

## **Nonviolence as Love in Action: James Lawson’s Transforming the Promise of Jesus’ Love into a Practical Force for Change**

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### ABSTRACT

This article expands on the existing scholarship on the Reverend James M. Lawson’s philosophy of nonviolent direct action, which he situated in the Christian lexicon and Jesus’ model of love. More specifically, this essay focuses on Lawson’s coherent and rational articulation of love as an unparalleled resource for social change. His own life, as he continues to teach and fight against injustices, represents an example of the confluence of a fierce principle of love and fervent praxis for social advocacy. The primal principle of love contains within itself deep and diverse meanings, as evidenced by various philosophical and religious examples. The Christian theology of love (*agape*) was essential to the transmission of the “Gandhian nonviolent repertoire,” as some scholars term it, to the Nashville movement of resisting segregation laws. The participants who were familiar with the centrality of love in their own Christian faith, understood the connection between the theological vision of love and the self-sacrifice required in nonviolent direct action.

After analyzing specific familial/intellectual/spiritual influences on Lawson’s theoretical interpretation of the nonviolent methods as “Love in action,” the article will assess his method of teaching workshops. Further, it will provide philosophical, ethical, and strategic analyses of Lawson’s techniques during the historic 1960 Nashville sit-in campaign, a sustained experiment in campaigns of “militant nonviolence” as “love in action.” Finally, the paper will reflect on the ways Lawson’s exemplary model of applying the theological principle of love in the direst situations can offer insights into a broad, pragmatic approach to religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, it will provide a survey of the practical possibilities of the religious principle and praxis of love through various examples from different religious traditions in order to situate Lawson’s work in a broader context.

In his sermon, “Love in Action,” the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaims, “we must see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness.”<sup>1</sup> The sermon, written during his imprisonment in Georgia, crystallizes the theological and philosophical underpinning of nonviolent direct action opposing unjust and oppressive laws subjugating African Americans in the southern United States. While Reverend King contemplated Jesus’ teachings behind the prison walls in 1960, another young minister, the Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr (b.1928), led young college students and some church leaders, also in 1960, to test the method of the power of love against the discriminatory laws in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. Lawson’s leadership in the Nashville movement has been documented in the episode “Nashville: We Were Warriors” of the two-part Emmy-nominated documentary, *A Force More Powerful*.<sup>2</sup> It has also been chronicled in the documentary *Love and Solidarity*, and in widely-recognized volumes, including Aldon Morris’ *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for a Change* and David Halberstam’s *The Children*.<sup>3</sup> This study expands on the existing scholarship on Lawson’s philosophy of nonviolent direct action, which he situated in the Christian lexicon and Jesus’ model of love. More specifically, this essay focuses on Lawson’s coherent and rational articulation of love as an unparalleled resource for social change. His own life, as he continues to teach and fight against injustices, represents an example of the confluence of a fierce principle of love and fervent praxis for social advocacy.<sup>4</sup> While the primal principle of love contains within itself deep and diverse meanings, the Christian theology of love—*agape*—was essential to the transmission of “Gandhian nonviolent repertoire,” as some scholars term it,<sup>5</sup> to the Nashville movement because it offered a comprehensible framework to the participants who were familiar with the centrality of love in their own Christian faith.

MLK himself called Lawson “the greatest teacher of nonviolence in America,” and had summoned him to lead the campaign against segregation in the South.<sup>6</sup> Lawson accepted the call and played an important role in the nonviolent struggle of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. “Notwithstanding the iconic stature of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his pivotal presence in the civil rights movement,” writes scholar Dennis Dickerson, “James M. Lawson, Jr., looms large as an equally influential theoretician and tactician in the black freedom struggle.”<sup>7</sup> However, Lawson’s theory and methods of nonviolent direct action remain under-researched, and his contributions have only been studied within the context of the civil rights movement—despite his influence in a number of social movements seeking justice and equality. A small number of scholarly works<sup>8</sup> use historical and qualitative methods to underscore Lawson’s place and his theoretical and strategic contributions to the nonviolent campaigns in Nashville and beyond. Furthermore, some studies, including those by Dickerson and Natalya Cherry, place Lawson within the ideational thinking of Methodist principles.

