

# INTRODUCTION



Migration is a theme of enduring historic significance. The wellspring of the myth of the American national character has been the movement of peoples of European descent across the landscape. Historians in the tradition of Frederick Jackson Turner have explained the United States in terms of the challenge of the western frontier.<sup>1</sup> The historiography of European settlement and migration has so dominated the literature that the internal movement of peoples of African descent is often overlooked. Looking from the perspective of the end of the twentieth century, the movement out of the South of significant numbers of African Americans beginning during World War I is far more important to understanding the peril and promise of contemporary American society than the experiences of, for example, immigrants from Norway making their way to rural North Dakota or of farmers from New England following the Oregon Trail. The Great Migration acted as demographic watershed, the harbinger of economic, political, and social changes that have transformed the United States.

Of about half of black Americans living in 1970 outside what he termed their "old country," historian Bernard A. Weisberger wrote, "for complex reasons, the children of the 'immigrant within,' the northward-moving black still remained unmelted." In contrast, newcomers from outside the

United States, regulated by a series of immigration restriction acts beginning in 1917 and culminating in 1924, were “largely absorbed into the major currents of American life.”<sup>2</sup> The persistent barriers of race, and to a lesser degree class, that the refugees from the South encountered in the urban North have their base in the era of the Great Migration. From today’s perspective, the story of the internal migration of African Americans is of greater significance for understanding our contemporary culture than invoking the shibboleth of an ethnic “melting pot.”

My interest in the voluntary movement of African Americans began in earnest when I visited the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution one Sunday afternoon in the early spring of 1987. The sun shown brightly over Washington, D.C., and expectations were that the cherry blossoms would be unusually abundant. Like other visitors, I was there to tour the exhibit “Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940,” which had opened February 5, 1987, and was already attracting widespread attention.<sup>3</sup> Using visual, aural, and physical artifacts, “Field to Factory” told the story of hundreds of thousands of African Americans who sought to start their lives over in the urban North after new economic opportunities opened during World War I.

I lingered for a long time at many portions of the 7,000 square foot exhibit, looking and listening. Drawn to the objects that Spencer Crew, chief curator, and his associates had brought together to depict the social history of ordinary people, I became a silent witness to the power of the material to evoke the spiritual. Sunday services were over, and African American churchgoers, dressed in their best, were arriving to spend an afternoon at the Smithsonian. I overheard several “elders” among the families recount how familiar many of the artifacts were. It was as if a time machine had transported them to the rural South, which either they or their parents once called home. I distinctly recall the comment of a woman who examined the exhibit depicting the interior of a rural church: “We had one like that in Georgia.” The cohort of African Americans who participated in the Great Migration of the World War I era shrinks with each passing year. Perhaps that is why the “Field to Factory” exhibit generated such interest, had its stay at the Smithsonian extended, and toured the country through the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. It drew African Americans living in Alaska together in retrospective comradery, and it stimulated others to dig deeper in archives and call up family memories of the pilgrimage from South to North.<sup>4</sup>

Few visitors that Sunday afternoon could have been old enough to have participated in the Great Migration of 1916 to 1918, the core experience with which this book deals. The Smithsonian exhibit used the wartime exodus to represent the entire period from 1915 to 1940 when African Americans left the South in waves of varying intensity. One could argue for a Great Migration of 1916 until 1930, since the onset of the Great Depression significantly slowed the black exodus. For metaphorical as well as historical reasons that I hope will become clear, I use the term “Great” primarily in connection with the movement during World War I, but it includes the postwar phases of the 1920s. My chronological boundaries extend into the 1930s and 1940s only for the purpose of examining the impact of the exchange of place epitomized by the Great Migration. I do so in part to make the case that the whole story of the significance of the Great Migration is not in numbers. Its magnitude (including the post-World War I phases) is worthy of note, but many more African Americans remained in the South than left it. By 1930 the majority were still tied to the land. Nevertheless, a new consciousness emerged by the end of the Great Migration era. The city became the critical arena in which the struggle of African Americans to find the “Promised Land” took place.

As we shall see, participants in the Great Migration interpreted their escape from the South as the “Second Emancipation.” This term suggests that they had more than material ends in mind when voting with their feet to leave home and seek better lives elsewhere. Though some attention is given in what follows to individuals, my chief concern is with African American churches and denominations. By all accounts, the church was the central institution within which African Americans expressed their corporate self. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the impact of the Great Migration on churches in the North and in the South. The Second Emancipation’s historiography is mostly devoted to socioeconomic considerations, or it is framed by the “race relations” imperative. Scholarly studies that give attention to the Great Migration generally belong to the subfield of urban studies and are concerned with issues of race and class, with ghetto formation, and with labor questions.<sup>5</sup> Cultural considerations are slighted, and a sustained focus on the most important cultural institution in African American communities—the church—is missing.

