

Disrupting the Calculation of Violence:  
James M. Lawson, Jr. and the Politics of Nonviolence

By

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*“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed...  
Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you...”*

1 Corinthians 15:51 and 58

Bernard Lafayette and Solomon Gort walked together to Nashville's downtown department stores. The sit-in movement had transformed the city over the last ten days as wave after wave of interracial student teams filled the city's segregated lunch counters. Most of the students had been arrested peacefully, but the two seminarians from American Baptist were prepared for violence. Their teacher, James M. Lawson, Jr., told them to anticipate such violence – had even facilitated drills to hone and test their nonviolent responses. But as they marched to Woolworth's on that cold Saturday morning in late February 1960 – a day later remembered as Big Saturday – Lafayette worried he could not resist returning a punch for a punch.<sup>1</sup>

Gort and Lafayette were part of two massive columns of students marching from First Baptist Church Capitol Hill to the downtown business district. By the end of the day, more than 400 would participate in the city's largest sit-in to date.<sup>2</sup> The determined and disciplined students were taunted by a group of young white men as they marched, but the students ignored them – just as they'd been trained to do. Seeing the end of the line, and the end of his chance to provoke the students, one of the young white boys jumped onto Solomon Gort and began to beat him. "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" Bernard Lafayette knew the Sermon on the Mount very well. And though he'd been taught that refusing to respond to violence with violence was among the highest expressions of Christian love, he still doubted himself. In the erupting melee before him, however, Lafayette had no time to think. He simply reacted and threw his body onto his friend Solomon to protect him from the fury of the blows.

Lawson approached the situation with utter calm and politely asked the men to stop beating his colleagues. Looking up only long enough to spit in Lawson's face, the assailant

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<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Children*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1998), 136 – 37.

<sup>2</sup> Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 38

continued to beat Lafayette. So Lawson asked him for a handkerchief. Amazingly, the young white man obliged. Wiping the spit from his face, Lawson realized he now had control over the situation. Seeing the man's leather jacket and ducktail haircut, Lawson asked if he owned a motorcycle or a hot rod. A motorcycle. Was it modified? It was. As the young white man described his customized motorcycle to the black Methodist minister, the two seminarians quickly scrambled to safety and rejoined the students marching downtown.<sup>3</sup>

In his interaction with the young white tough, James Lawson embodied a moral form of political action students in Nashville would collectively deploy in an attempt to challenge Jim Crow. Lawson's ethical response was predicated on a spiritual discipline that enabled him to respond creatively to his attacker, and his careful intervention in this episode of racial violence connected him to a decades long effort among black intellectuals to discern a courageous form of nonviolent action capable of undermining the socially prescribed strictures of Jim Crow. It also exemplifies the politics of nonviolence: a moral form of social engagement intended to reshape race, political culture, and social relations in the modern United States in the years between the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956 and the sit-in movement of 1960. This critical moment has been long neglected in studies of the civil rights movement, and this omission has obscured the development of a new political form in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Although the politics of nonviolence are a central theme in post-war US historiography, little has been done to explore their distinctly religious origins. This

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<sup>3</sup> Halberstam, *The Children*, 136 – 137

<sup>4</sup> The late 1950s were not dissimilar to the 1930s, a moment Harvard Sitkoff described as “a time of planting, not harvesting” for black Americans. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), ix. The long process of attempting to develop a moral form of nonviolent political action among black intellectuals is perhaps best evidenced by a collection of essays published in 1949. See William Stuart Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, (New York, Harper Brothers Publishing, 1949).

underdeveloped analysis has contributed to collapsing nonviolence and nonviolent direct action into the same category. This paper suggests nonviolence is a form of moral being with roots in Gandhism and the Christian tradition, a form of public religion whose central architect was James M. Lawson, Jr. Often described as the leading “tactician” of nonviolence in the United States, this paper suggests Lawson’s primary contribution to nonviolence was the intellectual adaptation of Gandhism into a mode of moral being calibrated to the particular political and racial context of the US South, an innovative political form intended to contrast sharply with the immoral system of racialized violence in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lawson appears frequently throughout historical and sociological literature, but little work has been done on his intellectual contributions to nonviolence. Eminent Sociologist and Historian of the Civil Rights Movement Aldon Morris described Lawson as “an expert tactician of nonviolent protest.” See Aldon D. Morris *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, (New York: Free Press, 1986), 204. Many scholars cite the importance of Lawson’s nonviolent workshops in Nashville in the late 1959 and 1960, but there is less explanation about the theoretical work Lawson did in arranging the curricula for these workshops. For the most recent work on the Nashville movement and Lawson’s workshops, see Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 83. For Lawson’s workshops as a model of how ideas are diffused, see Larry W. Isaac, Daniel B. Cornfield, Dennis C. Dickerson, James M. Lawson, and Jonathan S. Coley, “‘Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement,” Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Lester R. Kurtz, eds., *Nonviolent Conflict and Civil Resistance, Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Volume 34, (2012), pp. 155 – 184. Wesley Hogan’s book, *Many Minds, One Heart*, has an excellent treatment of how Lawson’s ideas impacted a cadre of Nashville students, pp. 13 – 45. For older work on the Nashville movement and Lawson’s workshops, see Halberstam, *The Children*, pp. 4 – 10; 40; 50 – 90; For work on how the Nashville students carried lessons from Lawson’s workshop to the wider southern movement after 1960, and for a brief treatment of the workshops, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially pp. 53 – 55. See also John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 70 - 190. Taylor Branch also follows the Nashville students in his history of America in the King years and describes Lawson as the “mentor of the Nashville movement,” Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 122. For detailed information about King’s relationship to the Nashville movement in 1960, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), especially pp. 260 - 297; 391 – 395; For a brief but important overview of Lawson and his relationship to Gandhism, see Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 67 – 84. David L. Chappell calls Lawson “a veteran of nonviolent warfare” in his work on black religion and the challenge to Jim Crow. See David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 68. Lawson is also mentioned regularly in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, Collector’s ed. (Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press, 1989), but little attention is given to the ideas Lawson synthesized and diffused.

This history of nonviolence is offered alongside an increasingly voluminous literature on “The Black Tradition of Arms.”<sup>6</sup> This new and robust turn in histories of black resistance has shown that African Americans, like Americans more broadly, owned guns for both personal and political purposes. This “armed turn” has attempted to shatter Manichean notions of violence or nonviolence as distinct political options among black Americans by suggesting the politics of nonviolence often depended on armed black communities.<sup>7</sup> While this paper does not explicitly interrogate the relationship between nonviolence and armed resistance, it does suggest these histories of black resistance lack a detailed theoretical accounting of nonviolence, an omission that has left our understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century US politics and black political thought incomplete.

Finally, this paper will historicize the politics of nonviolence in the US by denaturalizing what Mohandas Gandhi has called *satyagraha* – or “soul force.”<sup>8</sup> This paper argues nonviolence in the late 1950s US South is better understood as a form of spiritual power grounded in two modes of being. The first was predicated on black Americans fortifying their internal being against the fear generated by the constant threat of racial violence. In his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, black Christian writer Howard Thurman

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<sup>6</sup> Much of the recent work on the armed turn began with Tim Tyson’s work on Robert F. Williams. See Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). More recently, a bevy of scholars have produced important work on black-armed resistance to white violence. See Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Charles E. Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014). Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms*, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (New York: Knopf, 1998), 404 – 79.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi combined *satya*, truth – or that which is unchangeable – with *graha*, to clutch or hold firmly – in creating *satyagraha*. It’s also sometimes translated as “truth-force.” Jal Mehta and Christopher Winship have devised the term “moral power” to describe “the degree to which an actor, by virtue of his or her perceived moral stature, is able to persuade others to adopt a particular belief or take a particular course of action.” This term does not deal with the internality, the willingness to master one’s fear, at the heart of the politics of revolutionary nonviolence. See Jal Mehta and Christopher Winship, “Moral Power,” Harvard University [http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/cwinship/files/moral\\_power--final\\_1.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/cwinship/files/moral_power--final_1.pdf), p. 4

described Jesus of Nazareth's life as a creative and insurgent nonviolent challenge to the unjust demands of a coercive Roman state. The first section of this paper details how Thurman's ideas aligned with Gandhism to establish the intellectual foundations for nonviolence as moral being. Reclaiming control over one's being in a violent and segregated society enabled the crucial second step of moral being: the emplacement of black bodies in public spaces forbidden to them. In the second section of this paper, I argue the occupation of segregated and dangerous public spaces by disciplined students prepared for violent retaliation was a new and effective political form attuned to the violent racial politics of the US South in the late 1950s.<sup>9</sup> In the third and final section of this paper, I suggest James Lawson was the intellectual architect of these politics. Lawson's primary intellectual contribution was the synthesis of Thurman's historical Jesus with a Gandhian politics of moral being, a political form constructed to destabilize the racial violence central to the maintenance of Jim Crow.

