

## **Race and the Cosmos - a Review**

*Race and the Cosmos, An Invitation to View the World Differently* was a recommendation of presenter Cliff Berrien at a recent course offered by the Deep Time Network. I was taken by Berrien's recommendation and ordered it. I believe it has enormously important things to say about its subject that needs to reach a much wider audience.

The author, Barbara Holmes, is a faculty member of the Centre for Action and Contemplation and a spiritual teacher and writer who focuses on African American spirituality, mysticism, cosmology, and culture. She was called to ministry after working as a lawyer specializing in civil litigation, corporate and appellate practice. As well as working in homeless missions, HIV/AIDs support groups and international ministries in Kenya and Japan, she has written five books and numerous articles. On her website ([drbarbarahomes.com](http://drbarbarahomes.com)) she says: "My life is committed to the struggle for justice, the healing of the human spirit, and the art of relevant and radical creativity."

As an older Canadian woman of British ancestors – a part of my own country's culture bears all too much resemblance with that of America, I need to hear from this thoughtful woman who has wide experience of other cultures – and come to terms with how mine has been complicit in much of the suffering and pain of hers.

Her preface to the second edition starts with a quote from Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*; "Let us hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away, and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities . . . in some not-too-distant tomorrow". Much has changed – but not those dark clouds, she says. Despite appearances of progress, the clouds are still there. What offers new possibility for hope and the building of a beloved community may come from an unexpected source – the advances in understanding of cosmology. She recognizes that this connection might make no sense to many readers. But she encourages us to stay with her, and I did.

In the preface to the first edition, Barbara Holmes encourages her reader to study race through the lens of science and culture. The language of the civil rights

movement – oppression and overcoming - have not brought about the needed result. The moral life requires a larger context and science may help. When we use the term *race*, we think color, culture, or ethnicity. These are not biological categories but cultural ones – to which she adds theological ones. New learning is needed to set all of us free.

The whole notion of race is complicated, she observes. Liberation has been perceived as linear but that is not the case, and it will need to be viewed from a new perspective and language – that of the universe. While her primary focus is on her own African American community, a reassessment has wider implications for other communities now, both in the United States and beyond it. There is a yearning among all peoples to understand their origins and connections. As an example, she cites the wide interest in DNA testing as a source of cultural curiosity, as though such an identity will connect us to our tribal heritage. It simply raises more questions than answers.

Holmes begins with coming to awareness. The dreams of Civil Rights promised freedom to people without land, language, culture, identity, or autonomy. But dreams are still dreams and awakening to the present reality must happen. New cosmology has created a wider framework, but most of our attention is on our trivial day-to-day concerns. Only occasionally do we emerge to notice hate groups, terrorism and school shootings. It's worth knowing that Holmes is writing well before the events of January 6, 2021 – and her proof is evident in how some are pretending it never happened. A war on the other side of the world grabs our notice and then recedes from the headlines. We turn back to the pursuit of happiness and worry about the economy.

Her contention that African Americans live with a sense of double identity could apply to other indigenous groups as well – always looking for affirmation in the eyes of the dominant one. All the desire in the world to “overcome” doesn't erase that. Nevertheless, double identities allow the possibility of seeing through a different lens. Rather than trying to bury the pain of lack of acceptance, Holmes encourages her community to face it. Acknowledging the pain is the beginning of healing and a new framing. Personhood is not static and using the metaphor of quantum theory shows that unity and disunity are not opposites but allow for possibility and potential. We can mature within our own journey rather than depending on the affirmation of others.

We need a new language to frame our awareness. Her own community has had many identifying labels – African, colored, black – but these don't create a cosmological identity. Patriarchy has been followed by feminism. She cautions that in both cases, a couple of positive examples of success doesn't excuse broader inequities. In spite of some progress, language still supports the pseudoscientific theories of color as an identifier of character, faith and civilization. New scientific language can open up new possibilities.

In the next chapter, Barbara Holmes moves to liberation theology and beyond it. She questions the understanding of that theology in the United States, especially if it assumes an unending struggle. Earlier protests seemed to lay bare the hatred that existed, but what still hovers over it is theodicy, the justification of the existence of God in the presence of evil. For African Americans, and indeed for any indigenous community, what kind of Christianity was this? There were other exclusions; the freedom movers of the sixties were male and there was little understanding even within the African American community itself of the additional damage of racism experienced by women. It was also clear that public discourse could change while private ones remained fixed in bigotry. Holmes asks some basic questions about liberation:

- Who is being liberated and from what? The goals are not always clear - either to the liberators or those being liberated.
- Is the healing of personal and communal trauma a necessary part of any true liberation?
- What are the responsibilities of both sides after such healing?
- What is the effect upon ongoing faith and practice?
- How do new understandings of liberation align with new cosmology?

