METHODISM, PACIFISM, AND GANDHIAN NONVIOLENCE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: THE PRINCIPLES AND PRAXIS OF JAMES M. LAWSON, JR.

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August 17, 2013

Wrapped into James M. Lawson, Jr.'s persona as a civil rights activist was frequent confusion about his religious identity. While he was an undergraduate at Baldwin-Wallace College, for example, he was described as "a great admirer of Gandhi (who) wants to preach and become a minister like Gandhi." One observer said he "would like to be another Gandhi." His commitment to Gandhian nonviolence even led some to call him a Hindu mystic thus ignoring his deeply held Christian beliefs and Wesleyan sensibilities. Perhaps, Lawson's seeming preference for religious experience over traditional theology contributed to the view of him as religiously exotic or maybe non-Christian. Writing from prison in 1952, after he was sentenced for being a Conscientious Objector to the Korean War, Lawson, 23 years old and yet to enter the seminary, aspired to emulate "the life of Jesus, St. Francis, George Fox, Gandhi, Gautama (Buddha)… and other great religious persons." These figures attached little importance to "theology but (to their) experience with God." He added that "religious failures today are in (the arena of) experience and practice not theology."1 How one lived out humane values, thought Lawson, mattered more than established structures and discourse about doctrine and belief. Jesus, Gandhi, and others provided the paradigm for a life of meaning and their example reinforced the Christian and Wesleyan precepts that Lawson highly valued.

Lawson's pacifism and his adherence to Gandhian nonviolence were grounded in his Christianity and in his Methodism and they framed how he imbibed and integrated their moral precepts into his eclectic religious being. He did not define Christianity, for example, according to conventional perspectives. In a seminary paper at Oberlin, for example, Lawson said that "Christianity is not a western religion, or western civilization, or a particular political, economical or cultural system." Therefore, it needed to "disavow relationship to any social, political, military, economical or religious injustice." Instead, it should emphasize its core which lay in Jesus's declaration that "I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10) Because he envisaged Christianity capaciously and apart from any hegemonic systems, he could then embrace a Hindu like Gandhi and a Buddhist like Gautama

Buddha and view them as religious counterparts to Jesus of Nazareth.2

Notwithstanding the iconic stature of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his pivotal presence in the civil rights movement, James M. Lawson, Jr. looms large as an equally influential theoretician and tactician in the black freedom struggle. Lawson's blend of Methodism, Christian pacifism, and Gandhian satyagraha shows the broad religious resources that informed his ideas and activism. Moreover, the breadth of his study and sampling of various interreligious sources interacted with foundational Christian and Methodist beliefs that made him an unsung advocate of societal and global reconstruction. Lawson's significance lay in his well-known pacifist stand against the Korean War in 1951, his pedagogy in the Nashville Workshops which energized a local civil rights movement in 1960, his foundational white paper on nonviolence that influenced the launch of SNCC also in 1960, and his organizational contributions to the Memphis sanitation workers strike in 1968. These involvements drew from his lifelong involvement with the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation and numerous other groups dedicated to peace and nonviolence.

One cannot understand Lawson apart from his Methodism. The Wesleyan tradition provided him with a religious and intellectual foundation which shaped and bound together family, theological, ecclesiastical, and pacifist influences. Historically, African American Methodists drew from the Wesleyan tradition an emancipationist ethos that emphasized personal renewal which God provided through Jesus Christ and the dynamic perfecting power of the Holy Spirit. Through salvation, African Americans, who were freed from sin and being remade as a new creation, sought this same renewal for the broader society. Just as individuals were cleansed from iniquity, so could society be purged of the social sin of slavery, segregation, poverty, and war. Hence, spiritual/scriptural holiness, experienced individually, also energized social holiness realized in the larger milieus in which Methodists did ministry and societal transformation. Generations of African American Methodists in both black and majority white denominations, from Harriet Tubman (AMEZ) and Henry M. Turner (AME) in the 19th century to Rosa

Parks (AME) and James Farmer (MC) in the 20th century, became conspicuous activists whose insurgencies arose out of this Methodist heritage.3

