

Introduction

On September 10, 1885, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, having just read Daniel Alexander Payne's latest work, *Domestic Education*, wrote:

It is simple, comprehensive and practical, yet learned, classical and philosophical. It should be the text-book of every minister in the A.M.E. Church, and made a part of every sermon for the next twenty five years. He has treated the very subject of all others the negro race most needs enlightenment upon, without which we are destined to go to the wall. Every young man and wife in the land should make the study of it a specialty, and as a prerequisite to their future happiness and the happiness of their children and children's children. . . . Bishop Payne has brought out the brutality of children-beating parents in unmeasured terms and has shown how mothers can correct children by a frown and fathers by a look and a gutteral tone.¹

Turner's tribute to Payne's work was one of the many rave reviews in the *Christian Recorder* that accompanied the appearance of the book.² Like Turner, many AME Church members believed that African Americans needed guidance and advice regarding the rearing of Christian children. Although there was an abundance of white domestic literature published at the time,

readers of the *Christian Recorder* recognized that black parents faced unique challenges. As evidenced by Turner's book review, the legacy of slavery complicated the parental decision to corporally punish children.

In many ways, Payne's *Treatise On Domestic Education* was the culmination of over three decades of debate about the spiritual rearing of children in the AME Church. From its inception in 1852, the *Christian Recorder*, the official denominational newspaper, was a central site for the discussion of key issues facing the church. Therefore, editors of the newspaper exerted a disproportionate influence on the familial advice dispensed to their readership. In 1862, Elisha Weaver, the newspaper's first editor, created a regular column, the "Family Circle," which provided instruction on the religious life of the home. Following the Civil War, the *Christian Recorder* was inundated with submissions to the "Information Wanted" column from southern African Americans seeking to locate relatives separated during slavery and rebuild their families. In 1868, Benjamin T. Tanner began a children's newspaper, the *Child's Recorder*, which exceeded the subscription rate of the adult newspaper in the first months of its publication. By 1885, the AME Church was ready for a complete domestic manual that would synthesize the necessary familial advice for concerned African American parents.

This book examines the multiple constructions and uses of domesticity in the AME Church as it emerged from the Civil War to the close of the nineteenth century. While this study continues the process of recovering African American women's voices in black church history, I focus primarily on the ways men in the AME Church constructed and reshaped notions and understandings of nineteenth-century Victorian familial values. Although black male clergy consistently dispensed domestic religious advice in the AME Church, few studies have lingered on their contributions and interpretations of the ideology of domesticity. The participation of bishops, ministers, laity, and various other correspondents in this ongoing dialogue about domesticity is indicative of the concern many within the AME Church felt about the nurture and rearing of Christian children. Northerners and southerners, rich and poor, slave and free all sought to create a better life in America for the next generation of African Americans. Because their own life experiences, perspectives, and motivations differed, their specific prescriptive remedies to improve African American domestic religious life varied. However, what most agreed upon was that family and home life and their effects on children held the key for a prosperous future for the African American race and the church. As Daniel Alexander Payne put it, "What the families of a race are the race will be—nothing more, nothing less."³

A number of works have investigated the adoption of Victorian domestic ideologies among Christian communities. Colleen McDannell's *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900* illustrates the ways evangelical Protestants and immigrant Catholics developed a domestic religion to perpetuate middle-class values. A. Gregory Schneider's *The Way of the Cross Leads Home* charts the creation of an evangelical version of domesticity among American Methodists. Historians have studied varying aspects of domesticity and respectability in African American churches. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent* examines class, gender, and the impact of the politics of respectability on the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's *Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* considers the ways family life influenced women's views of gender, racial equality, and feminism. Particularly helpful for this study was her nuanced analysis of class and manhood in the adoption of Victorian values among black Christians. Jualynne E. Dodson's *Engendering Church* demonstrates the ways women gathered sources of power and opened opportunities for female members of the AME Church. Among their many contributions, these works reaffirmed black women as powerful actors and reclaimed their accomplishments for the historical record.⁴