## **I. Racial Violence in the US South and The Origins of Nonviolence**

Historians of the African American experience have long emphasized the significance of land and education for black Americans who had “nothing but freedom” in the wake of slavery.<sup>10</sup> But the push for land and education amidst sharecropping and economic disfranchisement cannot be separated from efforts to internally and externally resist racial violence. Eric Foner and Glenda Gilmore have persuasively argued that Jim Crow was not inevitable in the years after Reconstruction, but once segregation and disfranchisement arrived – borne of physical intimidation at the polls in the 1870s and 1880s

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<sup>9</sup> David Chappel has begun to unravel the way religion was used to battle Jim Crow in *Stone of Hope*. Steve Haynes has also done important work on the role of the kneel-ins as public religious ritual. See Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom : Emancipation and Its Legacy*, The Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

– its durability was ensured with violence. As Joel Williamson has shown, “between 1889 and 1946...almost 4,000 black men, women, and children had been mobbed to their deaths.”<sup>11</sup> Mark M. Smith has estimated more than half of these lynchings took place in the US South between 1885 and 1903.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Zimmerman cites the regularity of racial violence: “white mobs, often with the consent of police and other local authorities, lynched two or three black southerners every *week* in the period between 1890 - 1917.”<sup>13</sup> Racial violence or its threat was the most technology of control used to enforce black poverty, political disfranchisement, and social segregation between the end of Reconstruction and the Second World War.<sup>14</sup>

Historian and sociologist Charles Payne sardonically assessed the persistent and wanton use of racial violence in his study of the black organizing tradition in Mississippi. When it came to such violence, Payne argues, “the point was there didn’t have to be a point; Black life could be snuffed out on a whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn’t like the color of your shirt or the way you drove a wagon.”<sup>15</sup> Such capricious daily violence against black Americans lasted well beyond the highly calculated public ritual of lynching.<sup>16</sup> The ever-present possibility of white violence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had the effect of inscribing a lasting meaning of fear and intimidation onto perceived racial transgression in the United States.

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<sup>11</sup> Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race : Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 120. Other important texts on lynching and racial violence include Key texts: Amy Wood’s work, Leon Litwack’s work, and James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa : Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South, America in the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Wood says 3,200 black men were killed between 1880 and 1940. Wood, *Spectacle and Lynching*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Charles M Payne, *I’ve got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: 1995), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Beverly Guy Shefftal has described lynching as “public ritual” in Wilma Pearl Mankiller and NetLibrary Inc., *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 351.



Despite decades of effort, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) failed to pass federal legislation targeting lynching and racial violence in the United States.<sup>17</sup> While the law had never been the singular avenue black Americans used to combat white violence, in the early 1920s some black American shifted the gaze to India in the search for modes of resistance to white supremacy. Two years after spectacle lynching and racial violence reached their height in the Red Summer of 1919, Reverdy C. Ransom wrote an article about an “Indian Messiah and Saint” in the *A.M.E Church Review*. Ransom suggested a skinny Hindu in colonized India might deliver his country from British rule “through the peaceful method of non-cooperation.”<sup>18</sup> Ransom called this “awakening of Asia...one of the great historic movements of our time,” noting the Indian struggle “deserves the sympathetic understanding of every man who waits for a new birth of freedom in every land.”<sup>19</sup>

Ransom was perhaps first among a generation of black religious intellectuals in the US to look to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi for a moral form of political resistance to white imperial rule. Scholars have well documented the rise of the Howard University Law School as a training ground for black lawyers waging legal battles against Jim Crow under the tutelage of Charles Hamilton Houston, but less attention has been given to the School of Religion at Howard as a site where religious intellectuals worked on a moral methodology

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<sup>17</sup> The Dyer anti-lynching bill failed in 1922 after years of work by the NAACP to pass such a bill. More than a decade later, in 1935, lacking support from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt Southern lawmakers again prevailed and defeated the Costigan-Wagner Act that would have targeted lynching with federal law.

<sup>18</sup> Reverdy C. Ransom, “Gandhi: Indian Messiah and Saint,” in *A.M.E. Church Review*, October 1921, XXXVIII: 150, p. 87. See also Dennis C. Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55,” *Church History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Jun., 2005), p. 221; See also Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 26, 28, 48-49; and Leilah Danielson, “In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi’: American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915 1941,” *Church History* 72:2 (June 2003): 361-88.

<sup>19</sup> Ransom, “Gandhi: Indian Messiah and Saint,” 88

for challenging Jim Crow.<sup>20</sup> Among this group of religious intellectuals was Howard Thurman, first hired as a professor of Religion at Howard in 1932. Thurman and his wife Sue Bailey Thurman led more than a dozen associates to India on a “Pilgrimage of Friendship” in 1935 with the support of the Federation of Student Christian Movements. The delegation marked the first of many trips to India by a cadre of African Americans religious leaders in the years before the civil rights movement: Benjamin Mays, Mordecai Johnson and William Stuart Nelson – all colleagues of Thurman’s at Howard – each traveled to India in the years leading up to the state’s partition with Pakistan.<sup>21</sup>

Thurman lectured and learned at more than 40 institutions across the South Asian subcontinent over two months in 1935. On the first night of his trip, the chairman of the Law Club at the Law College of Ceylon asked Thurman about the long history of racial violence in the US. His query was pointed: how could Thurman call himself a Christian when it was Christians who sold black people into slavery and who sought to preserve the peculiar institution through a bloody civil war? Lynched by people who often called themselves Christian, the young man asked Thurman “how can you account for yourself being in this unfortunate and humiliating position?” Thurman responded: “My judgment

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20 For detailed analysis of the role of Howard faculty and administrators in advancing Gandhism and discerning a moral methodology for challenging Jim Crow, see Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55.” For more literature on Houston and the role of Howard Law School in ending legal segregation, see Gordon Andrews, *Undoing Plessy: Charles Hamilton Houston, Race, Labor, and the Law, 1895-1950*, (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); for an older work on Houston, see Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); for more information about Thurgood Marshall’s tutelage under Houston at Howard Law School, see Rawn James, Jr., *Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle to End Segregation*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010). For a critical history of Houston, Marshall and the NAACP, see Risa Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)

21 Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet*, pp. 72 – 101; See also “The Negro Pilgrimage to India” in Quinton Hosford Dixie and Peter R. Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011). For more on Thurman’s encounter with Gandhi as well as the trips by Johnson and Mays, see Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), pp. 88 – 119.

about slavery and racial prejudice relative to Christianity is far more devastating than yours could ever be.”

From my investigation and study, the religion of Jesus projected a creative solution to the pressing problem of survival for the minority of which He was a part in the Greco Roman world. When Christianity became an imperial and world religion, it marched under banners other than that of the teacher and prophet of Galilee.<sup>22</sup>

Thurman’s response was the expansion an idea first issued in a 1935 article, “Good News for the Underprivileged.” There is a difference, Thurman wrote, between the “Religion of Jesus” and “American Christianity.” In his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman fully explicated this distinction by treating Jesus “as a religious subject rather than religious object.”<sup>23</sup> Thurman wrote about the historical Jesus, the poor Jew living in a region recently annexed by Syria for Roman rule. This geo-political context made Jesus’ Jewishness a problem for the powerful military state within which he lived, an empire with its own religion. For Thurman, Jesus of Nazareth was a target of the state’s violent legal power. The religion of Jesus, not Christianity, should thus be understood in its political context as a method of responding to oppressive and violent state force.<sup>24</sup>

Thurman likened Jesus’ political environment to the one facing black Americans in 1949. Both black Americans and first century Jews faced “the problem of creative survival” as a persecuted minority with no protection from violence. The US, like Rome, used a host of technologies to control its populations: taxation and registration, regulation of land, limited access to education, control over labor. But the method binding all these technologies together was violence. In this climate of “deep insecurity,” and “faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees,” Thurman claimed Jesus “had to find some other basis

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<sup>22</sup> All quotes from Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 113-114

