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# Joy Unspeakable



## Synopsis

Holmes's research - through oral histories, church records, and written accounts - details not only ways in which contemplative experience is built into African American collective worship but also the legacy of African monasticism, a history of spiritual exemplars, and unique meditative worship practices.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Barbara A. Holmes is Associate Professor of Ethics and African American Religious Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary. Also an accomplished attorney, she is author of *Race and the Cosmos* (2002) and *A Private Woman in Public Spaces: Barbara Jordan's Speeches on Ethics, Public Religion, and Law* (2000).

Barbara Holmes has written with simplicity, but with deep analytical mind and she leads her audience into the depths of African American spirituality. Reading this work has given me a lot of insight into the 'joy' that beams with African American spirituality and its connection to their history beyond the barriers of congregational setting. It points to that seamless theme that identifies the black church as a unique experience. It is very insightful and educative!

"Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church" by Barbara A. Holmes is a rich and rare contribution to the subject. You will search far and wide to find anyone discussing spiritual

formation in the history, culture, and present situation of the Black Church. Thus Holmes' contribution, by focus alone, is an important one. Holmes does an excellent job "re-imaging" contemplation. That is, in "Euro-Cultures" contemplation is often seen only as individual and silent. However, as Holmes carefully details, African American Christianity has practiced communal, active, verbal contemplation. Holmes is especially insightful when she derives contemplative practices from the historical black church in slavery. From lament, to dancing, to the hush arbor, to the ring shout, to the slave spirituals, and much more, Holmes explains how each of these rituals were contemplative in that they led the community to see with spiritual eyes God's goodness in the midst of humanity's badness and madness. Holmes also does an excellent job explaining how holistic and integrative African American faith was and is. Heavenly hope, for African American believers, is certainly about a future filled with relationship and joy. However, it is also about seeing and experiencing God NOW, even in the midst of the horrors of slavery and racism. For African American Christians wanting to "tap into" their spiritual legacy, "Joy Unspeakable" will become a standard. For European American Christians wanting to understand and learn from their brothers and sisters in the faith, "Joy Unspeakable" is a must read. Reviewer: Dr. Robert W. Kelleman is the author of "Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction," "Soul Physicians," and "Spiritual Friends."

Joy unspeakable is an unspeakable joy to read! This is a thorough analysis of contemplative actions in the Black church from its beginnings.

So much of what is considered contemplative practice in the Christian church derives from European monastic practices in one way or another. Despite the fact that many of the early Desert Fathers and other early theologians were Africans, their practices and history became part and parcel of the larger 'Christendom' experience. Despite the fact that monastics live in community, their contemplative and mystical practices tended to be individual in character; certainly the Desert Fathers were individual practitioners, however much they were in reality tied to their community. It is the communal aspect in practice that is often lacking in modern expressions of contemplative work. However, it need not be so, as Barbara Holmes shows, drawing on the broader African experience of contemplative communal practices. 'I am contending that communal contemplation is richer than the immediacy of personal experience because the experience, the story, the event is subjected to the gaze of both the individual and the community.' The African-American community has lost much of its recognition of the history of this, and views with suspicion attempts to force a

European-dominated history of religion on its own expression of Christianity. Holmes draws examples from the history of Africans in America, from the days of gatherings of slaves to celebrate their faith to later church institutions and communities. Holmes includes her own experiences and history in this broader context. Holmes describes herself in some ways as being a front-porch Anchorite, and draws her own family's experiences with communal and family-based worship and education practices to show the impact of these things, not just for her, but for her family and wider community. She worries that the church is not remembering its past and its more vital spiritual legacy. 'I am concerned about the life and future of the black church because of its monothematic approach to worship. ... Retrieving this legacy is important because we can no longer assume that the tradition will be passed down through generations of church-going families.' While I am certain that this is an important book for the African American community and the Black church as a whole, I am not really qualified to give this kind of assessment. What I can do is speak to how the book influences me. In my first semester of seminary (now reaching back nearly a decade ago), I took a course on spiritual practices in the Christian church over time. Many people in this course had trouble connecting with many of the practices presented, because their denominational experiences were in narrow bands of the possibilities of Christian experience. I was honoured to be able to teach in the class in successive years, and for five years got to relive the experience and test out practices in new ways with new people. How I wish that Holmes had written this book sooner! Despite the thoroughness of the curriculum of that course, one of the things students often commented upon was the lack of African-American and African expressions of Christianity. Holmes' book would remedy that, and has introduced new ideas to my own consideration of practices I follow, as well as new perspectives on other practices that might be useful as I think about the worship life in my own congregation where I am chaplain. There is joy indeed.

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