I am also indebted to scholars who have interwoven issues of domesticity into their broader historical narratives of the AME Church. David W. Wills examines Daniel A. Payne's influence on womanhood and domesticity in the AME Church, and his dissertation, "Aspects of Social Thought in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884–1910," which contains a chapter on "Marriage, Family and the Role of Women," remains the most thorough exploration of issues of domesticity in the *AME Church Review*. James T. Campbell's *Songs of Zion* addresses the use of domestic ideology by opponents of female preachers, and Albert G. Miller's *Elevating the Race* points out the ways Theophilus G. Steward's memorial to his mother, *Memoirs of Mrs. Rebecca Steward*, supported the ideology of domesticity in the AME Church. The thoughtful biographies of Henry McNeal Turner by Stephen Ward Angell and Benjamin T. Tanner by William Seraile have also paved the way for this study.⁵

In this book, I explore two interconnected uses of domesticity in the AME Church. The first concerns the use of AME literature to impart advice regarding the religious life of the home. On one hand, it provided guidance for parents on the proper instruction that would best nurture the spiritual life of children. On a larger scope, the literature itself was meant to dispel myths

about the black family, which had been regularly maligned in the white press. From this vantage point, the literature was aimed at multiple audiences: concerned African American parents and a skeptical white audience all too willing to believe the worst about black familial life.

When I use the term “domesticity,” I refer to the ideology that encouraged white middle-class Protestant women to make their maternal responsibilities and the care of the home paramount to any other pursuit. Pioneering historian Barbara Welter referred to the growth of literature and poetry that reinforced this ideology as the “cult of true womanhood.” Within this worldview the central traits of womanhood were defined as piety, purity, submissiveness, and devotion to the home. Following this line of thinking, the mother, not the father, was charged with the central responsibility for raising the children.⁶

In many ways, African American proponents of domesticity had to write themselves into a discourse that, for the most part, had excluded them. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall has observed, white evangelical periodicals and women’s fiction, for the most part, barred black women from participation in the “cult of true womanhood,” arguing either that African American women were naturally licentious and sexually immoral or that the harsh conditions of slavery had stunted the development of the requisite qualities of motherhood. Similarly, editorials and letters to white periodicals doubted that black men could ascend to true manhood after years of being enslaved. With the perception that black women were promiscuous and that black men were powerless, many white Americans had a satisfying explanation for what they speculated was a degraded home life among blacks.⁷

Second, I focus on the use of Victorian notions of femininity by the male hierarchy in the AME Church to circumscribe women’s influence to the home. While there were multiple incentives for men to hold this position, I focus on the ways male clergy sought to measure up to cultural expectations of true manhood, which for many of them was closely tied to their official positions in the church. Images of black women ranged from the domestic homemaker who nurtured her children at her knee to the “race woman” who would elevate African Americans through her oratorical and leadership skills. Within this marketplace of ideas, various constituents argued for their version of domesticity to prevail.

The ideology of domesticity in the nineteenth century assigned the public realm to men and the private sphere to women. Because of this dichotomy, to limit the influence of domesticity to the home is to tell half of

the story. As AME Church leaders and contributors constructed literature for the home, defining the roles of men and women, implicitly they were defining gender roles in the church. For example, if women's central duty was to their husband and children, as some argued, they could not become traveling preachers in the church. Therefore, in order to illumine the importance of domesticity to leaders and contributors in the AME Church, I contextualize my argument within the struggle over gender roles in the church.

Moving chronologically, the book proceeds through the terms of Elisha Weaver (1862–1868), Benjamin T. Tanner (1868–1884), Benjamin Lee (1884–1892), and H. T. Johnson (1892–1900) as editors of the *Christian Recorder*. Through editorials and their selection of articles to include on family life, editors of the AME *Christian Recorder* had a decided advantage in shaping the contours of the public discussion of domesticity in the church. As the study proceeds from the post-Civil War period to the Woman's Era, I use the minister's tenures as editor to point to recurrent themes in the seemingly endless variations of Victorian domestic values.