African American religious studies as a specialty within the American Academy of Religion is nearly a quarter-century old and has yielded a rich and varied harvest. Though we as yet have no comprehensive history, an

increasing number of excellent studies contribute to the larger enterprise.<sup>6</sup> When the chronicle of African American religion is written, attention to the impact of the Great Migration must be incorporated. For reasons that will emerge, I view the period when hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South as critical to our understanding of contemporary African American religion. Before the Great Migration, African American church life developed, with some exceptions, independently in North and South, separated by regional economic, social, and political differences. African American Christians confronted racism in both sections of the country, but the expression of that racism and their ability to cope with it varied from place to place. As a result of the exodus, contrasting expectations of the church's mission came together in the urban North, and a more mixed religious culture emerged. Allan Spear wrote in *Black Chicago* (1967),

Of all aspects of community life, religious activities were most profoundly influenced by the migration. Before the war, the large, middle-class Baptist and Methodist churches had dominated Negro religious life. . . . Although they had not completely discarded the emotionalism of the traditional Negro religion, these churches had moved toward a more decorous order of worship and a program of broad social concern. The migration brought to the city thousands of Negroes accustomed to the informal, demonstrative, preacher-orientated churches of the rural south.<sup>7</sup>

Another pivotal outcome of the Great Migration is reflected in the emergence of the first wave of scholarly studies of black churches. The standard by which African American churches were judged was created by those whom I shall call the instrumentalists. These were religious and secular leaders, mostly but not exclusively in the North, who attempted to redirect a greater proportion of denominational resources and the focus of church life from internal to external concerns. The debate between northern Social Gospelers (the instrumentalists) and southern leaders fearful of losing the old-time religion (the traditionalists) reflected in many respects the ideological conflict between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington that lingered long after Washington's death in 1915.

Many discussions of African American churches today assume that their normative mission is to serve the community by being agents of social change. Less interest is given to the internal life of the churches, that is,

specifically to churches as arenas in which matters of ultimate meaning and concern are addressed. The Great Migration propelled this preoccupation with black churches as the means to ends other than those of offering members spiritual refreshment and a place to worship. The instrumentalists were influenced by the Social Gospel movement and principally concerned themselves with urban churches. After it became apparent that the Great Migration did not bring about a wholesale redistribution of African Americans, they turned their attention to southern churches, specifically southern rural churches, which were presumed to be retrogressive. One emphasis of this study, then, is on how the instrumentalists came to dominate the discussion of the mission of African American churches, North and South, after World War I.

Debate and discussion of the meaning of African American religion in the last decades of the twentieth century follows channels cut in the aftermath of the Great Migration. The bipolar categories of “protest” and “accommodation” used by contemporary analysts may have replaced the older language of “this-worldly” and “other-worldly,” but the tendency to establish mutually exclusive realms constrains our understanding of African American religion.<sup>8</sup> Authors, particularly those who were themselves active in the generational shift toward Black Consciousness or sympathetic to the involvement of churches in the civil rights movement, understandably leaned toward the “protest” model and applauded those denominations that had progressive leadership. In the protest vs. accommodation paradigm certain black denominational traditions fared better than others in the debate over the function and meaning of contemporary African American Christianity. For example, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., received low marks for not being directly involved in the civil rights movement while under the leadership of Joseph H. Jackson.<sup>9</sup> Churches belonging to the “sanctified” tradition, such as black Holiness-Pentecostal groups, also fared poorly in scholarly accounts structured on the paradigm. These varieties of African American religion continue to be labeled “conversionist sects” and are said to exemplify “a desire by many African Americans to return to ‘that old-time religion.’”<sup>10</sup> Pentecostalism, particularly under the banner of the Church of God in Christ, is today the fastest-growing religious sector among African Americans, yet it has been the subject of strong criticism for not being in the vanguard of the “protest” movement, and it did not even appear in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies until 1926.<sup>11</sup>

A historical puzzle exists here that cannot be solved without a deeper understanding of the time crucible when bearers of that old-time religion came into the urban North. Black Baptist and Methodist denominations in the North, having put aside much of the emotional exuberance in their own pasts, looked askance at the newcomers and their exotic spirituality, and the reformers within and without the established churches measured the migrants against the new benchmark of social and political protest. Ironically, the Pentecostals and their religious kin grew in numbers in urban environments until they outdistanced the older mainstream churches. As we near the end of the twentieth century, debate over the meaning and mission of the black church continues, but signs of convergence have emerged. Black churches are expected to be socially and politically active as well as true to what some have begun to call the “core” African American cultural tradition.<sup>12</sup> This tradition, surprisingly, has its roots in the often-criticized southern and predominantly rural worship practices of the migrants. The emerging canon for the African American church seems to be one that calls for the incorporation of distinctively “black” (variously defined) cultural forms of worship yoked with a prophetic and activist ministry. Once again we must look to the era of the Great Migration for help in understanding the roots of this shift in the paradigm.