In this paper, I use philosophical, theological, and textual approaches to synthesize and extend this scholarship. Specifically, I offer a study of the foundational philosophical and religious principles that Lawson embodied and mobilized to substantiate a theoretical connection between Christian love and nonviolent resistance and formulate a strategic action plan to confront racism. Lawson, as a preacher and teacher, systematically situated nonviolent actions within Jesus’ commandment of love in order to

counteract odious racist beliefs and actions in the Christian canon and to confront the *status quo* in Christian traditions that authorized this violence. This paper begins by providing a brief historical background of Lawson's impetus to nonviolent struggle and his involvement in the nonviolent direct action movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the South, which he terms as "the Rosa Parks-Martin King Struggle."<sup>9</sup> The paper will then: 1) analyze specific intellectual/spiritual influences on Lawson's theoretical interpretation of methods of nonviolence<sup>10</sup> as "Love in action"; 2) assess his method of teaching workshops through which he developed the hermeneutic of connecting Jesus' love with social justice; 3) evaluate Lawson's method of preparing students (most of whom were from Christian backgrounds) that situated "love" at the core of the nonviolent struggle through methods such as role-playing, dress-code, and guidelines for conduct; 4) provide philosophical, ethical, and strategic analyses of Lawson's techniques through the historic 1960 Nashville sit-in campaign, a sustained experiment in campaigns of "militant nonviolence" as "love in action." Finally, the paper will reflect how Lawson's interpretation of the theological principle of love in the public arena can offer insights into its broad value in building a "beloved community."<sup>11</sup>

### ***HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS: "THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY"***

As a child, James Lawson experienced racial slurs and physical violence from white boys of his age. He vividly recalls the day when in fourth grade, while running an errand, a white child yelled the n-word at him, and Lawson responded with a slap. After returning home, he shared the incident with his mother who, with calmness on her face, asked, "What good did that do?" Lawson recalls, "She reasserted that Jesus is love and God is love." Finally, she told him, "There must be a better way." This encounter was one of the "most critical moments in his life, something, he decided years later, that John Wesley could have called a sanctification experience, a moment when his life seemed to stand still and then change forever."<sup>12</sup> What Lawson experienced as a child became the guiding light for his journey to find the better way, which he later understood as "love in action," resulting from his deep study of Jesus' teachings and Mohandas Gandhi's (popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi) methods of *ahimsā* and *satyagraha* (nonviolence and truth-force). Many years later, Lawson reflected on his mother's words as a "numinous" experience.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Lawson terms this encounter in religious lexicon signifies his theological grounding, guiding his decisions and leadership in his adulthood. This singular experience, along with his religious upbringing and study of Christian and Gandhian teachings, directed his major decisions as an adult.

While Lawson's mother provided the philosophical/theological foundation for his life's trajectory, A.J. Muste, co-founder of Christian pacifist organization Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR USA), offered an intellectual framework for integrating Jesus' teachings and action. In 1947, Lawson met Muste and remembers the meeting as another "sanctifying moment" of his life.<sup>14</sup> He uses the term "sanctification" within the Wesleyan Methodist context: "an event or moment highlighted in your life that changes the direction, the way you work."<sup>15</sup> At the young age of 18, he realized that throughout the Western history the long tradition of Christians' embracing Jesus' method of defying war has run parallel to the forces of imperialism, militarism, and aggression.<sup>16</sup> Muste, a Christian pacifist, offered two options: to be "pioneers,

leading mankind into the day of peace and brotherhood” or use the “terrible weapon” that would push the human race “backward.”<sup>17</sup> He inspired Lawson to not only study writings on “Christian pacifism,” but also works of Mohandas Gandhi.