Lawson's familial background reflected these patterns in black Methodism. His father, Reverend James M. Lawson, Sr., was the grandson of an escaped slave from Maryland who settled in Canada. He was born on December 15, 1883 in Guelph, Ontario, the son of a Canadian born father and a Pennsylvania born mother. Though he immigrated in 1887 as a child to the United States, he returned to Canada to attend McGill University. He became an minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New England and served congregations in Alabama, South Carolina, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Wherever he was assigned as pastor, if a NAACP chapter or an Urban League affiliate did not exist, he established one. After serving at St. James AMEZ Church in Massillon, Ohio, he transferred to the segregated Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church. This militant minister, a believer in self-defense, never yielded to racial oppression. Lawson recalled that his father "refused to take any guff from anyone, particularly at the point of race." The elder Lawson also "wore on his hip a thirty-eight pistol and insisted that he was going to be treated as a man." Moreover, while in Gadsden, Alabama, "he interfered when he saw Negroes being mistreated." He expressed his "social concern and compassion" in his sermons which "had a lot of social content or context (from) with(in) the gospels."4

Philane May Cover was far different from her spouse because she unambiguously espoused nonviolence. Born on May 28, 1895 in Brown's Town, St. Ann, Jamaica she arrived in the United States on May 22, 1919. Though she was a high school graduate Miss Cover worked as a servant in Jamestown, New York. It was here that she probably met and married the Reverend Lawson and later bore their nine children. Lawson told his mother that while doing an errand another child called him a "nigger." She asked him why he responded with fisticuffs since that display of violence had not accomplished anything. "Love," she said, "was a superior way" especially because her son was "loved by God, and by her and by (his) Dad." This lesson in nonviolence learned in childhood became fundamental

to Lawson's later pacifist development.5

Therefore, Lawson saw ministerial militancy modeled in his father, and was taught by his mother how to channel it into nonviolent methodology. Hence, at age 19, he became a Conscientious Objector to all war. He said "my folks were ready to give me complete support" though they eschewed the prospect of prison. His father, "while feeling that pacifism (was) a natural process for his sons and while affirming our right to be pacifists and (commending their) sincerity and religious training," was unconvinced that "Christian pacifism" was the best strategy to encounter evil. Mrs. Lawson, however, maintained her belief "that Christian pacifism is the only way and often told us that if we are in prison she ought to be there too." She never encouraged her children "to fight, hate, or destroy," but "insisted" that the Lawson offspring should "treat everybody with Christian love and decency."6

This thoroughly black Methodist family was reinforced in both their activism and pacifism by white Methodists who shared these same sentiments. Lawson became active with the National Conference of Methodist Youth especially during his matriculation at Baldwin-Wallace College. They supported him, for example, in a protest against a racially discriminatory hotel in Jacksonville, Illinois while they were en route from a denominational meeting. They also backed Lawson in his pacifist commitments. During his incarceration for draft evasion, the organization in 1952 reelected him as its Vice President, "despite my presence in prison," he said. Its members, Lawson noted, "are terrific people" as they resisted the accusations of conservative Methodists that they were a "Communist-front" that deserved to be purged by the General Conference. Also, while in prison, Lawson received a visit from Carl Soule, the executive director of the Commission on World Peace of the Methodist Church. Soule's interaction with Lawson reminded the young Conscientious Objector that he was "responsible for at least one major area of growth in my life." In 1947 Lawson participated in an Iowa meeting on peace and world affairs. Already an adherent of "preventive war" and "the Christian concept of love," Soule helped to refine his thinking by having Lawson "realize that in world affairs one must search always for the other guy's point of view

because too often ethnocentricism causes distortion."7

Although Lawson had various interracial involvements in the Methodist church, he was a part of the segregated Lexington Annual Conference in the Central Jurisdiction. Because he aspired to the ministry, his ordination and pastoral assignments would unfold in this separate ecclesiastical structure. Nonetheless, Methodist peace and social activist organizations drew black Methodists into these non-segregated denominational groups and Lawson benefitted from these cadres of interracial support. Some prominent African American Methodists including James P. Brawley, President of Clark College, and Edgar Love, the Superintendent of the Department of Negro Work in the Board of Missions and Church Extension, affiliated with the Methodist Federation for Social Action. Lawson also recalled that Matthew W. Clair, Jr., who would become his bishop, had long embraced pacifism. Yet, his greatest support came not from white and black officials in the denominational hierarchy. Rather, it came from "the youth and the few radicals; not the (ecclesiastical) officers." Leaders in the Lexington Annual Conference predicted the bishopric for Lawson, but when he "went to jail instead, some District Superintendents were quite disappointed."8

