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Wallace D. Best: Passionately Human, No Less Divine

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INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORY of African Americans is in large part a religious history. It is a story deeply anchored in themes of captivity, exile, enslavement, and deliverance.¹ It is an account of a diasporic people that closely follows the historical narrative of the Hebrews of Old Testament scripture. Indeed, the affinity of the slave experience to that of the Hebrews of the Old Testament is a major reason many slaves in the United States embraced the Exodus story. The captivity and subsequent deliverance of the Children of Israel seemed an ancient account of the slave's lived experience and cherished hopes. Many of the most revered Negro spirituals, such as "Go Down, Moses," bear this out.

Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!²

One can even say that, above all, the dual themes of captivity and deliverance, or captivities and deliverances, have comprised the very core of the black experience in the United States since the slave era. They are the most intimate and enduring aspects of black life.

This book is about the transformations that took place among the black Protestant churches and in the religious culture of black Chicago during one of those deliverances, the period known as the Great Migration. Beginning in 1915 at the time of the First World War, the Great Migration, or the "second exodus," was the signal event of the early twentieth century, when large numbers of blacks relocated from the rural South to the urban North, "leaving the land," in the words of Richard Wright, "for the streets of the city."³ As an integral part of the deliverance motif in black American life, migration itself has been a lasting theme. Blacks have long connected their freedom to the ability to move, to change place or spatial direction, recognizing that, as Ralph Ellison put it, "geography is fate."⁴ In the often chaotic and disruptive process of migration, all aspects of African American life underwent incredible transformation. Since the beginning of the mass social and demographic movement, scholars from various disciplines have attempted to chronicle the full range of those changes in dozens of books, documentaries, and articles.⁵ Only a few of these analyses, however, have given adequate attention to black churches or to African-American religion more broadly. Thorough investigations of the religious transformations intrinsic to the migration era have not

been a central concern, nor has religion factored prominently in the narrative. This book intends to fill a large gap in the historiography of the Great Migration to Chicago and in our understanding of the relationship between the migration of southern blacks, urbanization, and religious change. It shows that the Great Migration stimulated new urban religious practices and traditions among the black Protestant churches of Chicago that reflected aspects of both black southern religion and the exigencies of city life. These practices and traditions may have been rooted in the folk culture of the rural South, but their expression developed from southern migrants' confrontation with the urban North.⁶

The book illustrates how the migration of black southerners to Chicago launched a new sacred order in the city. It was new because so much of this order's ritual and institutional expression differed from previously established patterns. The notion of the sacred also differed in important ways from some interpretations of the concept. It did not involve a juxtaposition of sacred and profane in the strictest sense, as demonstrated by history of religions scholar and philosopher Mircea Eliade.⁷ African American religion has historically defied this polarity. In the simplest terms, the sacred component to black Chicago's new order was that which was set apart yet attributable fundamentally to human action in the tradition of French philosopher Emil Durkheim.⁸ The sacredness of things (objects, relics, symbols) or moral communities (churches) is not inherent; it comes by social agreement, or as Karen Fields has asserted, it is "made so by doing."⁹ It was a process of setting apart by human action that was at work in the construction of black Chicago's new sacred order.

The new sacred order did not so much topple an old religious establishment as it rendered that establishment's long-held institutional priorities ineffective in a rapidly changing religious climate. In contrast to the old religious establishment that was run by a coterie of well-educated, middle-class male ministers, the new sacred order was largely a female order, as black women constituted more than 70 percent of the membership in many churches. The new order was also fundamentally Protestant and explicitly Christian, which refutes notions that black religion during the first decades of the twentieth century was overrun by "cults and sects."¹⁰ While black urban religion was most certainly represented by many non-Christian and quasi-Christian groups, black mainstream Protestant churches were the truest indicators of change to the religious culture in Chicago. Black southerners imbued these churches with a "folk" religious sensibility, and in doing so ironically recast conceptions of modern African American religion in terms that reflected the rural past. In the same way that working-class cultural idioms such as jazz and blues ascended in the secular arena as vehicles to represent black modernity, African American religion in Chicago—with its negotiation between the

past and the present, rural and urban, old and new—exhibited African American religion in modern form.¹¹ At the broadest level of argument, the book reveals how an African American religious diaspora from the rural South, which some Chicago sociologists and writers deemed “pre-modern” because of migrants’ inexperience with urban culture, ushered in the modern era of black religion in Chicago.