According to Lawson, Jesus’ teaching of “turning the other cheek” was also a major influence on Gandhi’s personal life and developing his methods of resistance, although he was born into a Hindu family. In his autobiography, Gandhi recalls his reading of the Sermon on the Mount: “The verses, ‘But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man takes away thy coat let him have thy cloak too,’ delighted me beyond measure.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout his life he considered the text to be the “great doctrine of non-violent non-cooperation.”<sup>19</sup> The Sermon on the Mount also inspired African American nonviolent resisters in the mid-twentieth century. It is not surprising that Muste, because of his pacifist views, opposition to wars, trust in nonviolence, and Gandhi’s influence, is hailed as the “American Gandhi.” Many years later, Lawson is also characterized by some with the title of “American Gandhi.”<sup>20</sup>

Lawson drew from his mother’s wisdom, Muste’s instructive lectures on Christ’s resistance and love, Gandhi’s mobilization of *satyagraha* (literally, Soul-force or Love-force, but generally translated as passive resistance). For Lawson, “a better way” to confront the forces of racial injustice and violence was solidified during his stay in India (1952-1955). There, he interacted with Indian leaders of the Indian nonviolent movement, visited the sites of the struggle, and studied Gandhi’s writings and strategies of nonviolence. “Lawson’s experiences in India contributed to the development of his own philosophy of nonviolence,” observes Preeti Sharma.<sup>21</sup> Lawson had personally witnessed the new fledgling democracy in India after the historic overthrow of the world’s mighty colonial power in 1947 by the mass *satyagraha* campaigns, which included civil disobedience and non-cooperation. Lawson already had a predilection for standing up against injustice: since his childhood, he stood up against the actions of harassment. These tripartite sources of inspiration led him to develop a theoretical framework for “love in action” that would become a strategic form of nonviolent direct action.<sup>22</sup>

### ***INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND “SPIRITUAL FOUNDINGS”: LAWSON’S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK***

On the eve of his assassination, Martin Luther King called Lawson “the leading theoretician and tactician of nonviolence.”<sup>23</sup> This characterization attests to his theoretical ingenuity of nonviolent direct action within the African American struggles for justice. As has been noted earlier, scholars also recognize Lawson as an “influential theoretician and tactician in the black freedom struggle.”<sup>24</sup> However, I emphasize that Lawson is the only one in the movement of the ‘50s and ‘60s who was recognized by MLK as a “leading theoretician” for creating a systematic program of nonviolent resistance. He has continued to use his theory beyond African American struggle, including fighting for the rights of sanitation workers in Memphis, supporting the Mexican Farm Workers movement in California, and training the leaders of hotel labor unions in Los Angeles.

It behooves us to analyze the roots of his theory that places “love” at the center, and his tactics that

utilize the principle of love in the face of the most oppressive and unjust laws. Philosophers, psychologists, and religious thinkers have deliberated for centuries on the complex notion of universal love: palpable and invisible, and vulnerable and powerful. Love has been understood to refer not only to the personal, emotional sentiments of humans, but also to the interpersonal forms of compassion and friendliness (e.g. in Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese thought) and the divine notion of unconditional love exemplified in Jesus. In a recent interview, Lawson traces his trust in the nonviolent struggle to the “Gospel of Jesus, which is gospel of compassion, love, and justice.”<sup>25</sup> Scholars underscore the ethos of love that is foundational to Christian pacifism as well as the 1950s and 1960s nonviolent movement. As was mentioned earlier, Muste affirmed an alternative to violence and a way forward to a more just world sanctioned within his own faith. Lawson summarizes Muste’s words connecting the personal practice of love for the Lord with public actions for justice: “You will love the Lord, you will work actively for Him, and thereby because His belief is love and His life is love, you will end up seeking a concept of greater social justice and a more just (and peaceful) country and planet.”<sup>26</sup> Such conceptualizing of love coheres with the strategies of nonviolent direct action requiring self-sacrifice and non-retaliation. While Gandhi situated his actions in the Indian religious principle of the *interconnectedness of all beings*, many organizers of the African American nonviolent resistance movements drew on Christian theology of Jesus’ love.