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 15

<sup>24</sup> Thurman believed American Christianity “lacked much that was fundamental to the genius of the faith itself.” All quotes from Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart, The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, (Orlando: Harcourt and Brace Publishing, 1979), 104

upon which to establish a sense of well-being.”<sup>25</sup> Scorned and threatened by the state, security and power must come from somewhere else.<sup>26</sup>

Violence could not be the source of security for the disinherited in Thurman’s telling. Not only because a minority was unlikely to overpower the state with violence, but because violence itself was unlikely to alter the core of insecurity – the persistent distrust of the oppressor by the oppressed. It was this distrust, what Thurman called deception, that fortified hatred, and it was hatred that guaranteed “final isolation from one’s fellow.” This isolation borne from hatred served to obliterate the “creative residue” needed to give rise to precisely the “great ideas” that might transform oppressive social relations.<sup>27</sup> The problem with violence was it’s progenitor of hatred, and the problem with hatred was its limiting of creative and viable options for transforming oppression. Thus the problem of creative survival: unable to muster sufficient violence to battle their oppressors and trapped by hatred, the disinherited had their backs against the wall.<sup>28</sup>

Mohandas Gandhi became an important example for black Americans searching for a creative response to this problem of spiritual survival. Reverdy Ransom was not alone in looking to Gandhi as a Christ-like and saintly figure.<sup>29</sup> Gandhi was attractive to some black Americans in part because of his passion for New Testament notions of moral activism, teachings he both adopted and reinterpreted. Gandhi eschewed the long-standing Christian belief that Jesus counseled passivity in the face of oppression. He treated Jesus’ life as an embodiment of the Hindu principle of *ahimsa* – literally “no violence” – claiming Jesus

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<sup>25</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 35

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 86 - 88.

<sup>28</sup> It’s also critical to acknowledge that violent insurrection as an imminently anticipated and easily quelled response was countered by a host of authors who argued that a nonviolent response would destabilized their attacker to quickly re-consider their method of intimidation and control. These tactical expressions were popularly presented in Richard Gregg’s 1934 book *The Power of Nonviolence* as “moral jiu-jitsu.” See Richard Bartlett Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Publishing, 1934).

<sup>29</sup> For an extensive discussion of the ways in which prominent black intellectuals and writers discussed Gandhi in Jesus like terms, see Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet*, 35 – 45; 98 – 102; 140;

offered clear examples of active and creative nonviolent resistance to oppression.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on Matthew 5:40, “If any man take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also,” Gandhi suggested Jesus illustrated how one might “disarm” an aggressor by giving “your opponent all in the place of just what he needs.”<sup>31</sup> Such an act echoed the Hindu practice of *dharna*, the tradition of shaming a debtor by sitting nearly naked on his stoop. For Gandhi, both were intended to have “a wholesome effect upon evildoers,” and Jesus’ parable was “a picturesque” and “telling” example of “the great non-violent doctrine of non-cooperation.” Whether Jesus actually lived or did not live mattered little.<sup>32</sup> For Gandhi, the principle was true: the story of Jesus’ life was a creative, destabilizing, and forceful response to violence and oppression.

But neither Gandhi nor Thurman saw Jesus’ life simply as a set of practices. For both men it was a story of moral being in the midst of immoral state control. For Thurman, Jesus’ life was lived in fear of God. For Gandhi, Jesus was an exemplar religious leader who pursued an understanding of the world’s lasting forms and principles – truth and God. For both men, Jesus’ aspiration to apprehend the unknowable required abandoning violence. This incomplete apprehension of the world’s forms meant never ruling out the possibility of truth revealing itself – even in the form of an attacker - and Gandhi defined this relentless but nonviolent pursuit of that which is unknowable as *Satyagraha*, a process of “clutching nonviolently to truth.” The moral politics of this Hindu Indian nationalist deeply excited black Christian thinkers intent on discerning how a politics of moral being might take root in the United States in the 1930s, a place where legal challenges to white supremacy had done little to transform Jim Crow.<sup>33</sup> But while Gandhism inspired a form of spiritual power in the

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<sup>30</sup> See Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You: Christianity not as a Mystical Teaching by as a New Concept of Life*, (Rockville, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2006), 17

<sup>31</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Nonviolent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, (Mineola: Dover Press, 2001), 6; 375

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 375

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 3

United States, the politics of nonviolence emerging in the late 1950s US South were a calculated response to a homegrown institution of violence and white supremacy.

## II. James M. Lawson, Jr. and The Remaking of Racial Politics of the US South

Understanding how Gandhism intersects with the explosion of civil rights activism in 1960 requires an understanding of James M. Lawson, Jr. From critical local campaigns in Nashville and Memphis to large-scale SCLC campaigns in Birmingham and Selma, Lawson indelibly influenced the politics of civil rights protest in the 1960s.<sup>34</sup> But before these moments of high drama, Jim Lawson travelled across the South and Midwest in the late 1950s refining and diffusing nonviolence as a political form, working out ideas and tactics with hundreds of local people.<sup>35</sup> He visited students in colleges and churches across the South and Midwest in an effort to discern how Gandhism and ideas about Jesus might become a moral form of political ritual with the power to destabilize Jim Crow. Historians have long recognized Lawson's centrality to the advancement of nonviolence among local

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<sup>34</sup> A cohort of contemporaries celebrated Lawson's work on nonviolence. Martin King called Lawson one of the world's most important "theorists and practitioners of nonviolence" in a speech in Memphis on March 18 1968. John Lewis said Lawson's trainings in Nashville "turned my world around...Jim Lawson knew--though we had no idea when we began--that we were being trained for a war unlike any this nation had seen up to this time, a nonviolent struggle that would force this nation to face it's conscience," John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 70 and 78; Dianne Nash was skeptical of nonviolence when she first attended Lawson's workshops, but concluded "in the process of using it...I finally became convinced," Lisa Mullins, *Dianne Nash: The Fire of the Civil Rights Movement*, (Miami: Barnhardt and Ashe Publishing, 2007). P. 18; Marion Barry said "...Jim Lawson was the foremost proponent of the philosophical construct around nonviolence..." Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 63. Julian Bond described Lawson's vision as "a militant nonviolence, an aggressive nonviolence..." *Voices of Freedom*, 63. Tom Kahn, a close assistant to Bayard Rustin and co-organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, told Lawson he was "most impressed and appreciative" of his role in the sit in movement of 1960. See James M. Lawson Manuscript Collection (hereafter JLMC), Jane and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt University, Box 39, Folder incoming and outgoing correspondence, From Tom Kahn to James Lawson, 29 June 1960.

<sup>35</sup> After visiting her home in Dover Delaware, Pauline Morris told Lawson she believed "non-violence is the best practice" for the difficult process of advancing integration. JLMC, Box 36, FOR I, Folder incoming correspondence, Pauline Morris to James Lawson, 20 May 1958

and national activists, but this paper will explicate Lawson's work to develop nonviolence in the years before the sit-in movement.<sup>36</sup>

From an early age James Lawson understood he would be forced to choose how he would respond to racism. He grew up on heroic stories of his great-grandparents' flight from the slavery in the US south, and Lawson's father – a Canadian born African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) preacher – continued this tradition of resistance to white supremacy by founding an NAACP chapter in every town he pastored in the 1920s and 30s. The Rev. James M. Lawson, Sr. encouraged his son Jimmy to fight, to stand up for himself and never acquiesce if challenged. He carried a .38 caliber pistol on his hip to make clear he would not back down if challenged. Lawson's mother, Philane May Cover Lawson, was the counter-ballast to Jim Lawson, Sr. She believed Christian love prohibited physical and verbal violence. So when Jimmy Lawson, Jr. smacked a white child in elementary school for calling him a "nigger," Lawson's mother asked him: "Jimmy, what good did that do?" Lawson remembers it this way: "She went on talking quietly in that vein, among other things mentioning the love of God, the love in our family, Jesus and our commitment as Christian people. In the process of this conversation, I remember only the two sentences: 'Jimmy, what good did that do?' and 'Jimmy, there must be a better way.'" Lawson called this "a numinous experience," the moment his life became an "experiment with finding the better way."<sup>37</sup>

In the Fall of 1947, Lawson heard A. J. Muste lecture on the history of nonviolence at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio in his first semester of school. Then serving as the

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<sup>36</sup> Lawson consistently maintained the importance of religion to nonviolence. He wrote Tom Kahn, "your point about the religious character of the struggle is highly complex and, to be treated justly, would require considerable discussion." JLMC, Box 39, Incoming and Outgoing correspondence, Tom Kahn to James Lawson, 21 July 1960. The final section of this paper details the religious ideas running throughout Lawson's conception of nonviolence.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent Harding and Rosemarie Freeney Harding, eds. "James M. Lawson Jr.: The Seamless Cloth of Faith and Struggle" in *The Veterans of Hope Pamphlet Series Vol. 1, No. 2*, (Denver: Center for the Study of Religion and Democratic Renewal at Iliff School of Theology, 2000), p. 9

Executive Secretary for the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), Muste introduced the 19-year-old Lawson to Reinhold Niebuhr, John Paul Sartre, Leo Tolstoy and Mohandas Gandhi. Lawson was inspired by this “other way” of doing political resistance, and he dedicated the balance of his college course work to understanding the long history of non-cooperation and nonviolent action of which Muste spoke.