The central questions that drive the book emerge from anthropological understandings of culture, and to some degree, religion. Given that culture, as Lawrence Levine has reminded us, is not static but is a process, what impact did the demographic shift have on Chicago’s African American religious culture and historic conceptions of “the black church”?¹² How did African-American Protestant congregations respond (or not respond) to migrants, and what role did these migrants play in the shaping of a new religious environment? If the African American sociologist St. Clair Drake was correct when he asserted, “the city is a world of rapid change,” affecting “religious behavior profoundly,” in what specific ways did it influence the religious behavior and theological understandings of black congregants?¹³ This book answers these questions, identifying southern migrants’ agency, adaptation, and collectivity in the construction of black religion in Chicago.

The notion of construction is important here, and one could even employ the terms “deliberate” construction and “active” construction to further emphasize human agency. Historically we have been more accustomed to think of religion as spontaneous and supernatural. Religion is something that just happens—outside of human control and irrespective to social context. To take nothing from the private, interior experience of religion, such is not the prevailing understanding of religion operating in this book. I understand religion (particularly when speaking in communal and institutional terms) and even notions of the sacred to be mutually reinforcing modalities that find expression as the cultural production of their adherents. Far from being passive observers of religion during the Great Migration, black Christians actively produced a religious cultural expression that reflected social, cultural, and political concerns. Responding to the crisis of migration and the demands of urban life, many members of Chicago’s African American religious community shaped a religious culture that was thoroughly cognizant of the human condition. They were particularly aware of the plight of the city’s black population and understood that the context of the faithful must influence the content of religion. The book also reveals a new theological orientation developed during the migration signified by themes of exile, sojourn, deliverance, and the moral obligation of black Christian churches to the black community. In this way, the book is a religious history that is also a cultural analysis and a social history of black religion. It works from the perspective of a number

of disciplines that often by way of their divergent methods and discourses speak past each other.

The most crucial aspect of the book centers on the interplay between southern migrants and mainstream black Protestant churches. The pragmatic attempts by mainstream black Protestant churches to address the temporal needs of southern migrants and the migrants' insistence upon infusing these congregations with their own sense of religion characterized this exchange. The interplay was often fraught with tensions that were grounded in issues of class and region, but it effectively altered the church music and worship patterns in many mainstream black churches, allowing for greater degrees of emotionality and more focused programs of social service. Prior to the migration, the majority of Chicago's black Protestants openly discouraged emotional worship for the way it reflected "African" and "slave religion." Nor did they consider social outreach to be a priority. With the migration, black gospel music emerged as a prime example of the new climate of expressive religious worship. It also highlighted the rural/urban tension and dichotomy. As a musical genre, black gospel predated the migration and had its origins in the rural South. It was also primarily characteristic of Pentecostal "storefront" congregations in the urban North and Midwest. But black gospel music as performed by artists such as Thomas A. Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson only came into prominence when it was introduced into mainstream black Protestant churches as a response to the worship demands of southern migrants. From these churches, it spread by mass communication and marketing practices drawn from urban culture. The same is true for "folk" or vernacular preaching, which was the companion religious expression to black gospel music. Social service and community outreach targeted for southern migrants became integral parts of the Christian mission and gauges for institutional relevancy. Black Chicago churches were far less "otherworldly," escapist, quietist, and otherwise socially disengaged than the normal depictions of early-twentieth-century African American religion.¹⁴ Indeed, many black churches across a wide denominational spectrum embraced a new pragmatism about "worldly" matters in deference to southern migrants. In a few cases, this new pragmatism was clearly influenced by the tenets of the Social Gospel.¹⁵ Some African American ministers even suggested a new set of institutional priorities that placed the material needs of new migrants at the center of urban church work. This view signaled a profound reconception of African American Christianity.