Lawson interpreted his youth and peace associations as arenas where he could realize a Wesleyan understanding of himself and his life's mission. He came to understand that carriers of Wesleyan social holiness too seldom resided within denominational officialdom but within the Methodist Youth organization and insurgent pacifists. They were the ones willing to identify with Gandhi and other interreligious sources which supported their advocacy of nonviolence and disarmament. Later, as pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Lawson preached on "Come All the Way Up." He recounted John Wesley's conversion experience and declared that salvation called believers to a conversion that retains its vitality. Wesley talked about two types of Christians: Lower Christians live spotless lives and that's all; Higher Christians, however, "take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23), live to serve, and maintain a conversion that is dynamic and enduring. These characteristics enable the Christian to "come

all the way up" to live in the arena of action and in the power that "God can pour through your life." Lawson's Methodism thus became foundational to his life of risk. While still incarcerated, he said, "I'm an extreme radical which means the potent possibility of future jails. My life will be rather exciting, and (will) offer security only in the sense of service to God's Kingdom." He intended to "come all the way up" and take his activism onto a higher plane of insurgent involvments.9

Lawson's sentence at federal facilities in West Virginia and Kentucky provided time to ponder his post-prison plans. In correspondence with friends and supporters he charted how three aspects in his religious thinking converged into pacifism, nonviolence, and international and interreligious commitments. Lawson was obviously far along, despite his youth, on the road to pacifism. While matriculating at Baldwin-Wallace College, he heard a lecture from the executive director of FOR, Reverend A. J. Muste. He strengthened Lawson's pacifism and offered to publish as a FOR pamphlet one of his anti-war essays. Muste also commended him for returning his draft card and not retreating "on any part of your action." Such support encouraged Lawson's opposition to the Korean War and his disdain for all violence. "I am convinced, "he said in 1952, "of the rightness of my position." He declared that "the world is still rapidly engaged in the gigantic armaments race led by two great nations: one representing the totalitarian forms of government (and) the other supposedly representing the 'Christian democratic' forces" The "latter" nation, the United States, Lawson believed, was "not easily differentiated" from other "totalitarian groups" because of their faith in "atomic weapons." The U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. and their rivalries could push the world "toward the catastrophic day" of mutual annihilation. Only "unlimited love, moral and spiritual armament, courage, trust, and nonviolence" can lead to "world peace." Pacifism was the only pathway to this objective.10

Pacifism, of course, required a praxis. How could world peace be realized? How could one dismantle hegemonic structures that sustained segregation in the American South, apartheid in South Africa, and the degradation of untouchables in India? Tackling these issues mandated a serious engagement with

nonviolence as an ideology and a moral methodology grounded in Christianity and other religious traditions. For Lawson, nonviolence activated and energized pacifism and provided it with both interreligious and philosophical depth. This mature undergraduate in a paper drew these connections in his declaration that "the exact opposite of cold wars and future world wars" was "a moral equivalent to war or nonviolent direct action." When pondering world peace, Lawson cited Gandhi's declaration that nonviolence was a "method of social action which in itself is Christian and democratic." Action needed to be directed against "huge military projects and our part of the cold war." Moreover, there should be "mass education and training of people in the use of non-violent direct action techniques." Nonviolence, he said, was "superior to war because it does not necessitate wholesale murder, bloodshed and devastation of property and natural resources." It also "breaks the vicious circle of hatred and revenge, and is consonant with democracy and Christianity by exalting and respecting, while protesting their actions and institutions. These were Gandhian principles that Lawson restated with a familiar Christian vocabulary. Achieving world peace and justice lay in this strategy.11

Lawson poured into the framework of his Christian and Methodist beliefs complementary principles and praxis from Mahatma Gandhi and his espousal of "nonviolence and truth" in ridding India of British colonizers. Lawson learned from the Hindu Gandhi that he and other Indians "could hate the actions of the British, but never hate the British soldiers or British people.": Lawson added that 'you are fighting a system, not an individual, not a race, or not the people of another country, but a system.' Furthermore, Lawson "insisted on good and pure means for the attainment of good and pure ends, for (Gandhi) held that unlike means could not produce the right ends." Ultimately, Gandhi's mobilization of countless Indians filled prisons to overflowing so that "no more could be put in jail." Lawson concluded that the "amazing fact was that the British did not concede as the vanquished, but as equals." He praised Gandhi because "he has reactivated a sublime principle that social action must be nonviolent."12