By 1947, Muste was “America’s Number One Pacifist.”<sup>38</sup> A Dutch-born immigrant, Muste co-founded the American affiliate of the British-FOR with sixty-seven other US pacifists in 1917. He had been radicalized by the violence against workers in the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1919, and he consistently positioned himself to the left of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) throughout the 1920s. Like his ministerial counterpart Reinhold Niebuhr, Muste was active with the FOR throughout this time. And like Niebuhr, Muste grew frustrated with the passivity of Christians in the face of state violence against US workers in the 20s.<sup>39</sup> By 1932, Muste was a self-described Trotskyist who embraced a “qualified defense of labor violence” before returning to an un-qualified position of

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<sup>38</sup> *Time Magazine* called Muste the “number one U.S. pacifist” in 1939.

<sup>39</sup> For Gandhi’s contention that *satyagraha* is the opposite of pacifism, see M. K. Gandhi, *Nonviolent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, (Mineola: Dover Press, 2001), 6. The broader debate on passive and active resistance stems from differing interpretations of Jesus’ sermon on the mount in the biblical book of Matthew Chapters 5 - 7. The British FOR, for example, interpreted Jesus admonition to “resist not evil” as a counsel to passively accept violence against oneself. Other writers and activists, perhaps first among them the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, believed Jesus counseled followers to “resist not evil in the way of evil.” Tolstoy was among the first to argue the use of non-violent force in resisting evil was a Christian idea. In his 1894 text *The Kingdom of God is Within You: Christianity not as a Mystic Religion but as a New Theory of Life*, Tolstoy described “passive” interpretations of Jesus teachings in the face of evil as “a perversion” of Christian doctrine, arguing instead non-resistance should be interpreted “in the exact sense of our Saviour’s teaching—that is, not repaying evil for evil. We ought to oppose evil by every righteous means in our power, but not by evil,” p. 18 in Tolstoy. For full text of *The Kingdom of God is Within You* see <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4602/pg4602.html> (recovered 27 April 2014); Tolstoy’s ideas deeply impacted Gandhi. In Part II of his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi wrote “Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, (most other books) pale into insignificance.” See Ch. 15 in Gandhi’s autobiography, “Religious Ferment.” For the full text Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth* (1925), see: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/gandhi/#part2> (recovered 27 April 2014); For a more full discussion of this debate see Anthony C. Siracusa, *Developing an American Ahimsa*, (Memphis, 2009), pp. 42 - 45, <https://dlynx.rhodes.edu/jspui/handle/10267/7416> (accessed 27 April, 2014)



Christian pacifism by 1936.<sup>40</sup> And unlike Niebuhr, Muste did not abandon the nonviolent principles for a “just war theory” in the 1940s but devoted himself instead to advancing what Dave Dellinger would call “revolutionary non-violence.”<sup>41</sup>

In a 1937 essay written just months after his re-conversion to Christian pacifism, Muste puzzled over the moral qualities of a new tactic in the labor movement: the sit-downs. He cautioned against the coercive nature of property occupation to gain the upper hand over factory owners, but he lauded “the spiritual qualities of men who will subject themselves for over forty days to the stern rigors of a sit-down,” describing the new tactic as “a glorious opportunity for those of use who believe in the way of love and nonviolence.”<sup>42</sup> Muste directly supported the formation of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 in his capacity as Executive Secretary of FOR, and he actively counseled the CORE students as they experimented with the sit-in as a method of pursuing racial integration. During this period in the early 1940s, FOR was at the leading edge of nonviolent theory and practice, hiring Bayard Rustin and CORE co-founder James Farmer in an effort to nurture their rise as civil rights leaders committed to nonviolent action.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> JoAnn Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 64

<sup>41</sup> David T. Dellinger, *Revolutionary Non-Violence*, (Indianapolis, 1970). See also A.J. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, (Harper Press: New York, 1940).

<sup>42</sup> A. J. Muste, “Sit-Downs and Lie-Downs,” in *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, ed. Nat Hentoff, (Bobbs Merrill Publishing: New York, 1967), 204 - 06.

<sup>43</sup> For more on Rustin and Farmer, see Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 146 - 191. For the best work on Rustin, see John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, (New York: Free Press, 2003). Jervis Anderson also has an earlier biography on Rustin. See Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen, A Biography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For excellent primary sources from Rustin himself, see Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, Devon W. Carbado, and Donald Weise, eds., (*San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003*). For more on Farmer's experience founding CORE, see James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), pp. 101 – 117.

Muste's 1947 talk at Baldwin Wallace had steeled Lawson's childhood commitment to avoid violence just before it was severely tested.<sup>44</sup> At the end of his senior year, Lawson refused to register for the draft. After consulting with Muste, as Bayard Rustin had done in refusing participation in the Second World War, Lawson sent back all his federal draft materials with a letter explaining why he could not cooperate. "I felt that the free man must maintain his right to determine those laws that are absolutely contrary to the meaning of freedom and justice," he recalled, and both conscription laws and segregation laws were for Lawson "a complete denial of the meaning of freedom."<sup>45</sup> On April 25, 1951, just weeks before he was to receive his degree from Baldwin Wallace College, Lawson was sentenced to three years in a federal prison for violating the Conscription Act of 1947.<sup>46</sup> He spent 14 months in two federal penitentiaries before being paroled to Nagpur, India to coach sports and mentor youth at Hislop College.<sup>47</sup>

In India, Lawson read about the Montgomery Bus Boycott on the front page of the *Nagpur Times*. He did "some jumping up and dancing and shouting" as he believed the seeds of Gandhian non-cooperation were finally taking root in the United States.<sup>48</sup> When he returned to the United States in the fall of 1956, he enrolled at the Oberlin School of Theology where less than a month into his studies he met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The two men sat beside each other at dinner after King's speech, King aged 26 and Lawson 27, and as Vincent Harding writes "when King realized that Lawson had spent three years in

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<sup>44</sup> James M. Lawson, Jr. interview with Joan Turner Beifuss, September 10, 1968, Sanitation Strike Collection, University of Memphis Library, Folder 29, p.20; FOR was at the forefront of nonviolent theory and practice with regards to race in America during the 1940s.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, folder 130, p.7

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, folder 129, p. 19

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, folder 130, p. 19 – 24

<sup>48</sup> Lawson interview with Harding, 11

India absorbing the teachings of the Mahatma, King knew that he had met his soul brother.”<sup>49</sup>

After a decade of study and experimentation Lawson believed the serious application of nonviolence required addressing race in the United States. He also concluded the most urgent site for applying nonviolence to race in the US was the former confederacy. So early in 1957, Lawson moved to Nashville, Tennessee with the intention of beginning work with A.J. Muste’s Fellowship of Reconciliation. He transferred to Vanderbilt Divinity School and deepened his inquiry into the relationship between religious being and the politics of nonviolence. Like Gandhi, Lawson believed all the “great living religions” counseled a life of nonviolence in order to know God. And like Gandhi, Lawson used the Hindu notion of *ahimsa* – nonviolence – as a baseline for arguing that prohibitions against violence were endemic to most major religious philosophies in Asia: Taoism,<sup>50</sup> Mohism,<sup>51</sup> Buddhism,<sup>52</sup> and Sufi mysticism.<sup>53</sup> Lawson read all of these philosophies as linking knowledge of God to a life of nonviolence.<sup>54</sup>

But Lawson made critical adjustments to Gandhism in tailoring it to the US South. As the first FOR staff member dedicated to thinking about how religious ideas might be

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>50</sup> *Wu-wei*, the idea of “not forcing,” is likely the idea Lawson emphasized from the Daodejing. The practice of *wu-wei* is supposed to explain the path of harmony with the Dao, or *ziran*.