However, these were not the only voices in the newspaper. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, author of numerous AME Church histories and his *Treatise on Domestic Education* (1885), was perhaps the most outspoken advocate for domesticity as a tool for the advancement of the race. While elder statesmen such as Payne sought to set the tone regarding all serious matters involving the church, they often encountered friction from up and coming young ministers like Theophilus Gould Steward. Steward challenged the authority of the AME leadership and argued that the church too often favored tradition over innovation and change, especially regarding women's rights in the AME Church.

After the Civil War, the voices of women increasingly filled the pages of the *Recorder*. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an internationally renowned novelist and poet, contributed articles and serialized novels to the paper. Much as Harper did in her own life, her female protagonists often simultaneously embraced domesticity, engaged the public realm, and fought for woman's rights. In addition, "ordinary" people wrote to the newspaper, describing upcoming events, celebrating past triumphs, and expressing opinions about the issues of the day. It is the concert of these many voices that reveals the multiple ways African Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century employed domesticity for empowerment, control, and the hope for a brighter future. Influential leaders and contributors in the AME

Church, such as Benjamin T. Tanner, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Daniel A. Payne, and Theophilus G. Steward, each embraced elements of the white Victorian cult of domesticity and translated the ideology to fit the particular condition of African Americans in the post-Civil War era.

Emancipation was a time when many black leaders, including members of the AME Church, began to reevaluate and re-imagine the possibilities for the future of African Americans. A central component in that brighter future was the family. As Eric Foner has argued, “Emancipation not only institutionalized the black family but also spawned tensions within it, black men and women shared a passionate commitment to the stability of family life as the solid foundation upon which a new black community could flourish.” While black men and women shared a concern for the family, American society granted greater freedoms to African-American men. During the Civil War, black men served with the Union Army. The Freedmen’s Bureau viewed the husband as the head of the black household, allowing men to sign contracts for the labor arrangements of the entire family and paying women a lower wage. By 1867, black men could vote and hold political office, while black women were excluded from such positions.⁸

During the post-Civil War period, the AME Church also experienced an incredible increase in membership with the influx of new southern members. Historians have estimated that in 1858, the membership of the AME Church was approximately 20,000 members, with virtually no members in the southern states. By 1896, the total membership of the church was over 450,000 with approximately eighty percent of the members residing in the South. During those forty years, the AME Church transformed itself from a small northern community to a national denomination.⁹ The editors of AME Church periodicals, especially the *Christian Recorder*, felt it was part of their responsibility not only to disseminate information and world news to the growing AME Church membership and African Americans across the country, but to help them interpret the implications of those events.¹⁰ From the earliest pages of the *Christian Recorder*, contributors debated and discussed how to best uplift the race. This is a study of one of the most historically overlooked proposals in the discussion, the formation of a black domestic ideology.

Far from espousing a unified philosophy, the views and formulations of domesticity were as diverse and varied as the membership of the AME Church. Rather than gradually embracing the ideology, the correspondences in nineteenth-century AME literature reveal that domesticity was a con-

tested and constantly shifting notion. This project examines moments of intense interest in the family and the most outspoken advocates and opponents of domestic ideology, especially those that invoked a particularly strong response in AME periodicals such as the *Christian Recorder*.

My central concern is not the level of participation of families in domestic religion. Instead, I explore the ways contributors to nineteenth-century AME literature imagined and presented the ideal black family and home to advance causes large and small in the church and American society. The first chapter charts the strategies employed by the first editors of the *Christian Recorder*, Elisha Weaver and Benjamin Tanner, to universalize the religious instruction of children and write African Americans into the discourse on domesticity. In chapter 2, I explore the ways many male AME Church leaders employed ideologies of domesticity to stake their claim to the higher leadership positions in the church. Chapter 3 examines the repackaging of domesticity to meet the challenges of the Post-Reconstruction black family, exemplified by Tanner's efforts to establish the children's newspaper the *Child's Recorder*. The last chapter analyzes the reactions to and implications of Payne's *Treatise on Domestic Education* (1885) within AME Church literature. The limits of Payne's ideology, as well as its unexpected applications, reveal new facets of an old debate concerning the role of women in the home and the church.

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