Lawson similarly thought that nonviolence effectively addressed sinful structures that suppressed not

only the colonized, but those who were marginalized within their own societies. Just as too many Christians were guilty of moral neglect of the poor and segregated blacks in American society, Hindus bore the same responsibility for the untouchables in India. “Untouchableness is segregation gone mad,” Lawson lamented. They were required to reside “on the outskirts of some villages,” and in other instances they were prohibited from being “anywhere near.” Like some Christians in the United States who denigrated blacks, in India the untouchables were similarly shunned: “no Hindus,” he noted, “would touch them or go near them, for to do so meant to become unclean.” Just as enlightened Christians opposed the subordination of African Americans, a reformist Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, inspired campaigns to break “the back of Untouchableness. . .through nonviolent efforts.” Gandhi and his wife who had to overcome their caste pretensions “taught his disciples to help the ‘children of God’ as he called the untouchables.”Gandhian followers, for example, defended the untouchables in their effort to improve their living conditions, stirred some support from Brahmans, and convinced the authors of the India Constitution to outlaw untouchability. “This does not mean,” Lawson observed, “that every caste Hindu now openly accepts every former untouchable, but rather that where this segregation was once legal, it is no longer legal.”13

Lawson believed in the wide applicability of nonviolence not only in activating pacifism and in Gandhian initiatives to liberate untouchables, but also in efforts to destroy Jim Crow in the American South. While in prison, he met black veterans of World War II who declared that “the only way to stop segregation was with ’50,000 machine guns.’ There were white inmates who “would just as soon machine-gun every nigger in the US.” Hence, an actual “race violence” seemed possible to Lawson. As a result, he concluded that the South needed “a Christian revolution” embedded in nonviolence. “God,” he believed, “wants someone to start such an effort under His guidance (and) I think His Will for my life is now to be that person.” This initiative would have a widespread impact because of its effect on world peace. “While carrying on a non-violent revolution,” Lawson pondered, one could “tie in the world non-

violent revolution against war."14

When Lawson entered prison, he was a Christian pacifist. Before his release, he advanced to Gandhian nonviolence. "You know of Gandhi's nonviolence," wrote Lawson to a friend in 1951. What he did in South Africa and India and how CORE, an offshoot from FOR, replicated it "in race relations in the US," weighed heavily on his mind. Their principles and praxis of "social action stresses God at the core of life." Derivative ideas included "love for all men, most of all the opponents; truth, in plan and action; using what you have to improve (some) conditions; refusing to be a part of evil social patterns; redeeming the opponents rather than condemning them; and (being) about the last but not least (within the human family); (and) self-suffering rather than inflicting suffering on the opponents." With Gandhian methodology in mind, Lawson wondered "why can't a mass non-violent revolution be staged throughout the South where the segregation pattern is much like the 'untouchables' of India? Such a movement would have to start with one person who had the Christian vision to make such a revolution a reality in his own life." Again with a Gandhian praxis in mind, Lawson added if "much negotiation and talk failed to move those who could remove segregation then, staging (the)mass breaking of segregation laws and immediately packing the jails with both groups (poor blacks and whites) who want to live in harmony with each other" would have to occur.15

An embrace of Gandhian nonviolence became the synthesizing factor for Lawson's religious thinking. The social holiness of his father's Methodism fitted the Christian pacifism which he drew from his mother. He mobilized this ethical influence from within his family in the broad context of war in Korea and the rise of atomic armaments. This background created in Lawson opposition to all violence whether in warfare or in the social suppression of subject peoples either in India or in the American South. Determining how to fight for world peace and social justice and how to blend seemingly disparate ideas became Lawson's intellectual challenge. Muste again aided Lawson by sending to India for him a letter of introduction to activists in the Gandhian movement. Lawson, he said, could learn

about problems in India and help the “cause of peace in the United States.” Both clearly agreed that Gandhian nonviolence was the answer for the life of activism that Lawson envisaged for himself. It complemented a foundational Christian doctrine found in Luke 10:27: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.” Moreover, Gandhian nonviolence provided a praxis, a methodology, and a strategy to achieve practical objectives. Mass mobilization, moral discipline, and precise techniques furnished the tactical tools to accomplish world peace and human liberation.16