Communities have tried borrowing from other disciplines to answer these questions since the days of the sixties' protests. Rights, as expressed originally, drew upon sacrificial love but it morphed into individual freedom to join the culture of spending and consuming. While some could become successful, those who didn't could be ignored. Sociology suggested that individuals could control their own destiny. Psychology focused on self-esteem but ignored the larger context. Theology focused on liberation stories and the roles of the prophets but ignored theodicy – the question of God's character and responsibility. Process theology, while not totally denying God as eternal and unchanging, focused on a

sense of becoming – espoused by both Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry’s metaphor of the journey of the cosmos. In this case at least, process theology offers a vision of dignity, equality and generosity. This is a big leap from our childhood notions of God.

Holmes quotes theologian David Toolan’s new perspective on the Last Supper:

“No theatrics, no magic, simply the highly charged polyvalent symbolics of what a human body can contain and dispense. Two great movements converge in what Jesus shows us here – the everlasting desire of cosmic dust to mean something great and God’s promise that it shall be so.”

In the chapter, *Science, Theology and Culture*, Holmes observes that these three discourses offer both perils and possibilities. In comparing science and religion, she notes that what both have in common is curiosity. Early history placed the earth at the center in creation stories and continued to do so even though Greek astronomer Aristarchus posited that earth rotated around the sun as early as the third century BC. Suggestions that it didn’t do that did not work out well for Copernicus, Aquinas or Galileo because the church was obsessed with order. Later Newton’s laws of motion were better accepted from the viewpoint of the universe as a well-oiled machine. But the danger that viewpoint brought with it was acceptance of social hierarchy, where certain individuals were above others in both religious and civil societies. It also suggested radical separation from God, from other individuals, and from all forms of matter.

The new physics of the nineteenth century brought the discovery of the electron. where the atom was no longer the smallest element of matter. There was a new understanding that light traveled in packets. Quantum is defined as quantity or amount. Amounts can be measured, but these packets have very strange qualities. Can they be measured in times and space, or can they be measured in terms of probability? Quantum physics studies these realities. It shatters the sense of the previous order.

Religion has had a similar shattering, Holmes says, in the Biblical idea of chosenness, which suggests winners and losers – especially as the west has interpreted it. Culture defines what an individual must do to survive and what values the community holds to sustain itself. Western society has supported culture but with some significant omissions – women, ethnic, and indigenous communities.

By relying on Greek and Roman culture, and ignoring earlier ones, the west has created power cultures based on hierarchies and paternalism that place their own intellect and color at the top. Both science and culture have failed to deal with the omissions of other intellects and colors. Forgetting or ignoring the failure prohibits moving to new possibility.

Music, dance and stories have upheld hopeful people through the ages, Holmes says. Both cultures and sciences have their own mythologies, and their communities are both enhanced and retrained by them. The age of reason affected both in believing that their pre-history didn't matter. Specialization has also hindered both. African Americans and Indigenous North Americans were denied their use of native languages, rituals, and cultures. Other settlers were encouraged to change their names and forget their heritage in favor of a melting pot.

The chapter, *Race, Cosmology and Belonging*, is perhaps for me the most important of the entire book. Holmes opens it with a quote from another of my favorite books, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. "If eyes can be trained to see darkness as a contributing symbol, perhaps other needed reorientations can happen as well," Larry Rasmussen says. Holmes starts with the movements that were energized a few years ago by trying to make racism more specific by adding "anti" in front of it as though that might make it go away. She goes on to name the cultural stereotypes and even notes that all the marches, discussions and debates have actually domesticated racism, making it like a pet. Instead, we have to see the world differently rather than rely on the usual strategies of fight, flight or resignation. Domination still happens and the counter-argument is that former victims are so much better off. What if instead we looked at the metaphors through the lens of cosmology and quantum physics?

We absorb ideas of difference in human appearance when we are so young that we hardly recognize their subtlety. We learn to like people and things most like us, Holmes says. But among the current delusions is the notion that North Americans are color blind. People called "people of color" know otherwise. She quotes Rasmussen again, who notes, "The planet reels from centuries of trying to make it light and white, fast, packaged and marketable." We live in a cult of whiteness where others are invisible. If white is the norm, those included in the category can't describe what it means to be categorized in that way, and *White* is

assumed as the norm in the media, finance and politics. Some might be given a hyphenated status – Greek-American, Italian-Canadian – but notice the difference from African-American. The other “hyphenateds” remain white – even white trash. Of course, color is a myth. There are no white people. When Irish Americans or British Canadians arrived in Northern America neither was described as white. There is no such thing as a white nation. There is one human race. White, more often than not, means social privilege.

Holmes goes on to observe what most of us who call ourselves Christian, have not – that religious symbols and our interpretation of scripture has allowed the association of light with goodness and dark with darkness or evil. It’s not something that hits home, unless other people refer to someone as black. We miss the fact that black has always been part of the universe – and that we start our journey to life in total darkness. Our associations with dark may be unconscious but they are there – darkness has not disappeared and for far too many, it suggests inferiority.