The reconception of African American Christianity shaped the cultural production of the period in black Chicago, contributing Chicago's rich tradition as an entertainment capital. As Norman Spaulding has argued, a disproportionate number of theaters, taverns, clubs, and lounges dotted

the Loop and South Side beginning in the 1890s, many featuring black musicians and entertainers.¹⁶ In the first part of the twentieth century, black Protestant churches added to this rich and vibrant culture of entertainment and performance. Black churches, particularly among the poor and working-class, became proving grounds for local singers such as Sam Cooke and Lou Rawls, who went on to national fame. Gospel artists such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe passed seamlessly between the constructed categories of sacred and secular, indecipherably merging the genres of gospel and swing. Choirs staged fierce competitions, with the highest marks going to those with the best overall presentation, including who had the best choreography and who could best “shout the church.”¹⁷

The advent of gospel music and radio broadcasts provided the opportunity for some Chicagoans to market black religion to a wide audience. Radio preacher Wilber Daniels put it succinctly: “I realized a long time ago that if I was to spread the Word, radio would reach more people and get the message across to more people. Religion can be sold as well as other products.”¹⁸ This new thinking regarding the church’s place in the wider world of Chicago not only spread the Word, however; it also created a space for new theological and social stances regarding issues of gender and sexuality. Many black women rose to take positions of clerical leadership, usually outside the ecclesiastical mainstream. In doing so, they defied conventional gendered thinking about “women’s place” and “man’s work.” Some of these ministers outside the mainstream were rumored to be homosexual, even if they did not claim a homosexual identity. At the very least they espoused nonnormative sexualities. From among these churches came the richest contributions to the city’s cultural production.

Black Chicago’s new sacred order fractured older notions of church life and instituted new ones. Since the late nineteenth century, black churches in Chicago had usually comprised members from the same or similar economic backgrounds and social status. Worship across class lines rarely took place, and it was not encouraged. With the influx of black southerners, however, this level of class division among and within churches was simply impossible to maintain. Class lines in black Chicago churches began to blur as people from various socioeconomic backgrounds clustered into the same congregations. A middle-class religious establishment that had developed among mainline black Protestants had to gradually yield preeminence to a dynamic and class-diverse religious culture, as these churches found in their midst growing numbers of southern migrants, who were overwhelmingly poor and working class.

Similarly, the migration of black southerners to Chicago began to mitigate the historic competition between African American religious institutions and civic organizations.¹⁹ Throughout the late nineteenth century, the institutional life among the city’s blacks had become bifurcated into

neat categories of sacred and secular. The few commercial and media ventures that existed, along with a number of political and civic organizations, occupied the public (secular) realm, while churches occupied the private or semipublic realm. Attempts to bridge the two worlds generated great tensions and was met, at times, with open hostility. The demands the migration placed on the resources of most black Protestant churches, however, made this level of institutional and philosophical division untenable. Many churches began to develop intimate alliances with local civic groups, such as the Chicago Urban League and the Travelers Aid Society, fraternal orders, national social service organizations, and black businesses. In some instances, black Protestants even cooperated with white-owned businesses eager to tap into the resources of the city's growing black congregations. They initiated and maintained these alliances to better assist new migrants, and the alliances soon became a barometer of the commitment black churches held not only toward southern migrants but also toward racial betterment generally. It became apparent that the degree to which black Protestant churches responded to the needs of southern migrants, as well as to the altering religious scene, signaled their interest in social change and indicated their vitality as religious institutions.

By the time of the migration, few black Protestants in Chicago would have disagreed with W. E. B. Du Bois, who stated in 1903 that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." But these same black Protestants would also concur with a lesser-known, yet equally prescient statement Du Bois made a decade later. He said the "Negro problem" in America was also a theological problem, a "test for the church."²⁰ Although what Du Bois meant by the "Negro problem" transcended the Chicago context, the statement was relevant to the city's migration-era black churches. The migration of black southerners tested the resourcefulness, fortitude, and spiritual vigor of black Chicago churches in the way Jim Crow segregation had done for all black American churches in previous years. And as in the days of Jim Crow, migration-era black Protestants appropriated extant racial ideologies that tended to encourage not only outreach to southern migrants but also programmatic and policy changes in their congregations. The primary racial ideology many black Chicago Protestant churches followed was the doctrine of self-help, which had by the second decade of the twentieth century become the standard creed throughout most sectors of the black community. For many black Protestant churches, the migration of black southerners provided the basis for practicing the tenets of self-help in their congregations and in the network of organizational alliances they established. Black Protestant churches, for example, became crucial stopping points to the "Spend money with our own merchants" campaigns