Lawson’s intellectual reflections, while in prison, were largely untutored and developed apart from relevant theoreticians and practitioners. When he was released, his isolation ended and he benefitted from the stimuli of international travel especially in Africa and Asia, seminary study, and interactions with pacifist and civil rights activists. On the eve of his parole on May 6, 1952, Lawson planned to finish his remaining academic obligations at Baldwin-Wallace College and to sail for India in early 1953. As early as 1951 Lawson declared his intention to go to Asia for three years or to enter a seminary. Already, he had been approved by the Joint Committee on Missionary Personnel of the Methodist Church to be a special term foreign missionary. He relied on this certification to become a teacher and athletic coach at Hislop College in Nagpur, India. “I plan to remain for around 5 years,” he said, and to “become acquainted with eastern philosophy, (the) concept of history, Gandhi, Africa, and other opinions toward (the) western world.” Also, he examined Hindu scripture, poetry and literature, and the activist aspects of the thought and mysticism of Rabindranath Tagore. His continued study of Gandhi, for example, became foundational to his seminary studies when he returned to the United States in 1956.17

Lawson thought in 1951 that his “desire to preach in a very large church no longer exists, even though, 30 years from now this may seem to be God’s Will for my life.” Since seminary, law school, or graduate work in sociology and psychology were possibilities, his vocation, therefore, could take him to

New York “to work in the slums.” Then he could go onto Mississippi to minister to “a small charge, but begin the economic, social, spiritual, and educational groundwork to, in a Christian way, overthrow racial segregation.” He was unequivocal in wanting “to make an effort concerning a Christian revolution,” but he wondered “do we have time to wait for the slow processes of education?” If a social institution is wrong, why wait until it falls of its own weight while it is still destroying the lives and personalities of thousands of people.” Hence, the ministry, to which he had already been ordained, either as a pastor or social activist, became his vocational choice and that required enrollment in a seminary. Moreover, whatever the ethos and intellectual culture of the particular seminary he chose, Gandhian nonviolence would surely influence the direction of his studies.18

The choices that lay ahead of Lawson included Gammon, Perkins, and Oberlin. Both Gammon in Atlanta and Perkins in Dallas, for different reasons, had appeal because he wanted “to know and understand the South.” Gammon, a black Methodist seminary, had numerous alumni who would be his pastoral and activist colleagues. Moreover, he noted if he went “I would probably attend for only a year or so, then finish elsewhere, unless, of course the scholastic possibilities satisfy me.“ Already, some clergy in the Lexington Annual Conference preferred that he should go to Gammon “for future political reasons” that would enable Lawson to become a bishop in the segregated Central Jurisdiction. Perkins at Southern Methodist University, on the other hand, had in 1955 graduated five African Americans, a stunning achievement without precedent at a southern white seminary. At Perkins, he could continue “Methodist school integration as well as acquire an excellent education.” Oberlin, however, was located in Lawson’s home state of Ohio, was close to his parents, and had a century-long reputation for admitting black students and supporting social insurgency. He chose, therefore, to attend Oberlin.19

Lawson intensified at Oberlin his study of both pacifism and Gandhian nonviolence. He explored in a church history course “The Pacifism of the Early Church: Jesus Through Constantine.” He argued that contemporary Christians tried “to reconcile Christ with violence and war,” but “no such

attempt was ever thought of by early followers" except for zealots who could be hardly called disciples. Though Jesus made no specific comment about warfare, "he saw his mission as one seeking for the redemption of the whole of human life: the whole man was to be freed from ancient chains and all men were to be reached by his message and work." Since "his methods are love, service, and the willing acceptance of suffering or rejection," then "his preachments strictly forbid any injury of any form to another." Gandhi, an admirer of Jesus, who often cited the Sermon on the Mount as his guide, espoused the Hindu and Jainist notion of ahimsa or the mandate to cause no harm to any living thing. Here is where Gandhi connected to Jesus. Hence, "the fullness of the Gospel we see in Jesus," Lawson contended, can never be reduced in specifics to retaliation, injury, hostility, ill-will, hatred, or violence." Also, whenever Jesus encountered examples of "physical force," he, like Gandhi, unequivocably repudiated them. Physical force, said Lawson about the Gospel of Jesus, was eschewed "because force contradicted the import of his life, ministry, and purpose."20

Similarly, Paul and his followers believed they should "live at peace with all men, have the same mind as was in Jesus Christ, remain in long-suffering, meekness, (and) obedience to God, (and) love the brethren and all others, serve the weak and afflicted, and with forbearance face wrongs committed against them." Moreover, Paul said "Repay to no one evil for evil. . .Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for the wrath (of God), for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.'" Lawson also added that "the over whelming view of historians is that for the Christians 'any kind of military service was impossible.' This belief lasted at least until 170-180 A.D.21 In another course he tackled unresolved issues related to Gandhian thought and methodology. Would Gandhi have been successful in Nazi Germany or in a Communist context or even in the United States? Did the success of the Indian leader in India owe to the "tough conscience" of the British "which permits a Gandhi." Moreover, as he mused about Gandhi's concept of God either as "tyrant" or "democrat," he seemed impressed with the idea that the "way to God is thro service."22