<sup>51</sup> The idea of universal love, or *jiān ài*, is likely the idea from Mohism that Lawson emphasized. *Jiān ài* was the idea Mozi used to capture an emphasis on loving across clan or family structures, a response to his belief that Confucius over-emphasized loving people within clans and family structures.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to *ahimsa*, the notion of truth, or no illusion in word or thought – the Sanskrit work *satya* – was drawn from Pantanjali and the Baghavad Gita.

<sup>53</sup> Sufism included a set of inner laws, *fiqh*, intended to govern one’s own behavior as well as outer laws, *qanun*, which referred to social concerns like marriage and criminal law. Early Sufis, like Christian monks and Hindu mystics, professed the subjugation of selfish desire in order to know God.

<sup>54</sup> The document from FOR spelled it out this way: “the goal is God; the second thing is that He can be directly known in this life and in this body; the third thing is that spiritual practices are imperative if one is to know God...” JLCM, Box 36, Folder “The Basis and Power of Love, Preliminary Reading for Feb 1959 Boston FOR discussion Group.” The FOR document cites these quotes as originally printed in Swamhi Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, p.181

used to develop a mode of nonviolent politics,<sup>55</sup> Lawson did not tap the “radical roots” of race and labor organizing in the South – largely because postwar anti-communist sentiment had eroded the efficacy of the popular front organizing more common in the 1930s South.<sup>56</sup> He also didn’t fully embrace Gandhism by taking a vow of abstinence, becoming a vegetarian, or living in a communal ashram. He didn’t pursue complete poverty or spin his own clothes. Instead, Lawson drew on what he called a “broad Christian tradition” and the long-standing anti-communist reputation of the FOR to teach “the theological and practical aspects” of nonviolence.<sup>57</sup> He focused on black Christian churches and black colleges in piloting a hybridized form of Gandhism that might be best understood as a mode of moral being capable of mustering spiritual power for political purposes.<sup>58</sup>

As FOR’s first “Southern Secretary,” Lawson reported to National Field Secretary Glenn Smiley who, along with Bayard Rustin, had been critical in convincing Martin King to

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<sup>55</sup> Howard Kester, a FOR staffer and former Vanderbilt Divinity student in the late 1920s, had organized sharecroppers in communities across the South – but he struggled not only to preach nonviolence in the 1930s but faced the constant threat of personal violence against himself. For more on Howard Kester, see Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997). UNC also has extensive oral histories with Kester. See: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/B-0007-1/menu.html>

<sup>56</sup> See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008). Gilmore cites the local Newspaper in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1935, which wrote "we can use a few more radicals whose roots are set deeply into native soil," 204. Gilmore's book does excellent work on the role on the communist alliance with labor and black Americans in the South during the 30s, but the largely failed efforts of both communists and organized labor in the 30s to advance racial equality made the importance of new approaches all the more important by the late 50s when – a time when, arguably, anti-communist crackdowns were at their height. For more on the failure of organized labor to advance civil rights in the south, see Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the Cio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). For work on smaller victories by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Memphis, see Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*, (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Robin Kelley has done excellent work on communist organizing in the 1930s, particularly in response to the Scottsboro trials where the NAACP faltered. See *Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression, The Fred W Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 23 - 43.*

<sup>57</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Outgoing Correspondence, Letter from James Lawson to Dr. George Brown, 15 April 1958

<sup>58</sup> Lawson described his work as the FOR’s Southern Secretary as “a unique task in the South today...Only the FOR has the broad Christian tradition which can appeal to the churches leaders of the South...” Lawson estimated that between 75 and 90% of Negro leaders are clergy or laymen and see the struggle as part of their “Christian witness,” *ibid.*

commit to nonviolent action in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>59</sup> But beyond Montgomery, the organization had little experience with race in the US South. Muste's earlier support of James Farmer and CORE in the 1940s was largely centered in Chicago, and the FOR's endorsement of Rustin on his 1947 "Journey of Reconciliation" through Tennessee and North Carolina was a one-off action. No one from the FOR – or any other organization for that matter – had developed a sustained strategy of nonviolent action for confronting Jim Crow in the US South before the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. This was Lawson's unique challenging working with the pacifist FOR in the rapidly expanding segregationist South.<sup>60</sup>

Lawson's strategy was to inject religious ideas into a political form that was calibrated to white supremacy's weakness. As a mode of moral being, nonviolence required the spiritual disciplines of love and forgiveness in the face of tremendous violence and malice. And it was these personal disciplines that separated it from nonviolent direct action, which required no such moral discipline. The nonviolent direct action of CORE volunteers in the 1940s was inspired by Gandhi, and the CORE students - James Farmer, George Houser, Bernice Fisher among others – all studied Krishnalal Shirdaharani's contemporary summary of Gandhi's major campaigns, *War Without Violence*, in an effort to discern "How It's Done."<sup>61</sup> CORE was inspired by the sit-down among labor activists and Gandhi's

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>60</sup> Smiley notes that members who were "inactive" after a few years were dropped from the list of supporters...Lawson was essentially building a new organization. JLMC, Box 26, Folder Incoming Correspondence, Glenn Smiley to James Lawson, 23 June 1958. For the best work on the way the South was expanding as part of the Sunbelt, see Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>61</sup> See Lewis Perry's discussion of CORE students' studying of Krishnalal Shirharani's chapter on "How its Done," Lewis Perry, *Civil Disobedience: An American Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University, 2013), 194.

nationalist campaigns to discern how a new form of political action might join picketing and boycotts the “repertoire of contentious politics” used to challenge Jim Crow.<sup>62</sup>

But nonviolent direct action – the boycotts, pickets, and sit-downs common to early 20<sup>th</sup> century protest – was not nonviolence. An earlier generation of historians collapsed the political strategy of nonviolent direct action and nonviolence largely because they did little to account for religion and religious actors.<sup>63</sup> Historian David Chappell has offered an excellent starting place in assessing the role “prophetic religion” played in the death of Jim Crow. Chappell defines prophetic religion as a religious language of political transformation that contrasts sharply with the civic language of liberal reform. The rise of “nonviolent soldiers” in the civil rights movement, Chappell suggests, cannot be disentangled from what he calls the persistence of “Christian and Jewish myth” among a cadre of religious leaders who believed only “catastrophic changes” might prevent the collapse of human society.<sup>64</sup> Building on Chappell’s work, this paper suggests nonviolence was not simply a protest strategy but a vision of new social relations grounded in narrative portrayals of Jesus and Gandhi. For Jim Lawson and a cohort of student leaders, nonviolence was an innovative form of social politics capable of unmooring people from the deforming prescriptions of Jim Crow.

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<sup>62</sup> Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 39. The sit-in is said to have emerged in the Akron Rubber Plant action of February 1936, and the spread of sit-downs and lay-ins after 1936 was rapid. By 1937, these tactics had been used in 50 labor strikes and at the end of 1938 they had been deployed in 500 labor conflicts across the United States. Perry, *Civil Disobedience*, 175.

<sup>63</sup> In their history of nonviolent direct action among African Americans, especially since Reconstruction, August Meier and Elliot Rudwick suggest nonviolent direct action tactics have long been a part of black struggle. They argue the “discontinuity” in the protest tradition belies any kind of argument about ideological commitments to nonviolence. This essay, however, suggests the late 1950s were an outlier in this longer history of nonviolent direct action, largely because of Lawson’s work to create a form of moral politics he called nonviolence, a form of politics which a critical number of students – many of them ministers, seminarians, or faith based actors – adopted and practiced. See August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Along the Color Line, Explorations in the Black Experience*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 265.

<sup>64</sup> Chappell, *Stone of Hope*, 3

A host of broader shifts must be considered in accounting for the ascent of this unique form of politics in the post-war US South. Sociologist Aldon Morris has suggested that the NAACP's blossoming in the immediate post-war years contributed greatly to the development of widespread black protest beginning in 1960 and, indeed, following Ruby Hurley's appointment as Southeast Region Director of the NAACP in 1951 the total number of NAACP chapters across the former confederacy rose to more than 500.<sup>65</sup> But the rise of the NAACP should be understood alongside the near complete banishment of black Americans from electoral politics in the US South. As more than four million black Americans left the US South for the North and West during the Great Migration, their attempt to join the Republican party hastened the pursuit of a "lily-white" strategy among the party of Lincoln.<sup>66</sup> Increasingly ostracized from their base of formal political power, black Americans moved to join FDR's Democratic party in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The cumulative effect of this shift was a doubling down on black exclusion by Southern Democrats during the "Dixiecrat Revolution" of 1948.<sup>67</sup> By the time the 1956 "Southern Manifesto" was issued by southern lawmakers engaged in "massive resistance" to integration, blacks were almost completely disfranchised from formal electoral politics in the US South.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Library of Congress online Manuscript Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-civil-rights-era.html#obj14>

<sup>66</sup> Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln : Black Politics in the Age of Fdr* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983) and Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*.