started by the *Chicago Defender* editor Robert S. Abbott in the mid-1920s.²¹ As an ideological approach to racial progress, the doctrine of self-help greatly influenced Chicago's black churches during the migration era. And although it was often ineffective, it also provided a system of thought and action which proved useful to black Chicago churches during a chaotic time of population growth and broad cultural shift.

Use of the term "migration era" interchangeably with the "Great Migration" is an attempt to span the range of analysis over both phases of the mass movement. Past studies of the Great Migration have claimed to cover the entire exodus but have actually concentrated only on one of the two phases. In this study, "migration era" indicates that the periodization covers the first phase spanning from 1915 to 1930 and the much larger one that occurred during the Second World War lasting until the early 1970s. This study considers both as one singular phase. Although the number of black southerners migrating to the urban North decreased during the Depression, the migration by no means ceased. Rather, it "continued throughout the depression years," as St. Clair Drake noted, at a slower pace that came to full throttle with the availability of industrial and manufacturing jobs at the outbreak of the Second World War.²² Indeed, the outmigration from some southern states, though less than it had been in the previous decade and would be in the next, was still substantial during the 1930s. Mississippi experienced a net loss of more than 68,000 blacks between 1930 and 1940. During the 1920s the loss was 83,000, and during the 1940s the number totaled nearly 315,000 persons.²³ Furthermore, migrants did not draw a distinction between the two phases of migration. This has long been an interpretive convention (invention) of scholars, not the perspective of the participants in migration. Migrants themselves registered no indication that they viewed the movement to have slowed or ceased during the 1930s. Neither did scholars who were observing the exodus at the time acknowledge a break in the mass movement during the 1930s. In 1940, for example, prior to the second wave of migration, Horace Cayton, Jr., presented a paper titled "Negro Migration" at a hearing of the U.S. Congressional Committee on Interstate Migration held in Chicago. He detailed several causes and conditions he considered key factors in the continuation of the exodus. The year before, Cayton had assisted the *Chicago Defender* in publishing a series of articles on the migration titled, "Is the South Doomed?"²⁴ St. Clair Drake further asserted that migrants continued their quest northward "due to the collapse of cotton tenancy in the South, inadequate relief for Negroes in those regions, and the availability of WPA employment."²⁵ The time is right to dispense with the ahistorical and unhelpful periodization of the Great Migration. Although this study does not extend as far as the early 1970s—it covers all of the interwar period and ends with the

death of Elder Lucy Smith in 1952—treating the years between 1915 and 1952 as part of a single “Great Migration.”

Not only is there confusion about the phases of the Great Migration, there is little agreement as to how best to measure it, and whether the period is the proper domain of sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, or urban historians. The answer, of course, is that it is the proper domain of each of these fields, and this book, although primarily a religious history, takes a multidisciplinary approach, relying heavily on these other perspectives. A multidisciplinary approach is not only warranted, it is necessary because students of the Great Migration have long recognized that the mass movement was not simply about the vast numbers and the demographic shift in population. What warrants the superlative in the characterization of the exodus of southern blacks to northern cities is the wide-ranging impact the mass movement had on individual African Americans, specific black communities, and on American society as a whole. The account that follows is not an attempt to paste the lives of churchgoing southern migrants onto the master narrative of the Great Migration, but a suggestion that looking at migrants’ religious experiences and the concurrent transformations to African American religious culture calls scholars of all relevant fields to rethink our assumptions about the movement entirely.