Inspired by Jesus’ teachings, Lawson resisted the Korean War draft in 1951, for which he was sentenced to a federal penitentiary for three years. According to Lawson’s own accounts, he was not a “conscientious objector,” as some scholars portray him, but a “non-cooperator to the draft laws” because he saw his act as a form of active defiance rather than a passive refusal on personal religious grounds. During his prison sentence, he reread the writings of Gandhi and Howard Thurman, a Christian theologian, ordained Baptist minister, and leading religious figure of the twentieth century. Lawson later had a chance to meet Thurman in Nashville. Thurman had visited Gandhi in India in 1936, along with a delegation of African Americans, about thirteen years before Lawson arrived in Nagpur, India. When Lawson took an assignment at the Hislop College in Nagpur, just four years after Gandhi’s assassination, he encountered many followers of Gandhi and participants in the movement for India’s independence. Thurman, however, had the chance to meet with Gandhi himself and discuss the African American struggle and the relevance of nonviolent direct action in the United States.

The historic meeting with Gandhi corroborated Thurman’s trust in Jesus’ ethic of love in fighting against oppression. Thurman’s personal conversations with Gandhi affirmed the potency of nonviolent resistance for fighting racial oppression in the US South. Even though Thurman did not partake in direct action campaigns, his writings provided the foundation for the leaders of resistance.<sup>27</sup> When asked by Thurman whether Gandhi’s nonviolence was “a form of direct action,” Gandhi responded:

[W]ithout a direct active expression of it, non-violence to my mind is meaningless. It is the greatest and activist (sic) force in the world [...] In fact ‘non-violence’ is a term I had to coin in order to bring the root meaning of ahimsa [...] At the center of non-violence is a force which is self-acting. Ahimsa means ‘love’ in the Pauline sense, and yet something

more than the ‘love’ defined by St. Paul, although I know St. Paul’s beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes.<sup>28</sup>

Gandhi sought to transform *ahimsā* (nonviolence), articulated as personal discipline/virtue in the Hindu, Yogic, Jain, and Buddhist traditions, into a “weapon” for confronting social and political injustices. Similarly, he understood that “the love that Jesus taught and practiced was not a mere personal virtue, but that it was social and collective virtue,” as he explained to a Christian.<sup>29</sup> Thurman felt the instant connection with Gandhi’s interpretation of *ahimsā* and Jesus’ love and spoke with excitement: “When one goes through the pages of the hundreds of Negro spirituals, striking things are brought to my mind which remind me of all that you have told us today.”<sup>30</sup> This statement is significant as Thurman saw the examples of “Jesus’ religion” and right to justice and equality within the African-American spirituals—the hymns, sermons, and personal reflections. Through reading and meeting Thurman, Lawson found himself standing yet again at the intersection of the wisdom of two thinkers, Gandhi and Thurman, as he had earlier encountered the intellectual insights of Muste and Gandhi.

Just as Gandhi raised his voice against the system of “untouchability” within Hinduism, Thurman called on Christians to purify the Christianity that had endorsed the system of slavery. He urged, “it is necessary to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people, and to inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.”<sup>31</sup> Recognized as the “moral anchor for the civil rights movement” and hailed as a “spiritual activist,” Thurman surmises in the *Jesus and the Disinherited*, “the religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central.”<sup>32</sup> In this influential book, he connects Jesus’ life to the African American experience and other marginalized groups and calls on Christians to emulate the life of Jesus. This book becomes a guidebook, as it were, for MLK, James Farmer,<sup>33</sup> Lawson, and other ministers in the South who invoked the Gospel to inspire the people to resist injustice, following the model of Jesus himself. It is said that MLK carried two books with him: a copy of the bible and a copy of Thurman’s book in his pocket.<sup>34</sup>

