



Fig. 7.7 Breadline of the unemployed at the Doyers Street Mission, New York City, 1930. © Art Resource.

Coughlin. A familiar—and dangerous—voice was silenced.

African American Christianity in the 1920s and '30s

The great migration of black people to the cities continued after World War I, swelling the urban black churches and giving rise to new religious movements. Vincent Synan, a historian of the Pentecostal movement, observes that “since blacks in the South and elsewhere occupied the bottom rung of the social ladder, it was inevitable that large numbers would be drawn to Pentecostalism, representing as it did the religion of the poor.”²⁶ Growing numbers of African American Christians felt blessed and empowered by Pentecostal worship.

Father Divine (c. 1880–1965), an African American holiness minister, founded the “best

known and most influential of the Holiness Churches”²⁷ to emerge in the 1930s. Father Divine opened the Peace Mission on Long Island, New York, where people came for worship, healing, and inspiration. He insisted on holy living (abstaining from known sins such as alcohol and tobacco abuse), believed in racial equality, and preached healing through positive thinking. During the Great Depression when so many people suffered from hunger, Father Divine gave lavish feasts for hundreds of poor people. His movement spread as he opened several churches (called “Heavens”) in northern cities. Through his inspiring presence and acts of generosity, Father Divine encouraged people of all races to put their faith in him. Some of his followers began to address him as “God” and “Jesus Christ.” It was said that Father Divine warned his followers against reading the Bible, lest this detract from his authority. In the 1940s Father Divine became embroiled in a series

of financial disputes and his influence waned. He began his ministry in the Holiness tradition, but insofar as he made himself an object of worship instead of God, he departed from Christianity.

In contrast to Father Divine's Heavens, a this-worldly movement arose to confront issues of racism and social justice. Black nationalism celebrated Africanness as the core identity for black people. One can find roots of black nationalism much earlier, but the movement seems to have sharpened when black soldiers returned home from the Great War only to find that despite their military service to their country, racial prejudice was as strong as ever in the United States. Older movements, like progressivism and the Social Gospel, had failed to address racism. The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) became a new rallying point for black pride and progress. It was founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and grew very strong in the early 1920s.

Its main publication, *Negro World*, reached tens of thousands of people with a message of positive racial identity.

The UNIA had much to offer African Americans who were “alienated from a white version of Christianity,” according to Albert Raboteau. It “supplied a weekly Sunday service, a baptismal ritual, a hymnal, a creed, a catechism, the image of Jesus Christ as a ‘Black Man of Sorrows’ and the Virgin Mary as a ‘Black Madonna.’”²⁸ It was one thing to embrace a Christian faith that affirmed blackness. It was another thing to place too much faith in the person of Marcus Garvey. Convicted of financial misconduct, Garvey was sentenced to prison and eventually deported. The movement of black nationalism was of course more enduring than Garvey's personal leadership.

Black nationalist religion took a more strident form in the Nation of Islam or Black Muslims. The Nation of Islam had older roots but coalesced in Detroit in the 1930s. Its rejection



Fig. 7.8 *Revival* by Julia Eckel, 1934, shows the religious fervor that many black southerners brought with them to northern cities. © Art Resource.



of Christianity as the religion of “white devils” and its call for black separatism distinguished the Nation of Islam from traditional forms of Islam (which called for peace and equality among the races). A thorough discussion of Islam and its many forms is beyond the scope of this book. For our purposes, we must note that by the early twentieth century, African Americans were becoming increasingly aware of religions faiths beyond Christianity. Some of these faiths were a direct challenge to Christianity, while others incorporated elements of Christianity. But the black Christian churches remained the spiritual anchor of most African American communities.