But new science teaches us that dark matter matters. Scientists now know that it is present in the galaxies and plays a vital role. They don’t completely understand it but know that it is important. Holmes notes that the universe confirms the presence of both dark and light and we need to rejoice in diversity. There is a cosmic power in the dark matter that provides a positive model for dark people. New science sees a trinity of darkness – dark energy, dark matter and dark flow. Black holes may even be the birthplace of the universe. Holmes goes on to explore the findings of science that allows us to see its implications in a new way. Time and space can be studied and experienced differently. “The pain of the past may also be our future; the hope of the future may be available right now”, she says.

Science teaches that the universe is expanding – not from a single point, but from multiple centers. This destroys the notion of hierarchy, and it also might destroy the idea that some are victims and can’t be held down or marginalized any longer. An analogy suggesting a lack of a center comes to Holmes as a marble cake where *light* and *dark* remain distinct but equally essential to the cake. It isn’t integration but *difference* that has both importance and value in its own right. As scientists search for a Theory of Everything”, she suggests that a cultural theory of everything could bring respect for difference and darkness. She moves on to

outlining string theory. It posits that the universe is composed of tiny strings “whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos”, as physicist Brian Greene says. Rather than a theory of everything that was previously envisioned as oneness or order, this one focuses on diversity in every form of being – a musical analogy would be a variation on a theme. Labels that we use – like gender, class and race are like fugues and etudes of a larger symphony.

The Chapter entitled *Quantum Context and Dominance*, starts by noting that battles around color mask the struggles for power. After remarking that everybody wants a God just like themselves, Holmes notes two new developments. Dominant cultures want to address differences without losing a sense of order. Those less dominant issue a cry for human dignity. A new script could be helpful to both. Quantum physics has identified new tiny elementary particles like quarks and leptons as the basic elements. But how they move and how they can be measured is neither ordered nor stable.

As I write this, the former president is busy describing himself as a victim. His circumstances have little in common with others in the less dominant cultures claiming the same thing, but he has learned to exploit this human feeling to his full advantage. We are also seeing politicians try to suppress the history of power and domination in the school systems. Walter Wink reminds Holmes that superiority always has a spiritual dimension, which in turn affects the spiritual dimension of the oppressed. There is an imbalance of power which ultimately will show itself, though the outcome cannot be predicted. She sees a cultural analogy in what quantum physics has found about unpredictability in cosmic history. We couldn't predict the fall of the Berlin Wall – or the success of Mandela. Both happened. The universe itself may address the need for balance. We cannot simultaneously know the speed and location of an element in the quantum world. What we can speculate about is potential without initial bias. Holmes contrasts the effect of scholastic tests as predictors for children of less dominant cultures when the dominant culture holds all the cards. In contrast, quantum theory leaves the options open.

In Chapter 7, Holmes returns to the Beloved Community, noting, however beloved, it is also a place of contradictions and dissent, as those who are part of any community know all too well. For all that, it remains a much desired place. Meditating on King's “I have a Dream speech, she notes that a dream is an

individual rather than a collective thing, but shared dreams can become a vision. This happened in the civil rights era when visions united in social action. The immediate results suggested that utopia was soon to arrive; the reality since then is different. Words like truth and reconciliation are popular both in America and in Canada but they ring hollow. Too often they still involve exclusivity and power.

Enter the new physics. Rather than attempting to glue disparate communities together, Holmes turns to David Bohm. Fragmentation needs reconsideration. For Bohm, the immense diversity of the known world has a unity that we miss in trying to impose order upon it – whether race or gender or national boundaries. We would like to see progress of a linear sort. Instead, we can see a sense of relationality where past present and future are all present. Bohm believes that the universe is in conversation with us as it expands. What we may be involved in, she says, is “a dialogue between creation, created and Creator.

In Chapter 8, *The Search for Meaning*, Holmes notes this search as intrinsic to human life. It now must include the cosmos and our place within it. We know, as Brian Swimme illustrates so well in *The Journey of the Universe*, how balance must be maintained to sustain our own planet. The anthropic principle posits that the development of the universe needs to be the size and age it is for us to be here at all. Theology needs to include this perspective; so do cultural studies. Holmes identifies these lessons

- Life is delicately balance in the cosmos – and all other elements of humanity must mirror it.
- The universe is our Mother – and we must care for her rather than exploit her. All of us are cared for and loved by her.
- Location affects our perspective, and we cannot see the whole picture.
- We live in incredible circumstances with incredible responsibilities for good relationships.
- We are all here for a reason.

Human consciousness gives us incredible potential – not always for good and history show horrific examples of collective evil as well as for good - but Goodness is the first principle of the universe. New physics and cosmology teach new possibilities arising not from dominance but from diversity that bends toward justice. Racism, oppression, and domination fall aside in the face of

beauty, truth and goodness in a cosmic framework. The beloved community – and especially its new generation - is encouraged to become Afrofuturistic, to develop its own future, to build its own communities, health and value systems. That will help their trauma and heal it as they incorporate the wonders of science into their own culture. She doesn't say it, but Holmes implies that my community and others need to confront what they collectively have done historically, repent on behalf of those they have damaged, and start their own journey of healing by kneeling in awe of the cosmos we share.