Although in the 1920s and 1930s the “Gandhian repertoire” was known to some US intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), Muste, (1885-1967) and Thurman (1899-1981),<sup>35</sup> any definite prospect of adoption of nonviolent action in the US South did not emerge until the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>36</sup> At times some of the discussions among those who considered the resistance option viable focused on “hyper differences”—differences of national contexts (e.g. fighting against foreign colonization vs domestic integration) as well as Gandhi’s religious and moral ideologies.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, in the early 1940s the Black newspapers widely covered Gandhi’s civil disobedience against the colonial regime. According to the *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, “While most American newspapers closely covered the outbreak of civil disobedience in India, it was the African American press that recognized the racial framework in which Gandhi, Nehru, and other leading Indian figures positioned their struggle.”<sup>38</sup> According to Lawson’s own accounts, the “articles in Black papers imagined how Gandhi’s approaches could be used in the context of the US,” but a “broad discussion on use of Gandhi’s methods did not gain normalcy in the United States.”<sup>39</sup>

Lawson, who was inspired in his early youth by “the spirit and mind of Jesus,” in his adulthood (in the late 1940s) understood the clear connection between Jesus’ teaching of love and the Gandhian method of

*satyagraha*.<sup>40</sup> It appears that during his incarceration, resulting from his defiance of the violence caused by war, his thinking deepened about the methods of nonviolent direct action. Dickerson writes: “When Lawson entered prison, he was a Christian pacifist. Before his release, he advanced to Gandhian nonviolence.”<sup>41</sup> Dickerson assesses Lawson’s progression of thought from pacifism to Gandhi’s nonviolence, which is more broad, active, and strategic than pacifism, the latter of which in its narrow sense only opposed violence caused by war.

It is important to note that Lawson experienced the aftermath of Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement firsthand when he visited India. There he met with Gandhi’s followers, traveled to Gandhi’s ashrams, and had conversations with the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other prominent leaders who participated in non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns. While a constellation of deep personal penchants, as well as intellectual and theological influences, heightened Lawson’s belief in nonviolent direct action, his Methodist allegiance coalesced his belief in the inextricable relationship between Jesus’ love and work of resisting injustice.<sup>42</sup> The Gandhian methods of *ahimsā* and *satyagraha* provided the strategies and vocabulary, and the success of civil resistance in India offered proof in the efficacy of nonviolent struggle.

### **LAWSON’S WORKSHOPS: A HERMENEUTIC OF CONNECTING JESUS’ LOVE WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The method of love-force requires mass recruitment to resist unjust laws and, at the same time, alter the public consciousness that sides with untruth and injustice. Gandhi, who also held the status of a religious leader (*Mahatma*, “Great Soul”), communicated the moral method of *satyagraha* through open “prayer meetings.” MLK and other preachers of the South used the pulpit to pronounce their message of Jesus’ love and social justice. Lawson, although a preacher himself, inspired young students through workshops, and he continues to teach even today.

When MLK and Lawson shook hands at Oberlin College in 1957, MLK beckoned him to come South, saying, “we don’t have anyone like you in the country, come help us.”<sup>43</sup> Lawson arrived in Nashville and enrolled in the graduate program in the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University. He had already assumed the position of the southern secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and also served as the first chairperson of the Nonviolent Action Committee of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council.<sup>44</sup> Through his leadership, the members of the organization “came to realize that Christian social action would necessarily include the discipline of non-violence.”<sup>45</sup> Lawson, who was in contact with many local clergy, believed that the success of the Montgomery bus boycott was “not an accident.” Reflecting on his arrival in Nashville, Lawson recalled, “I wanted to demonstrate that a successful Montgomery can take place again and it must be a fulltime campaign,” and “I had to lead the direct action.” Supported by the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Lawson, along with other clergy and their wives, began weekly discussion groups of about thirty to sixty people at various churches. These groups were designed to deliberate on concerns in the Nashville area, and start an “inventory of the problems.” The crucial issue of segregation

in the downtown stores was “raised by women,” primarily wives of the pastors and some lay people. They described the humiliation and inconvenience they were subjected to at their shopping trips, not being able to try on clothes, and not being allowed to drink at the lunch counters. Once a core problem was identified, the community presented to the Committee of Nonviolent Action (a part of the Southern Leadership Conference).<sup>46</sup>