The Oberlin experience, while solidifying Lawson as a pacifist and adherent of Gandhian nonviolence, also became a life-changing crossroads for this mature seminarian. While still in India, he read about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his successful leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott. Though he dreamed himself of spearheading a "Christian revolution" in the South to overturn Jim Crow, King, whose parallel life resembled his own, arrived in the South ahead of him. Hence, King's lecture at Oberlin in 1957, fortified his long-held intention to work in the South for transformative social change.

After King's lecture to a packed audience, he and Lawson talked together at dinner. Harvey Cox, then the YMCA-YW secretary at Oberlin and a future Harvard Divinity School theologian, arranged the meeting. King was interested that Lawson had lived in India, a destination that King would visit within the next two years. Equally important was that Lawson told the Montgomery leader that he himself "planned to move South eventually and work" in the black freedom struggle. King, "of course, was interested in that." In agreeing that Nashville was the best location for Lawson, FOR officials were mobilized to implement these plans and employ him as a southern regional field secretary. He transferred from Oberlin to Vanderbilt Divinity School and commenced responsibilities as an organizer and teacher of nonviolence. Lawson already believed that "FOR field work appeals to me largely because the work of FOR is more so now the essential work of the Church today even though the Church is reluctant to recognize it." He added that "there is a great deal on my heart and mind which will need expression in creative peace work." To a Methodist Church official Lawson described his Nashville assignment as that of preaching and teaching about "the theology and techniques of Christian nonviolence as related to racial problems, specifically to integration." He stressed that "my Christian pacifism cannot be separated from my understanding of the Gospel and the Church."23

He explained his role to a Nashville resident in 1958. He noted that "I travel a great deal, preaching, speaking, lecturing and advising local groups in the fields of Christian peace-making and reconciliation in race relations." During the 1957-1958 Little Rock desegregation crisis he met with the nine black

students involved at Central High School. Lawson discussed the "ways in which the Christian can defend himself through love, forgiveness and good-will and not with fists, bad language or hatred." These core FOR beliefs derived from Lawson's integration of Gandhian principes into his understanding of Christianity. Hence, "Christians," he said, "must never fight physically because that is not Jesus' way. Instead, we must learn to use spiritual weapons." Moreover, "this is what Gandhi believed and tried to teach India." He noted that "more than any other man, Gandhi in this century has showed us what Jesus meant." Though Lawson introduced himself to his correspondent as "a Methodist minister of the Lexington Conference," it was clear that both Jesus and his disciple, the Hindu Gandhi, directed his path.24

He counseled a young Delaware woman against any attitude or action of retaliation in a situation in which she was victimized. He recalled what Carlotta Walls of the Little Rock Nine told him about "being bombed with 'spitballs' containing bits of metal, stones, or pieces of wood." Because the perpetrator missed her, Lawson advised her to "recover it (the spitball) and return it to him with a smile or she could say to him; 'Why do you dislike me when you have not even tried to know my name?'" Lawson declared that "this is Christian nonviolence. It was what the people of Montgomery have tried to use. Gandhi in India pointed his entire nation to independence from colonialism through nonviolence." He said that "a new kind of society where all of us learn to live together" was only possible if "the minds and hearts of many of our Negro and white people" are changed. Jesus' commandment "to love even one's enemies" applied to such situations and so did Gandhi's dictum to do no harm to any living thing.25

Lawson told his boss at FOR, Glenn E. Smiley, that he enjoyed teaching these principles. Yet, these interactions occurred mainly with "non-FOR people." These disparate efforts, he believed, were not maximumly effective. "I personally feel," he said, "it is high time for a major national decision concerning the role of FOR in a movement of non-violence in the South." He observed that "even though my major interest is yet in the larger implications of pacifism, I am more than convinced that the

historical opportunity of the South is a God-given opportunity for FOR." Hence, his involvement with the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference increasingly became Lawson's focus and became the arena in which he would emerge as a civil rights activist of national note.26

