

# JOHN HAYNES HOLMES, THE COMMUNITY CHURCH AND WORLD BROTHERHOOD

By W. E. B. Du Bois

Author and Editor

I met John Haynes Holmes in 1909, when I came to New York to work for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and to edit the *Crisis* magazine. He was one of that group of young, enthusiastic white folk who were willing to join in this uncertain and hazardous venture. He was a member of our first executive committee, and used his gift of eloquent speech at our annual meetings. Personally, Dr. Holmes interested me first because he attended board meetings and expressed freely and clearly his intelligent opinions. How much this means for democracy only those who have tried to get things done in organizations by boards of directors can know. Either one lands in anarchy because board members will not attend meetings or take time to understand conditions; or the organization becomes a tight little fascism under the control of one man.

Dr. Holmes' faithful cooperation drew my attention to his Church. I was not at the time very much interested in churches. I had been brought up in formal religion among Episcopalians and Congregationalists. I had heard all kinds of sermons. I had come to expect from churches and ministers well-bred evasion of all real human problems. But the Community Church welcomed Negroes; discussed the Negro Problem, and evidently did not believe that the white race was the only race on earth worth saving. That was a difficult creed to live up to in early twentieth century New York.

For years New York had been Southern in sentiment and the stamping ground of Copperheads and their successors. The Southern Society made it a major duty to call public attention to any infraction of the color line. No Negro in 1910 could sit in the orchestra of a theater, or get a meal at a first-class restaurant. When Mary White Ovington once attended a public banquet with Negroes, the daily press excoriated her. Negroes were not excluded from white churches, but they were not expected to attend. Particularly no respectable church discussed such a controversial subject as Negroes.

The Community Church did discuss race problems. It took special interest in India and I remember when Dr. Holmes began to praise and support Gandhi. Moreover, the interest of the Community Church and its minister in human races was not merely sentimental, or a matter of personal charity. I recall when Dr. Holmes began to emphasize 'the economics of the Negro Problem' and tie it in with the problem of labor. In 1920, he wrote in the *Crisis*:

"The Negro question in this day is a problem of labor. I feel more and more that the Negro problem like various phases of the white problem, is moving into that field. The Negro problem first came into prominence in this country in a day when we could say that the workers were to be divided into two classes. On the one hand, were the free workers of the North - white workers, men who in that pioneer day were to be regarded as free workers. South of the Mason and Dixon Line, was a very different kind of working population - a population bound to the land and doing its work for its master.

"We had, therefore, in the very clearest possible way, the distinction between the slave labor of the South, which was black, and the free labor of the North, which was white. All during the years we have discussed the problem - and it is still true in our day - and the burden of our discussion was to raise the black man to the level of the white man. That problem is not only with us today, but it is going to be with us tomorrow, and the long, long, battle for the rights of man, the black man as well as the white man, is going to be with us, to be settled only when men love one another upon a basis of justice and good will. ·

"The thing that the black man has got to learn, is that the time has gone by for you black men to think that your problem is wholly your own. It is not your own problem any longer. More and more, it is getting to be the problem of the white man and Just as the op-pressed white worker is reaching out his hand to the oppressed black worker, so the oppressed black worker, South or North, has got to reach out his hand to the oppressed white worker. And that means for you, my Negro brethren - that means for you who live in New York City, who live in these Northern States and who have, therefore, the opportunity of grappling with this problem as it should be grappled with in this country - namely, the political opportunity, which gives you the opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with the white worker in the political field - to fight and struggle and battle for your own interests, and through those interests for the emancipation of America, white and black. That means, it is time to give up voting a Republican ticket; it is time to give up voting the Democratic ticket; it is time to recognize that new organizations and new forces are being fashioned in this country and when the great Presidential election of 1920 is held, I venture to prophesy there will be a great universal party in the field, to bring all the workers, black and white, together."

This interest in labor and its problems led this church and its pastor to look with sympathy upon the effort of Russia to achieve economic emancipation; to build a nation ruled in the interest of the workers, and not mainly for private profit and privilege and monopoly. There were many who feared the interest of John Haynes Holmes in Russia even more than they deplored his espousal of the cause of the Negro. I have no doubt that funds to finish this new church would have come in more largely and faster, if Dr. Holmes had of sympathizing with Russia and trying to understand her problems.

The final triumph of his long deferred dream of a Community Church in New York "knowing not sect, class, nation, or race" is not merely local nor purely personal; but a great step towards making a disillusioned world regard religion as honest, true, and capable of courage and daring.

The Community Church of New York  
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