<sup>67</sup> Bruce Schulman suggests, however, that a new breed of "whiggish" southern businessmen would emerge as a more moderate and stable force in the Southern Democratic party. See Schuleman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 133. Regardless, with the exception of Memphis, black voting was almost nonexistent in the former confederacy before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As Hasan Kwame Jefferies points out about Lowndes County, Alabama, for example, more than 5,000 voting age black Americans lived in the county at the beginning of 1965, and not one was on the voting rolls. See Hasan Kwame Jefferies, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>68</sup> The City of Memphis in Tennessee is actually an exception to this rigid political exclusion. Wayne Dowdy has, for example, written about the massive voter registrations among black Memphians in the lead up to the 1959 election, which Black Americans called a "great crusade for freedom." See G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

But global movements in non-white countries shifted discourse on race and resistance in the United States. Gandhi's rise in international politics, despite never being elected to office, had already become a source of inspiration for black Americans. The high politics of Gandhi's friend Jawarlahl Nehru and the collection of non-aligned nations at the *Bandung Conference* of 1955 signaled to the Soviet Union and the United States that non-white peoples across the globe would not simply be folded into their geopolitical calculations. The South African Defiance Campaign of 1948, the armed Mau Mau uprising of the mid 1950s, and Kwame Nkrumah's successful push for Ghanaian independence in 1960 proved to be the leading edge of independence movements in Africa. By 1962, 25 new nations emerged in formerly colonized territories to shift the discourse on race, freedom, and resistance in the United States.<sup>69</sup>

These rapid changes effected by political and social movements contrasted with the slow process of Jim Crow legal reform in the United States. Rigid segregation in schools remained a fact of life in the late 1950s despite the 1954 *Brown* decision, and the widely publicized lynching of Emmett Till in 1954 was a reminder that abrupt and lethal white violence against black people remained real. The half-success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a strong local movement resulting in another unenforced Supreme Court decision, cast doubt on the NAACP's strategy of pursuing litigation. Despite the *Smith V. Allwright* (1944) decision outlawing the white primary, the *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948) decision striking down racially restrictive housing covenants, and the *Brown* (1954) and *Browder* (1956) decisions undoing the legal regime of segregation, white supremacists continued to evade the law and use violence to control black labor and politics.

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<sup>69</sup> James Hunter Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans : Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).



James Lawson believed in going “beyond the law” to confront “the public mind with the necessity of” ending white supremacy.<sup>70</sup> “We do not have the atmosphere in which the constitutional or democratic framework has relevancy,” Lawson told a group of students at Penn State in 1960.<sup>71</sup> Debated by elite actors in insulated courtrooms, the law was not - for Lawson – a truly democratic form of change in a political environment that disfranchised black Americans. Nonviolence, Lawson suggested, was a more pure form of democratic engagement that is “involving many, encountering all.”<sup>72</sup> This innovative political form, he suggested, might bring about the “radical reversal of perspective” needed to confront and transform white supremacy in the United States.<sup>73</sup> The “present openness” to this form of politics Lawson encountered in the late 1950s was borne from the success of non-white nations remaking their politics at a time when many young African Americans were eager to do just that.<sup>74</sup>

This sentiment was confirmed on Lawson’s first trip to Memphis in early 1958. He met with a group of “highly respected” leaders in the black community and learned that Church of God in Christ (COGIC) founder Rev. Charles H. Mason had a cross-burned in

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<sup>70</sup> JLMC, Box 45, Folder Students vs Segregation, “Address at Penn State University,” 30 March 1960, p. 3. Lawson went on to say “what we in the movement in Nashville understand is that we are committed to this building of a climate in which democratic law will have some real relevance. We see ourselves trying to persuade people, to change the attitudes of people, in such a fashion that the Supreme Court decisions can really be relevant.”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 2

<sup>72</sup> JLMC, Box 21, Folder - Speeches on NV Movement (race), “The Measure of a Movement,” The Gandhi Memorial Lecture, Howard University, 10 April 1961; “Negro leadership has not been amenable to an approach which would not only change the laws and customs but transform the power structures which made and sustains [sic] those laws and customs,” JMLC, Box 45, Backdraft, Ch 1 draft.

<sup>73</sup> JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, handwritten note

<sup>74</sup> Lawson wrote: “there is a powerful and significant reception to the idea of non-violence. When I spoke on campuses in Texas in 1953, I did not find this openness to the ideals of pacifism at all. I suggest that recent months (Montgomery, Orangeburg) has paved the way for responsible Negro leaders to see the unlimited possibilities in what we of the Fellowship (of Reconciliation) have been preached [sic] for 43 years,” JMLC, Box 36, letter from James Lawson to Dr. George Brown, 15 April 1958. Lawson also remarked “I strongly believe that the FOR has an opportunity to make the ministry of reconciliation felt as never before in its history,” JLMC, Box 36, Outgoing Correspondence, Letter from James Lawson to Dr. George 23 June 1958. He also told Brown of his intent to remain in the south for a “number of years.” “While there are dangers involved in the work, there is also realization that right now I belong there.” JLMC, Box 36, Letter from James Lawson to Dr. George Brown, 15 April 1958;

his front yard, his church sanctuary had been torched, and his newly built home had also been set to the flame. Dr. Hollis Price of Lemoyne College in Memphis told Lawson such incidents indicated the need to “change the entire nature of” activism in Memphis to focus on “stiffening the will to resist evil” and “effectively overcoming fear.”<sup>75</sup> The continuing nature of racial terror in Memphis led Brown to suggest “a different and newly oriented leadership” for challenging white supremacy.<sup>76</sup>

In his first full year of work, Lawson made trips like this to colleges and churches in every former confederate state but Florida.<sup>77</sup> In his first three months alone he travelled through Mississippi, Kentucky, West Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Arkansas and Ohio.<sup>78</sup> By the spring of 1958, sensing weariness in the young seminarian, Glenn Smiley told Lawson “we feel a great confidence in your work in the South” and urged him to keep up his feverish schedule in the faith that it would pay off.<sup>79</sup> But Lawson wasn’t so sure. He reported to Smiley his trip through Virginia in early May of 1958 was vastly underwhelming, noting Richmond had “fallen flat.” “The Nashville group still lags behind,” he wrote Smiley, and “I really do not know what to do.”<sup>80</sup>

But by the summer of 1958, Lawson had gathered a group of regular students for an ongoing series of workshops in Nashville. They covered a range of topics from the “religious and psychological basis of nonviolence,” the practical aspects of “nonviolent methods,” “preparation for nonviolence,” and Lawson provided extensive bibliographies on

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<sup>75</sup> JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, Memphis Report

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> JLMC, Box 39, Folder 1961 Clippings/King, “Minutes of National Council of the FOR, 21 - 23 April 1960”

<sup>78</sup> Lawson was also sought for a number of tasks across the country in places to which he did not travel. Lawson was asked by the Ohio United Campus Christian Fellowship to write an article on world problems and student challenges. David Shaw, Pastor of St. Luke’s in Odessa TX requested “The Montgomery Story” and “Walk to Freedom” comic books for his congregation. JLMC, Box 36, letter from David Shaw to James Lawson, 2 April 1959; Lawson also turned down a Danforth Foundation request to be at conference with 325 kids in August 1959.