After Lawson's arrival in Nashville in 1958, he and Smiley met with Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, the pastor of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill. Smith and Reverend Andrew N. White, the executive director of the Department of Christian Education of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1957 attended the organizing meeting in Atlanta of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Smith and White, both graduates of the School of Religion at Howard University where Howard Thurman, Benjamin E. Mays, and William Stuart Nelson exposed students to Gandhian satyagraha, started the first affiliate of SCLC. Out of the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC) emerged the Nashville sit-ins in which students from Fisk University, Tennessee A & I University, Meharry Medical College, and American Baptist College played the crucial role in the desegregation of downtown stores and lunch counters between February and May 1960. The techniques that the students learned and deployed drew from the workshops that Lawson conducted under the auspices of the NCLC. In 1958 and 1959 Lawson mobilized all that he knew about Christian pacifism, Gandhian nonviolence, and Methodist social holiness and blended them into an unprecedented movement curriculum that informed civil rights initiatives in Nashville and beyond.27

In 1960 FOR headquarters received a flyer titled "The Negro Students' Code." In "acknowledging the teachings of Jesus Christ and Mohandas K. Gandhi, and looking to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. for counsel, college students in Nashville, Tennessee drew up the code below to govern student conduct in 'sit-in' protests at lunch counters discriminating against Negroes." The "Code," a roster of eight movement principles, recommended the following:

> Don't strike back or curse if abused.
> Don't laugh out.
> Don't hold conversations with floor workers.
> Don't block entrances to the stores and the aisles.

Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times.
Sit straight and always face the counter.
Remember love and non-violence
May God bless each of you.

Written on the side was a note saying "James Lawson worked this out." These commandments were actually distilled from broader presentations that Lawson offered in the workshops. One Lawson document was "Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change." It summarized what Lawson taught in the workshops. 28

Lawson constructed his lectures around nonviolence and blended them with other complementary ideas grounded in Christianity and relevant interreligious sources. In discussing nonviolence as both principle and praxis, he did not present its philosophy and practice as a secular doctrine, but as the essence of religion itself. Core to nonviolence was mirroring God's love for humankind and exhibiting it through concrete relationships of human solidarity and community. This helped practitioners to break hegemonic structures of colonialism, segregation, and untouchability and create societies in which equity and reconciliation would flourish. Echoes of Wesleyan social holiness lay within these objectives.

Nonviolence was more than the absence of physical violence. Blacks who submitted to degradation, for example, yielded to 'a violence against ourselves,' and that acquiescence did not qualify as nonviolence. Instead, "nonviolence," Lawson taught, is the aggressive, forgiving, patient, long-suffering Christ-like and Christ-commanded love or good-will for all humankind even in the face of tension, fear, hatred, or demonic evil." Moreover, "it is the readiness to absorb suffering with forgiveness and courage rather than to inflict suffering on others." Additionally, Lawson said, "it is the desire to resist evil not by imitating evil, but with good-will, with an effort to convert the evil doer."29

Here is where Lawson introduced to Nashville workshop participants the complementary dicta of the Christian Jesus and the Hindu Gandhi. Jesus, he said, told listeners not to retaliate against attackers: 'whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well.' Moreover, Jesus exhorted

followers to 'love ye your enemies.' Similarly, Gandhi preached ahimsa or "non-killing." Lawson explained it as a command "not to offend anybody." He interpreted the Indian leader as saying: 'you may not harbor an uncharitable thought, even in connection with one(who) may consider himself to be your enemy. To one who follows this doctrine, there is no room for an enemy.' Lawson added that "Gandhi eventually coined the word satyagraha or holding fast to truth as the term to describe what he meant by non-violence. He understood satyagraha to mean the force of truth and love or non-violence." Hence, Lawson, "a Methodist minister of the Lexington Conference," though orthodox in his Wesleyan adherence, embraced nonviolence as a religion. It is "first, a way of life, a religious faith steeped in the religious tradition of the world." From an interreligious perspective, Lawson believed, "one can discover it (nonviolence) explicitly in the doctrine of ahimsa [Hinduism], non-retaliation [Buddhism], (and in the) doctrine of the Cross [Christianity]." He added that "the spiritual giants of all ages concur in this concept."30

