering black leadership). Allen often did not like to share the stage with others, but that does not mean he was always in the right and his challengers in the wrong. Richard Green in 1815 does not have to be read just as a tool of white Methodists, nor William Perkins and Jonathan Tudas a decade later as merely opportunistic, lower-class upstarts. They, too, had visions of what African American religion could be. But in Newman's telling, the need to emphasize Allen as a founding father occasionally obscures just how complex and disunited the free black community actually was. This was a community that thrived on charismatic leadership and Allen's was not the only pulpit in town.

Newman's deeply researched and thought-provoking biography of Allen is a welcome addition to our syllabi and will engender much discussion and debate in the classroom. The timing of the paperback release (October 2009) means that we will likely have to wait for the spring semester to assign the book, but it will be worth the wait. The questions that Newman's Allen wrestles with—conversion, community, abolition, colonization—are those facing the young nation over its first half-century. The challenges he faces in balancing Allen's contribution as a religious and political leader, of being in this world but not of it, are crucial. Historians and students alike will find much of interest.

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