<sup>79</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Folder Incoming Correspondence, letter from Glenn Smiley to James Lawson, 19 May 1958

<sup>80</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Folder Outgoing Correspondence, James Lawson to Glenn Smiley, 2 July 1958.

religion and nonviolence to spark continued dialogue in preparation for this sustained movement.<sup>81</sup> The consistency of the Nashville workshops was a revelation to him. It created a space where he could actively work through ideas and strategies with a dedicated group of students in a specific location. He told the Rev. S.M. Smiley, Jr. of Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, “I am now convinced that the FOR has been born for a moment like this.” His belief in nonviolence as form of moral politics that might address “the problems of the South” was growing. Despite the hardships of travel, hardships made more difficult by FOR’s relative anonymity in the South, Lawson’s first six months as a FOR staffer convinced him that the politics of nonviolence were a force capable of confronting and transforming white supremacy.<sup>82</sup>

The power of nonviolence was, for Lawson, its ability to change people – lots of people – and thus change the social structure of society. In Gandhian fashion he conceived of nonviolence as a “faith steeped in the religious tradition of the world.”<sup>83</sup> But his most important innovation to nonviolence was the injection of Christian moral practices – humility and forgiveness – into a political form that would contrast sharply with the violence of white supremacy. For Lawson and the students he worked with, these personal religious practices became collective political rituals intended to transform social relations. Remaking social relations was the method by which the practitioners of nonviolence attempted to structurally transform race in the United States, and the injection of personal religious

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<sup>81</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Folder Outgoing Correspondence, Lawson to Dr. Major Jones, Chattanooga, 10 March 1960

<sup>82</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Folder Outgoing Correspondence, James Lawson to Rev. S.M. Riley, Jr., 5 July 1958. Lawson also told Riley that much could happen if “ministers could be jarred out of their fear and see the possibility for creative preaching and action.”

<sup>83</sup> “Non-violence is first a way of life,” Lawson argued, “a religious faith, steeped in the religious tradition of the world...one can discover it explicitly in the doctrine of ahimsa (hinduism), non-retaliation (buddhism), doctrine of the cross (Christianity). The spiritual giants of all ages concur in this concept,” JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, “Non-violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change.”

practice into public political ritual was the innovation that enabled Lawson to move “people from idea to action.”<sup>84</sup>

### III. Nonviolence as Moral Being

James Lawson believed Gandhi and Thurman had correctly reinterpreted the New Testament as counsel to actively resist violence. But he also openly castigated continuing counsels to Christian passivity in the face of racial oppression as “theologies of realism” that made God “anemic” and “defenseless” in the face of great evil.<sup>85</sup> Lawson rejected the interpretation of Jesus’ teachings as “impossible ideals” and instead called on Christians to see that Jesus did “on the cross...what he says in the Sermon on the Mount,” illustrating how personal suffering can be a more powerful event than state violence.<sup>86</sup> By abandoning status quo religious politics and embracing pain and suffering, Lawson believed Christians might recover the cross of Jesus as good news for the persecuted.<sup>87</sup>

The suffering Jesus was, for Lawson, an illustration of how individual religious practice could engage and transform broader social forces. Because Jim Crow made personal demands of both black and white people, Lawson described segregation’s attempt to condition and warp how one is in the world as “spiritual violence.” Refusing to cooperate with such social conditioning was the first step in abandoning the externally imposed but personally internalized “emotional complexes” of fear, hatred, and inferiority which Jim Crow hoped to nestle within individuals by coercing cooperation with inhumane requirements. Refusing to abide by the demands of segregation was, for Lawson, a refusal to

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<sup>84</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds One Heart*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> JLMC, Box 45, Folder Notes for Chapter Three, Theology and Social Change, Handwritten Notes, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Box 45, Backdraft, Folder – Chapter 3, “The Theological Basis of Nonviolence.”

<sup>87</sup> “Jesus was nailed to a cross,” he wrote, “six bullets were pumped into Gandhi,” JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, “Non-violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change,” 1958; Lawson argued these men had become world historical figures precisely because they chose suffering and sacrifice. Lawson intoned sardonically: “perhaps your crucifixion will come out alright as well,” JLMC, Box 45, Folder Notes for Chapter Three, NO TITLE, Handwritten Notes

internalize the externally imposed inferiority of white supremacy. Reformulating Jim Crow as a social force of spiritual violence effectively narrowed the distance between self and structure in Lawson's telling. One could not, in Lawson's words, "deny consciously" one's inferiority as a black American while simultaneously "testifying" to such inferiority in abiding by Jim Crow laws.<sup>88</sup>

Because nonviolence was grounded in a conception of how to be within a social structure ordered by violence, nonviolence is best understood as a mode of moral being with political valences. Refusing to obey Jim Crow laws was both a rejection of personal inferiority and a public challenge to the legitimacy of Jim Crow. No person or law could make a person inferior, Lawson argued, because individuals always retained a choice about how to be. This choice took on clear political valences for black Americans who were confronted with a "colored" restroom, segregated pool, or lunch counter.<sup>89</sup> Refusing to use so-called "colored" facilities was an act of political noncooperation, but it was also a choice to fortify against the "emotional and spiritual violence" of Jim Crow. In this way Lawson offered his students a choice about whether to perpetuate white supremacy, and their inferiority – or refuse cooperation with segregation, and their inferiority – by nonviolently being in segregated public spaces. Lawson called this the "serious and concrete alterations of persons in the social order" that was, itself, the remaking of the social order.<sup>90</sup>

Because being nonviolent in segregated public spaces was likely to provoke violence, Lawson used the idea of Christian moral atonement to persuade students that nonviolence in the face of violence was a world-changing force. The moral theory of atonement posits that

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<sup>88</sup> Mullins, *Dianne Nash: The Fire of the Civil Rights Movement*, 18

<sup>89</sup> JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, "Non-violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change," 1958; "With the exception of a distinctive segment represented by Mary McLeod Bethune, the Negro has not been non-violent, but rather acquiescent. 'We, in part, suffer from decades of perpetrating violence against ourselves,'" Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> All quotes JLMC, Box 39, Folder 1961 (SCLC) Annual Meeting, "The Womb of Revolution," August 1961

Jesus' unearned suffering was a redemptive event for society. Freed from fear in entering into his crucifixion, Jesus's power was borne from a faith in the primacy of nonviolent suffering over violent power. Lawson taught that Jesus' courageous martyrdom affected a profound rupture in human society, and that the Sermon on the Mount was a clearly discernable moral methodology for overcoming state power and violence. Lawson described this as the "character of resistance" in the religion of Jesus: an alternative form of creative being that was more powerful than violence.<sup>91</sup>

By linking the idea of moral atonement to nonviolent being in segregated spaces, Jim Lawson conceived an innovative form of spiritual power with clear political valences in the United States. Years before children were attacked by dogs in Birmingham or marchers were assaulted by police in Selma and Memphis, Lawson told students and ministers how to take "responsibility for igniting" the "tension" around race in the United States by encouraging them to actively engage white supremacy and publicly endure suffering through nonviolent being in segregated spaces.<sup>92</sup> This did not mean passively accepting the often-brutal violence precipitated by the public ritual of sit-ins, kneel-ins, and freedom rides. It meant, instead, entering into violent situations prepared to practice humility, forgiveness and mercy.<sup>93</sup> After decades of wanton racial violence directed at black people, this careful distinction between active nonviolence and passive acquiescence is crucial. Like Thurman's historical Jesus, Lawson told his students their backs were against the wall. Segregation forced young black Americans to obey and participate in segregation or refuse and resist through non-cooperation. Doing nothing, however, was not an option. Pointing to Gandhi

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<sup>91</sup> JLMC, Box 45, Folder Chapter 3, "The Theological Basis of Nonviolence"

<sup>92</sup> JLMC, Box 36, Folder Outgoing Correspondence, James Lawson to Rev. L.C. Roberts, 5 February 1959

<sup>93</sup> JLMC, Box 45, Folder Notes for Chapter Three, "Cruciality of the Cross," Handwritten Notes

and Jesus, Lawson suggested active nonviolent noncooperation could challenge white supremacy without compromising the morality of nonviolent practitioners.<sup>94</sup>

But all of these social and religious ideas cannot be disentangled from a set of careful political calculations. As evidenced in the opening story of this paper, the politics of nonviolence were an effort by demonstrators to redirect violent encounters toward social transformation. Lawson showed little fear in approaching the man who attacked Gort – even if he was actually afraid – and Lawson’s personal discipline allowed him creative control even with spit on his face. Such mastery of a violent environment enabled him to determine the shape of the social engagement with the young white man, and it was this kind of personal control that Lawson believed groups of demonstrators might possess if they remained actively nonviolent in segregated department stores or public pools. If demonstrators were prepared to confront racial violence nonviolently, they could destabilize the calculation of violence by reclaiming control over and creatively reimagining social relations.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the politics of nonviolence were inseparable from the spiritual power of personal nonviolent being. Violating Jim Crow strictures in public places was meant to confront the deep memory of racial trauma and violence built into the social structure of the US South, and it was in those places where the memory of violence was greatest and the