Lawson divided his instruction into four modules: how nonviolence reacts, training for nonviolence, the virtues of nonviolence, and the methods of nonviolence. Practitioners prepared themselves by jettisoning anger, hostility and fear thus "minimizing the effect of an attack," valuing love, courage, fearlessness, and forgiveness, and pursuing redemptive suffering which "releases unknown elements for good." Preparation included meditation and prayer, study of the scriptures, practicing nonviolence by challenging segregation in bus transportation and in other public facilities. The virtues of nonviolence required practitioners to speak softly, to smile, and to focus on spiritual issues. With respect to nonviolent methodology, it should be acknowledged that "means and ends are one and the same." Since "a transformed community" was the objective, then "the methods must correspondingly reflect love and goodness." The practice steps included fact-finding, negotiation, education of the community, and various methods of nonviolent direct action including sit-ins, boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience. There also should be "a preparation for satyagraha."Gandhi," Lawson declared, took his

followers through the discipline of "physical and spiritual training." Along these lines King promoted in Montgomery, for example, "continuous mass meetings and workshops on nonviolence." Lastly, Lawson provided an extensive bibliography including relevant verses from the Bible, Bhagavad Gita, and from the writings of Mo Ti, a Chinese proponent of universal love and a contemporary of the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah.31

Despite the success of downtown desegregation in Nashville, racially conservative trustees at Vanderbilt University expelled Lawson from the Divinity School. Notwithstanding solid support from the seminary faculty, Lawson transferred to Boston University to finish his degree in theology. The Nashville sit-ins and those led by students in other southern cities convinced Ella Baker of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to call a conference in April 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Out of this meeting emerged the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Lawson prepared a position paper that greatly influenced SNCC's nonviolent trajectory. He said, for example, that "nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love." Moreover, "love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man." Additionally, "by appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities."32

Nonviolence continued to inform Lawson's civil rights movements throughout the 1960s. In 1968, Lawson, while serving as pastor at Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, again placed his nonviolent direct action philosophy into practice. The spontaneous start of the Sanitation Workers' Strike involved Lawson as chairman of the strategy committee of Community on the Move for Equality (C.O.M.E.) Although police hurled mace and used billy clubs on marchers and younger blacks renounced any vow of non-retaliation, Lawson and others held steadfast to their commitment to nonviolence. To bring national attention to the plight of black garbagemen, Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to provide

leadership to the Memphis movement. Supporting the union rights of exploited black workers, organizing the poor, and showing the ongoing relevance of nonviolence to transformational change pre-occupied both Lawson and King. Though King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the effectiveness of nonviolent direct action helped to win recognition for a municipal union for sanitation employees.33

The rise of Black Power in 1966 and black reparations and their militant confrontation with influential white institutions including churches starting in 1969 drew nonviolent endorsements from Lawson. Because majority white denominations had been complicit in maintaining black slavery and defending racial segregation, they were obligated to compensate African Americans for these injustices. A Black Manifesto to be implemented through the National Economic Development Conference would be the conduit for the distribution of funds from white churches to black communities. The reparations idea, Lawson said, was hardly new given the historic Homestead Act of 1862 and Whitney Young's proposed Domestic Marshall Plan of 1963. More than a demand for money the Black Manifesto called white churches to repentance for their part in black suffering. Furthermore, the expected funds would be directed to projects aimed at societal transformation. Black grievances against churches whatever the reaction of whites had legitimacy, according to Lawson, and that required "reparational relief." Lawson recalled that "in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes a very pointed judgment on those who are called to the Kingdom of God movement: 'If you go to the altar and find that your brother had a grievance against you, leave your gift at the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift at the altar.'" White churches needed to let go of their wealth and real estate and seek reconciliation with blacks because that was the route to religious authenticity.34

Lawson, a committed pacifist, became an avid advocate and practitioner of nonviolent direct action. The abolition of war and armaments, Lawson believed, presaged a social order that valued peace and justice more than American or Soviet dominance sustained by violence. These same sensibilities

energized Lawson's involvement in the American civil rights movement. The hegemonic systems that supported the violence of war also supported the rigid social hierarchies and human inequality found in segregation, colonialism, and untouchability. Pacifism married to the praxis of nonviolence, Lawson argued, represented a powerful moral methodology that could undermine these oppressive structures. Nonviolence, however, was more than a tactic. It was a theology, a doctrine, and a set of principles anchored in humankind's "great living religions." Lawson, though grounded in Christian pacifism and motivated by Wesleyan social holiness, drew from Hinduism and other faith traditions transcendent beliefs which valued human life and abhorred any violence that was mobilized against it. Hence, Jesus and Gandhi became for Lawson paradigmatic prophets and practitioners of nonviolence and defenders of peace and justice. These tenets were core to Christianity and essential ingredients to any authentic religion.

NOTES

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