

Barbara Holmes taught us to see our cosmic ties

## **A visionary of Black liberation, she broke open what it means to be a contemplative.**

by [Monica A. Coleman](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

Published on November 22, 2024



Scholar Barbara Ann Holmes (Courtesy photo)

Barbara Ann Holmes was a spiritual visionary who perceived deeper, broader, and wider than those around her. She brought new conversation partners into ongoing discussions, with a constant eye toward activism, mysticism, liberation, and community.

By the time the religious academy had the opportunity to read Holmes's books, she had already pursued three different careers. Before earning her PhD in ethics at Vanderbilt University, she had been an early childhood educator, a professional actor, and a corporate attorney. These experiences seeped into her religious writings and leadership through her commitments to education, creativity, and justice.

Holmes saw beneath the surface of who and what she studied. In her first book, *A Private Woman in Public Spaces*, Holmes examined the writings and speeches of Barbara Jordan, best known as the first African American congresswoman elected from Texas since Reconstruction. Through Holmes's eyes, Jordan was more than a politician; she was an ethicist and theologian in the public sphere. Holmes helped readers peel back the layers of what we see on the surface to look for the more that is there.

Holmes always saw more. In *Race and the Cosmos* and *Liberation and the Cosmos*, Holmes redefined the Black liberation theology project. Yes, liberation means liberation from racial, gendered, class, and sexual oppression. But perhaps it also means liberation from the categories in which we have become comfortable defining ourselves. Infusing Black theology and ethics with quantum physics and cosmology, Holmes urges readers to look for liberation in and among a multidimensional universe. *Race and the Cosmos* was a solid bridge between science and Black liberation theology, but Holmes repudiated such category distinctions. She dared us to see our unity from a quantum level and imagine how that unity could foster spiritual connections we haven't yet conceived of:

For the last few decades, we have glared steadily at issues of race and ethnicity and applied our best solutions, only to watch the issues return in different guises. Solutions may always be out of reach, but our chances of success are better when our efforts are invested with the humility that comes only with an inward and upward glance, for we are carrying our possibilities within the resonance of starborn and interconnected selves.

In *Liberation and the Cosmos*, we see Holmes's thespian ability to step into roles and give them voice and resonance for a contemporary audience. Holmes asks the hard questions of liberation: What do we mean by freedom, and why aren't we free yet? She answers those questions with elders and ancestors—Black historical artists, thinkers, pray-ers and freedom fighters—allowing them to parse ideas for us that

they did not exchange in their lifetimes. She lets them critique and encourage us. Holmes did not see time or space as limitations. She found answers by pushing past what most people see as natural boundaries.

She pushed traditional boundaries because she took a different path. She was raised in Pentecostal Assemblies of the World and Apostolic churches and ordained in the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She did not feel confined to a single road; she journeyed in all places where she was welcome. She found solace in religious scholarship and leadership in theological education. When I met her at Vanderbilt (my MDiv years and her PhD years), she was already renowned for her discipline and swift path through her degree program. She shared how she did it—how she wrote, how she led—and walked others through their own paths.

As a leader, she was also a mentor and seer. She was dean of Memphis Theological Seminary and then president of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She had a vision for others' success. She could cultivate courage within and for theological education. More than words of advice, Holmes gave words of experience, words wrapped in warmth and kindness. That made her trustworthy.

Years ago, I was giving a major lecture in the Twin Cities when I should have been in the hospital. My health was worse than I knew, but I wanted to give the lecture. Holmes showed up for me—in the green room, in the front row, and later in the hospital—as a calming, encouraging presence. “You’ve got this, Monica.” “You don’t have to do this.” “I’ll be right here.” “Now go.” She was my calm during a terrifying time.

That’s my favorite Barbara story. In the hours and days following her transition to the ancestral realm, social media flooded with stories from her colleagues, students, and friends. Everyone who knew her has a Barbara story.

Holmes’s last decades positioned her as a 21st-century Howard Thurman. She owned African American mysticism and broke open what it means to be a contemplative. In *Joy Unspeakable*, Holmes outlines the contemplative spirituality of historic Black Christian religiosity. She reminds readers of the Africanity of well-known monastics and the Africana cosmology that interweaves sacred and secular. Most importantly, she rejects the notion that contemplation requires silence. Holmes names the movement of Spirit and spirits within Black Pentecostalism, soul music,

and justice movements as part of the contemplative spirituality of Black Christianities:

Contemplation is a pause for the cause. During this pause we remember who we are and whose we are. This pause can come in the midst of a silent sit or a Pentecostal shout or Pow Wow drumming. If contemplation is an accessible and vibrant response to life and to a God who unleashes towards its most diverse potentials, then practices that turn the human spirit inward may or may not be silent or solitary.

In *Crisis Contemplation*, Holmes invokes her expansive understanding of the contemplative to discuss how contemplation fuels and upholds activism and community. She removes contemplation from the realm of individual piety and discusses it as a communal act of resilience in the face of crisis. Holmes believes that both sacred stillness and care for community (yours and your neighbor's) are necessary parts of the contemplative life. With echoes of her earlier work, Holmes notes that we were all bound together by our cosmic origins and expansive futures. The idea that “we are stardust” was Holmes’s beginning and end.

Barbara Ann Holmes was a spiritualist and a spiritual teacher. After retiring as a seminary president, she joined the core faculty of the Center for Action and Contemplation. She can be seen and heard online—in videos, interviews, and her podcast, *The Cosmic We*. Her teachings about the expansive justice-oriented capacity of the contemplative life have reached new and wider audiences. Many people met and will continue to meet Holmes as a mystic and spiritual teacher who shows a non-Western path filled with imagination, community, and liberation. [In her words from one of those videos:](#)

I find myself in thin places, geo-spiritual places where I experience God unfiltered. In these spaces where great beauty runs rampant, I contemplate the artistry of the divine one who beckons me.

We will meet Holmes in the thin places.