The strategic plan to desegregate the downtown stores required preparation.<sup>47</sup> Rev. C.T. Vivian, a prominent Baptist minister, believed that “the workshops were critical to a nonviolent direct action campaign,” recalled Lawson.<sup>48</sup> Lawson began the workshops, which were initially attended by mostly the local pastors and their wives. Some students of local colleges, primarily from the Black colleges, were recruited by clergy or others associated with the planning of the movement—for example, Kelly Miller Smith, a pastor of the First Baptist Church, recruited late congressman John Lewis, who later became a Civil Rights leader in his own right and US Representative for Georgia’s Fifth Congressional district. Hence, Nashville offered a perfect ground—given its proximity to institutions of higher learning—for launching a campaign. Lawson began to teach his seminars in Nashville in the fall of 1959.<sup>49</sup>

Lawson, himself a graduate student of Theology at Vanderbilt and a Methodist minister, adopted the platform of workshops to show to a group of eager students the practical side of Jesus’ love in nonviolent action. This marked the official beginning of the strategic development for the repertoire for nonviolent direct action. Lawson conducted weekly student workshops to prepare the young organizers to use methods of nonviolent resistance—such as lunch-counter sit-ins, boycotts, marches, and freedom rides. According to Lawson, in the direct action preparation, he looked to the model of Jim Farmer (also inspired by Howard Thurman), who introduced the method of sit-ins in Chicago in the 1940s.<sup>50</sup> The interracial group of students (most but not all of whom were African Americans) from the city’s institutions of higher learning would work together for months, developing a profound interpretation of what it means to take nonviolent action. They became the heart of the Nashville movement, and the Nashville story has been documented in books, as well as in photos, pamphlets, and documentaries.<sup>51</sup>

Lawson, a visionary and a “true radical Christian who feared neither prison nor death,” sought to create a movement of young people to fight head on, through nonviolent direct action, against the overt racial injustices.<sup>52</sup> Of course this fight was grounded in the principle of Jesus’ love that requires fearlessness and resolve. Lawson’s style of delivering his message was distinct from other African American ministers of his time, as he effectively used the pedagogical platform of workshops rather than the pulpit. Halberstam muses: “Sometimes it seemed as if he were more like a white college professor than a black minister.” His style was cool and deliberate and his lectures did not arouse a passionate “Amen” chorus.<sup>53</sup> Such assessment of Lawson’s method of training points to his unique grasp on the challenges of nonviolent struggle, requiring deep philosophical understanding of the method, building strategic alliances, and planning precise strategies.

A close analysis of Lawson’s method of holding workshops reveals that they were intended for three objectives: 1) engendering trust in the method of nonviolent direct action; 2) conveying the theoretical understanding of the method of “love” as taught by Jesus; and 3) creating a community of dedicated activists entwined by the bonds of mutual trust and commitment. The first objective of the workshops

was to engender the trust in the power of love—promised in Christian theology—and in the method of nonviolent direct action, which mobilized strategies to overturn injustices. Lawson, who deeply admired MLK, was also aware that the method of nonviolent resistance appeared passive and weak, and this misunderstanding had to be corrected. MLK wrote in 1958, “we had to make clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist [...] The method is nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually.”<sup>54</sup> Lawson realized that the efficacy of nonviolent direct action needed to be clearly understood by the student participants, most of whom were initially skeptics about seemingly-passive modes of nonviolent action resistance in the context of racial prejudice.

Lawson conveyed the concept of nonviolent resistance to participants in a manner that Gene Sharp, a prominent political scientist, later theorized: “Nonviolent action is a means of combat, as is war.”<sup>55</sup> Gandhi also had to convince his followers, who understood *ahimsā* simply as a personal, spiritual virtue, rather than “the mightiest weapon” and “the greatest force,” as Gandhi himself understood it.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, political scientists like Sharp differentiate between “nonviolence,” as implying personal virtue, and “nonviolent action,” which encompasses an active technique for exerting power against unjust systems. Cognizant of this potential ambiguity about the use of term nonviolence, Gandhi himself developed a new term, *satyagraha*. The new combination, *truth force* or *love force*, conveyed systematic effort in confronting untruth, hate, oppression, and injustice.