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<sup>94</sup> “We have (a) choice to share (the) load” of pain, Lawson argued, “or increase (the) burden (of pain) on others.” In his teaching and preaching, Lawson argued that Jesus exposed the short-sightedness, and thus the weakness of violence, by creating a world-changing event through willingly accepting the pain of violence onto himself. Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> JLMC, Box 21, Folder Speeches on NV Movement (race), “Raleigh Institute of Religion Lecture on Non-Violent Solutions of South & Its Effects Abroad,” January 30 1961. Lawson was militant, perhaps to a fault, in emphasizing the importance of accepting violence and suffering by remaining in jail. Lawson argued that nonviolence “does not debate” whether to go to jail and stay there. “Jail going and staying symbolizes the cross,” he told his students, it “represents (the) cheerful suffering” at the “heart” of nonviolence. As has been demonstrated above, suffering was at the heart of the politics of revolutionary nonviolence, and “accepting jail sentences tests the fiber of love,” which Lawson called “the root law and sustaining spirit of *insistent resistance*. Cut out jail-occupation and you of necessity cut out suffering - cut out suffering and you no longer have n-v.” JMLC, Box 21, Folder Speeches on NV Movement (race), Handwritten notes from SNCC Conference, Fall 1960.

threat of violence most imminent that spiritual power might do the most work. These politics of nonviolence drew their curious efficacy from these public confrontations largely because the humility of nonviolent demonstrators contrasted sharply with the violence that served as white supremacy's primary mechanism of control.<sup>96</sup> This re-appropriation of humility by nonviolent demonstrators was a strategic move given white supremacy's goal was public humiliation, and the enlistment of suffering and humility as weapons against white supremacist violence suggests that Richard Gregg's earlier characterization of nonviolence as moral jiu-jitsu was accurate.<sup>97</sup>

In the late 1950s, James Lawson contributed these ideas to the development of nonviolence by drawing on stories of Gandhi and Jesus. Just as Gandhi, Muste and Thurman had done before him, Lawson rejected notions of Christian "non-resistance" – but then went a step further to articulate how nonviolence could be an active form of moral being that simultaneously provided personal spiritual protection while proving politically "forceful."<sup>98</sup> In the post-war US South, these politics of nonviolence proved themselves – if only for a time – an effective weapon for curbing the fear inspired by racial violence while also developing a political advantage for nonviolent activists. At work in the years between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the sit-in Revolution of 1960, James Lawson's innovations were essential to the development of this forceful and novel form of a self-described moral politics.

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<sup>96</sup> JLMC, Box 45, Backdraft, Folder - Chapter 3 The Theological Basis of Nonviolence, "A Christian Theology of Nonviolence" Handwritten notes.

<sup>97</sup> Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*.

<sup>98</sup> Lawson argued for four categories of force: physical, spiritual/moral, psychological, and socio-political. JLMC, Box 45, Folder Chapter II, "Clarifying Nonviolence, Violence and Nonviolence."



## **Conclusion: Building a Nonviolent Army**

In his 1961 keynote address at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) annual retreat, James Lawson openly indicted “the American Way of Life.” He charged the United States with affording “structural support” to both segregation and slavery, and he told the gathered ministers that the foundations of the US must be shaken by applying “moral, spiritual, and political pressure” to political institutions in an effort to make Jim Crow an issue “the president, nation, and world cannot ignore.” Lawson called for the organization of “a non-violent army” made up of local cells. He envisioned dozens of platoons and thousands of volunteers participating regularly in mass meetings, practicing the disciplines of fasting and prayer, and staffing work camps for the continued training of nonviolent soldiers.<sup>99</sup> Like Gandhi’s satyagrahis, these nonviolent soldiers would engage in collective acts of civil disobedience across the United States and they would go to jail and stay there until their demands were met.<sup>100</sup> “We can stand it in here for as long as you can stand it out there,” Lawson often reminded his students.<sup>101</sup> He told the group that only “healthy minded citizens” prepared to enter prison instead of acquiescing to “forms of political evil” could bring about a “democratic society.”<sup>102</sup>

By the time of this 1961 speech, Lawson was a nonviolent political insurgent. He had been expelled from Vanderbilt University in March of 1960 for his role in the sit-in

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<sup>99</sup> Lawson self-control, as counseled by Gandhi, “includes this element of meditation and other forms of training.” He cites “simple living, recognition of the unity of all life and disinterested service. the vows were: truth, nonviolence, chastity, fearlessness, control of the palate, non-possession, non-stealing, bread-labor, equality of religions, anti untouchability and self-rule. By these daily observances was truth-force to be developed,” JLMC, Box 36, Folder The Basis and Power of Love, “Preliminary Reading for Feb 1959 Boston FOR discussion Group.”

<sup>100</sup> JLMC, Box 39, Folder 1961 (SCLC) Annual Meeting, “The Womb of Revolution,” August 1961

<sup>101</sup> JLMC, Box 21, Folder - Speeches on NV Movement (race), Handwritten notes for SNCC conference fall 1960. Lawson Quotes Philippians 1:12-14 in the speech: “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

<sup>102</sup> JLMC, Box 38, Folder NV Workshops 1958, NV workshop materials

movement, and his old friend A.J. Muste was forced to deliver the news that SCLC president Martin Luther King, Jr. could not offer him a job – despite King’s desperate longing to do just that. NAACP Director Roy Wilkins threatened to withdraw support from SCLC if King hired Lawson or Lawson’s friend Rev. Douglass Moore, the Methodist minister in Greensboro, North Carolina who supported four young men from North Carolina A&T College in occupying a Woolworth’s lunch counter on February 1, 1960. The sit-ins had seemingly altered everything overnight, but in truth these politics – and the insurgent Lawson – had been decades in the making.

As Lawson continued his speech to this group of exclusively male ministers – Ralph Abernathy, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Orange, and Wyatt T. Walker among others – he encouraged them to seize the political moment and assemble their nonviolent army in 12 months. “The Deep South can scream rape and invasion if it wishes,” he told the group “but the moment of truth is not far off.” This army should affect “a world wide crisis” that would overshadow the recent standoff between Russia and the US over missiles in Cuba and shift attention from “distractions” in Berlin or Moscow to focus attention on “the cancer at home.” With “jails...full of free men refusing to back down,” Lawson told the men, the world would shift its eyes to the racial revolution in the United States.<sup>103</sup>

These politics of nonviolence were fundamentally an indictment of legal reform as a strategy for ending white supremacy in the United States. As Thurman had shown with the historical Jesus and as Gandhi had shown with his life, true self-governance often required refusing to acquiesce to the immoral demands of the state – often required breaking laws and accepting jail. Such active insurgency, while often waged by well-dressed students carrying books, should not be understood as a politics of respectability. Rather than an endless process of measuring up to the expectation of an oppressor, the politics of

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<sup>103</sup> JLMC, Box 39, Folder 1961 (SCLC) Annual Meeting, “The Womb of Revolution,” August 1961

nonviolence were a creative form of political being that drew their power from the courageous confrontation of fear and violence, a process that destabilized the seemingly fixed social relations of white supremacy and created new possibilities for human engagement. To echo Leon Litwack and Glenda Gilmore, such efforts – amidst the near complete electoral disfranchisement of black Americans – can be seen as an attempt to redefine politics in the United States.<sup>104</sup> The politics of nonviolence were a rejection of the typical pattern of aggression and retaliation common to courts, elections and street fights in favor of a direct interaction between segregationist and the segregated. Practitioners of nonviolence used their very being to disrupt and transform the social politics of domination and acquiescence that undergirded white supremacy.

James Lawson – as a religious intellectual and political innovator – was critical to the development of these politics. His was not a messianic leadership common to stories of Martin King, but neither was it the radical egalitarian leadership of Ella Baker that proved so powerful for so many. Lawson was, instead, a didactic religious teacher who sought to convince his students that how they are in the world is a form of politics. Lawson taught a form of political being that was demanding, perhaps too demanding, but which for a time made the biblical vision of a “new creation” ushered in by “the new heart and spirit” of nonviolent students quite compelling.<sup>105</sup> He drew on the world’s great living religions to convince them that nonviolent being could be an effective form of political ontology, and not simply be characterized as a teacher of the “Gandhian method” or a political technique.<sup>106</sup> The changes to this politics of moral being in the “years of hope and days of rage” that were the 1960s is a separate but equally important chapter in this story.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Litwack, *Trouble I've Seen*, 373

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> All quotes JLMC, Box 39, Folder 1961 (SCLC) Annual Meeting, “The Womb of Revolution,” August 1961

<sup>107</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).