Building on a small body of scholarship that deals specifically with the impact of the Great Migration on African American religion, this study pushes the analysis further and in different directions.²⁶ What follows is as much a work of religious history as it is a work of social and cultural history that analyzes the relationship between urbanization, migration, and African American religion. As a work of religious history, it chronicles the development of the organizational forms of black Protestant religion in Chicago. The social history aspect of the study quantifies that development in terms of rates of church growth vis-à-vis the migration. It teases out the intricate alliances and tensions maintained in and among these institutions and with the larger community. The study is also a critical discussion of the relationship between religion and culture. I use the term “critical” because past studies of African American religion have often elided an analysis of this relationship. As a cultural history of African American religion, it is concerned about religious practice, objects, and symbols and the various meanings attributed to them by black Chicago Christians. It is an exploration of the structures of significance that emerge from an analysis of the forms of black religious expression developed during the migration era. Also, given my conviction that history must tell a story, the study integrates analysis with a narrative that is ethnographic, chronological, and thematic. This is particularly significant for a religious history because religious history, as all sacred texts will testify, is told in story form. It avoids

overreliance on the socioeconomic theories that have long shaped the field of African American religion in order to underscore religious meanings, human agency, and the resiliency of religious community. Religious communities are not necessarily like other communities, and often operate with different assumptions and different priorities. Put simply, in consideration of the development and transformation of Chicago's African American religious community during the migration era, the structural forces of racial oppression, economic deprivation, and spatial limitation were at work, but they did not prevent African American Protestant Christians from forming religious communities with all the accompanying dynamism, tensions, and contradictions.

In arguing for the cultural dominance of lower- and working-class southern migrants over the mainline religious establishment of black Chicago, the book suggests a new way to think about how class operated in these institutions. The evidence strongly suggests that the class composition in many black churches became more complicated and harder to decipher. Although the categories of "upper-class," "middle-class," and "lower-class" churches did not disappear entirely with the influx of black southern migrants, these designations became less meaningful and far less accurate. Also, the emergence of a black working class or industrial proletariat—unknown in Chicago before the migration—further complicated the composition of these congregations as well as the relationships between class categories. Moreover, an understanding of the influence of black southerners, who enjoyed a "more emotional ritual," over many mainline African American churches, challenges the previous propensity by some scholars for socioeconomic compartmentalization of religious practice. Not all black Chicago churches became "shouting" churches, but one of the most profound effects of the Great Migration on Chicago's Protestant religious culture was the way mainline churches altered various aspects of their religious rituals to "make some concessions" for the religious inclinations of black southerners. By the 1930s, with the dawn of "gospel blues," the influence of the "South in the city" within Chicago's black churches, encouraged by this ever-increasing religious diaspora, was deep and pervasive.²⁷ During the migration era, black Chicago Protestants—southern migrants and long-term residents alike—reconfigured the religious culture according to specific social conditions. They adapted and reinterpreted religious practices to fit the new urban setting. In the context of the urban North, ecstatic religious worship took on new depth and meaning, while social service attained a new urgency.

Chapter 1 expands the depiction of the migration of black southerners to Chicago beyond the master narrative of a demographic shift prompted by socioeconomic "push-pull" factors. Historically, these factors have been understood as the "push" of southern racism, mob rule, discrimination,

and ecological disaster and the “pull” of northern economic opportunity and personal liberty. As the historian John McMillen succinctly asserted, black southerners were “drawn as well as driven” to the North.²⁸ Establishing first the centrality of Chicago to the Great Migration, the chapter shows that the mass movement had a profound impact on all aspects of black life, especially upon African American religious institutions.²⁹ But even beyond issues of rapid congregational growth and alterations in church policies, there developed significant changes in the very conception of black religion. Lastly, the chapter places the book historiographically, arguing that cultural and religious analyses of the Great Migration have been overlooked in the interest of sociological ones—to the detriment of a comprehensive view of the movement and of southern migrants.