Lawson characterizes Jesus as a “nonviolent athlete,” and in his workshops called on the participants “to follow Jesus” on the path to resistance.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, Lawson offered workshops regularly—on Tuesday evenings, and they attracted students from Vanderbilt and from other colleges, including from Fisk University, a black institution, and from the American Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>58</sup> MLK was referring to the students of the Nashville area when he said of training in nonviolent action, “the campuses of Negro colleges are infused with a dynamism of both action and philosophical discussion.”<sup>59</sup> The deep philosophical discussions were an important part of Lawson’s workshops. Lawson enumerated a variety of historical examples of thinkers and successful nonviolent movements. The group discussed nonviolence from the perspectives of great American thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and A. J. Muste, as well as Chinese thinkers like Mo Ti and Lao Tzu. The participants debated “every aspect of Gandhi’s principles.” In particular, they studied Gandhi’s concept of *satyagraha*, which was considered by John Lewis to be “a grounding foundation of nonviolent civil disobedience, of active pacifism.”<sup>60</sup>

More importantly, Lawson exemplified the trust in the force of love. In referring to Lawson, John Lewis stated, “Jim was really the thinker in this group [...]. In his own right, he was a great moral force. We regarded him as our real teacher in nonviolence.”<sup>61</sup> Lewis expresses his views about Lawson that reflect his “charismatic leadership,” a term used by scholars of “charisma” in the social sciences. Ronald E. Riggio defines charismatic leaders as people who are “essentially very skilled communicators, individuals who are both verbally eloquent, but also able to communicate to followers on a deep level.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, what makes Lawson a charismatic leader is not simply his eloquence but his deep conviction in Jesus’ love and his personal dedication and connection with it. For his students, Lawson was the living model—embodying “something holy, so gathered, about him,” as Lewis recalled—of what he was teaching through historical examples.

Lawson's lucid presentations on historic thinkers and movements as well as a biblical theology of resistance transformed the thinking of students who initially doubted the power of nonviolent direct action. These students included people like James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, and Diana Nash, who later became influential leaders. Tolstoy's writings particularly impacted students who were studying theology, philosophy, and history. In his formative years, Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*—a book interpreting Christianity as the religion of universal love and advocating “the doctrine of non-resistance of evil by force”—deeply impacted Gandhi, and the two men had corresponded until Tolstoy's death in 1910. Tolstoy and his interpretation of Jesus' teachings offered a theoretical model to the participants of Lawson's workshops. The notion of nonviolent resistance as a valid means to confront violence can appear counterintuitive to those who experience heartless brutalities. Some students, like James Bevel, questioned the ideas of “love” and “nonviolence” as taught by Lawson, but Lawson's teachings transformed their thinking. Halberstam narrates Bevel's transformation in terms of almost religious conversion: “It had taken him a week to read Tolstoy, but it was an epiphany, the most compelling book on Christianity he had ever read. [...] If you killed others you were not a Christian. There were no exceptions. When Bevel had finished reading it he had decided he had to get out of the Navy immediately.”<sup>63</sup> Such an example of change of heart presented the finest role model for the skeptics' camp.

While the first aim of Lawson's workshops oriented the participants to understand the power of love as the ethical basis of nonviolent action, the second objective was to convey the theoretical understanding of nonviolent action through the example of the sacrifice of Jesus. As I have discussed elsewhere, Gandhi's life of suffering and sacrifice caused his Christian friends in his early life to perceive him as a Christ-like figure. But it was the Hindu texts and the Indian model of a “Mahatma”—a spiritual figure who is dedicated to serving others—that inspired the Indian masses to nonviolent action.<sup>64</sup> The participants in Lawson's workshops came from various Christian backgrounds and were familiar with the Gospels' teachings. Lawson emphasized the clear correspondence between nonviolent action and their own tradition of Jesus' teachings.