To gauge the watershed significance of the Great Migration, I begin in chapter 1 with an overview of conditions in the South before World War I. Chapter 2 discusses the exodus itself within the context of the debate over the future of African Americans. Chapter 3 attempts to probe the deeper meaning of the Great Migration as a salvation event, to see it from the vantage point of the migrants who read providential import into it. In chapter 4 I examine the responses of the principal African American denominations to what many leaders declared was an institutional crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The regional redistribution of large numbers of African Americans not only threatened existing ecclesiastical arrangements but, according to the jeremiad of the day, portended a loss of faith. Chapter 5 considers the challenges set before existing northern African American churches by the influx of thousands of refugees from the South who were considered religious and racial kin. I offer a significantly different assessment of the outreach made by the mainline churches to the migrants than can be gleaned from the older scholarly literature. To present the story of the process by which northern religious communities attempted to change the migrants, and, in turn, the migrant influx altered

the urban cultural landscape, chapter 6 discusses one particular northern city—Chicago. “Chicago,” Charles S. Johnson wrote in 1923, “is in more than one sense the colored capital and in every sense the top of the world for bruised, crushed, and thwarted manhood of the South.”<sup>13</sup> From 1910 until 1920 Chicago’s African American population increased 148 percent. The city’s religious map was redrawn by the Great Migration, and a more complex and diversified urban religious culture resulted. In chapter 7 the interaction of northern and southern black religious cultures is examined, and an argument is made for the southernization of northern African American religion. Chapter 8 extends this study’s emphasis on exploring the long-range impact of the rural-to-urban movements by returning to the South and assessing the point of view employed by pioneering surveys and scholarly studies of African American churches.

This history is not institutional in the narrow sense, certainly not church history by someone who must operate within the constraints of denominational expectations. Yet I consciously highlight the mainline African American denominations because of the inordinate attention that scholarly and popular accounts of the period between the two world wars have given to what is commonly termed “the rise of the cults and sects.”<sup>14</sup> By attempting to offset the tilt toward the exotic, I also mean to challenge the assumption that African Americans in urban areas flocked to the so-called cults and sects because the mainline churches failed to make meaningful efforts to meet their spiritual and material needs. My own assessment is more charitable, though the reasons for it can become clear only when we have established how the black church came to be the principal institutional vehicle to which the migrants, and those who sought to assist them, turned when it was realized that the Great Migration was a harbinger of the future.

Finally, readers are forewarned that the perspective occasionally shifts within chapters. These shifts occur because I view the Great Migration as both an event and a process. While the archetypal migrants are those who went from southern fields to northern factories, I recognize, as Carole Marks has argued, that many migrants had earlier experiences as nonagricultural laborers in the urban South.<sup>15</sup> Our lens will focus primarily on the exodus from the South to the urban, industrial North, but we must remember that African Americans also were moving into southern cities during these decades. I also acknowledge that the magnitude of the exodus from the South during the years from 1940 to 1960 was larger than that of the World War I era.

The publication in 1991 of Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* has stimulated discussion of the migration northward of southern blacks and its effects on contemporary American life. Much of the current debate focuses on the causes of the persistence of black poverty in urban America.<sup>16</sup> Lemann's subject matter, as Tom Bethell pointed out in the *American Spectator*, is essentially about the "unfinished business" that the United States has in overcoming "its original sin of slavery."<sup>17</sup> By the time that Lemann's migrants enter into the Promised Land, the road had been well-traveled by an earlier generation that participated in the first Great Migration. If they came with more optimism, it was because the patterns and formulations of twentieth-century urban African American life were yet to be demarcated and fully revealed. Thus, these earlier migrants may have correctly believed that America's "original sin" could be atoned for by entering into the Promised Land.

In the debate over the nature and mission of the African American church, participants too often set the rural church against the urban church, the other-worldly against the this-worldly, the spiritual against the social. Those partial to activist agendas deemed the rural church retrogressive while hailing urban churches as the vanguard of progress. Those defending theologically conservative, even fundamentalist, definitions of church put the highest priority on "saving souls." The following history of African American churches during and after the Great Migration demonstrates that the traditional framing of the debate in oppositional categories fails to do justice to the diverse ways in which African Americans expressed their religious hope, either institutionally or individually. In my analysis of the Great Migration and African American religion, I do not privilege one side of the debate over another. Instead, I argue that as a result of the Great Migration two differing understandings of the church's function met, and in that conjunction an important transformation and re-creation took place. Perhaps as a result of the following analysis, we shall come to understand that the this-worldly vs. other-worldly paradigm for discussing the African American religious experience should be put to rest. At the very least, I hope to convince readers of the critical importance of the Great Migration. In the words of Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, "As the primary institution available for responding to external threat and challenge, as well as internal aspiration and expression, the African-American church was remade anew in the shadow of the Great Migration."<sup>18</sup>