The second chapter shows the specific ways black southerners influenced religious worship and church policies. It demonstrates how the presence of black southerners muted the voices and perspectives of an African American middle-class Protestant religious establishment that had existed since the nineteenth century. In its stead, a diverse religious culture emerged that was essentially “southern” and “folk” in ethos, and the very margins of the religious culture were moved to the center. The chapter demonstrates that a key factor to the pervasive spread of this southern folk ethos in black churches was the way migrants insisted on sustaining their southern identities in the urban North. Rooted in the experiences of southern migrants, the chapter chronicles the ways black southerners understood themselves to be dispersed from the religious communities of their former homes—becoming a significant aspect of a new sacred order. They were, in effect, a religious diaspora.

Chapter 3 shows how the core of the new sacred order was a pragmatic religiosity instigated by the presence of new migrants, opposing the static typologies of twentieth-century black urban religion as compensatory, escapist, and socially disengaged. This chapter reveals the various ways many black Protestant churches faced the challenge of an expanding and materially desperate black community. From this new pragmatism among black churches arose greater support for black businesses and what some came to call “a business approach to religion.” Similarly, many of those same congregations established for the first time programs of social service, even hiring professional social workers. Social service attained a central place among the black churches of Chicago like never before, becoming an integral part of the new sacred order. Chapter 4 expands this discussion of the new sacred order, chronicling the ways worship in the new order acquired a decidedly southern folk sensibility. Patterns of worship, preaching, and music were augmented to fit the tastes of black southern migrants. The marketing of black gospel and the rise of black-oriented radio became key factors in the spread of a vernacular religious culture.

In chapter 5 the focus turns exclusively to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Chicago AME Church lagged behind black Baptists in terms of congregational growth and lost much of the prestige they had previously enjoyed. Whereas black Baptist churches launched aggressive recruitment initiatives, even to the point of establishing organizations designed specifically to reach southern migrants, AMEs remained ambivalent at best. The chapter shows how, by the 1920s, the ambivalence of the historic black denomination led to rebellion within the ranks as several AME ministers bolted from the denomination to form “Community Churches.” The Community Church Movement, launched after World War I by white Protestants (mostly business leaders), was a liberal religious expression committed to social outreach as its central premise. The movement afforded former AMEs the theoretical basis, the spiritual impetus, and the institutional means to address the chaos of migration and the temporal needs of southern migrants. African American Community Churches in Chicago flourished as a critique of the AME church, asserting by their existence that the level of institutional intransigence demonstrated by that wing of black Methodism was out of step with the times.

The sixth and final chapter compares the lives and the work of two of migration-era Chicago’s most prominent African American women pastors. It maps out the theological and cultural means, as well as the institutional complexities implied by the presence of women in positions of ministerial leadership. Profiting from the opportunities afforded by the new sacred order, Elder Lucy Smith and the Reverend Mary G. Evans rose to unprecedented levels of ecclesiastical authority and ministerial prominence during the migration era. They were unrestrained in their efforts to build and lead two of the city’s largest congregations, All Nations Pentecostal Church and Cosmopolitan Community Church. These churches illustrate the way the new sacred order was a female sacred order. Composed almost entirely of women, who, like Smith, migrated to Chicago from the rural South, All Nations became one of the South Side’s most vibrant congregations. Southern migrants’ attraction to Smith’s down-home manner and the popularity of her broadcast, “The Glorious Church of the Air,” ensured its spread. The rise of “black gospel” and radio broadcasts like Smith’s demonstrate the ways African American religion became a key component in black cultural production during the migration. Questioning the depictions of African American Pentecostalism as “otherworldly,” the chapter shows how Smith’s brand of Pentecostalism, rooted in the early Pentecostalism of Azusa Street, contained a pragmatic element.³⁰ Not only did Smith form relationships with local black businesses, she also became the first African American pastor in the city to use church facilities to provide food to area residents during the Depression.

Elder Lucy Smith and her All Nations Pentecostal Church embodied the dynamic and pluralistic religious culture of Chicago for close to four decades. Smith's death in 1952 and the subsequent (and literal) collapse of the All Nations church a few years later were an emphatic coda to an era of phenomenal religious institutional transformation. It was an era when the new urban religious practices and traditions developed among the black Chicago churches became encoded onto the very fabric of African American Christianity. It had become the way both to "do" and to "have" church in the city.