Lawson situated the nonviolent struggle within the Christian ethos, which centers around the principles of love and sacrifice. In a recent phone interview, he explained that in his workshops and in class lectures he presents Jesus as a “nonviolent athlete.” He prefers the word “athlete” in place of a “warrior” to avoid any “war metaphors.” Lawson wanted his participants to develop “discipline” and created ways to train the participants in “athleticism” to develop “soul-force” to persist against the forces of violence and hatred.<sup>65</sup> Since his childhood, Lawson has regarded Jesus an exemplary model for his personal life and methods to fight against social and political injustices. Halberstam writes: “In his teaching he emphasized the life of Jesus. Jesus, he pointed out, turned away from his tormentors again and again, and triumphed by using the power of love.”<sup>66</sup> Such teaching empowered young students, who were raised in Christian households, to carry the difficult task of taking on the structures of power.

Theoretically, Lawson made a connection between Jesus' “love your enemies” and Gandhian *satyagraha*. Although Gandhi's example stirred the imagination of many civil rights leaders, he was a figure who was far removed from the cultural context of the US South. Lawson, in his theory of nonviolent direct action, was influenced by Gandhi who, as we've seen, was himself inspired by Jesus' example and

the philosophical thought of Tolstoy. In 1914, Gandhi defined the term passive resistance in an article entitled, “The Theory and Practice of Passive Resistance.” Gandhi preferred the term *satyagraha*: “I think Tolstoy called it also Soul-Force or Love-Force and so it is. Carried out to its utmost limit, this force is independent of pecuniary or other material assistance; certainly, even in its elementary form, of physical force or violence.”<sup>67</sup> Lawson emphasized that “love is a key to nonviolence,” and philosophically connected love with power and nonviolence.<sup>68</sup>

The third objective was to create comradery and forge bonds among the dedicated participants who had established deep friendships through their commitment to the common purpose of fighting against the injustices of racial segregation and all forms of moral degradation. Lawson, as a teacher and mentor, presented the nonviolent struggle in spiritual terms: “When you are a child of God [...] you try thereby to imitate Jesus, in the midst of evil. Which means, if someone slaps you on the one cheek, you turn the other cheek, which is an act of resistance. It means that you do not only love your neighbor, but you recognize that even the enemy has a spark of God in them.”<sup>69</sup> Such words of a minister/teacher guide the “child of God” to resist the heinous act of slapping or spitting by their opponent—in this case a white racist person—for the greater cause of equality and freedom.

Anthropologist Victor Turner argues that the “authority of the elders” is essential to demarking the lines of conduct, representing the “axiomatic values of the society in which are expressed ‘the common good’ and the ‘common interest.’”<sup>70</sup> In Lawson’s workshops, the young men and women found courage by being with one another, united by the common interest creating *communitas* (intense community spirit and cohesive bond), to use Turner’s terminology.<sup>71</sup> The common bond for confronting the unjust laws transcended any differences of distinctive personalities and backgrounds. The bond of friendship, built on the foundation of Jesus’s love and shared mission, was strong and continued among many of them. Some, like John Lewis, Diane Nash, and James Bevel, emerged as noted leaders, carrying the torch as a new generation of changemakers. What has been overlooked by many skeptics of nonviolent action, nevertheless, is that nonviolent resistance requires two essential components: preparation and precise techniques.

### ***LAWSON’S METHODS OF PREPARATION: HOLDING FAITH AMIDST FEAR***

The workshops provided a theoretical framework and created a community of activists dedicated to the cause. Furthermore, they became a laboratory for preparing the activists. Lawson’s contribution to the theory of nonviolent direct action lies in his theorizing love as an important component of collective nonviolent action as well as carefully developing methods of sit-ins and boycotts. As has been noted earlier, the rhetoric of the power of the divine law of love for redressing inhumane laws had imbued the African American religious leadership circles since the ‘30s. Indeed, numerous individual and collective campaigns, including Rosa Parks’ historic refusal to surrender her seat, and the ensuing bus boycott campaigns in Montgomery, had captured the imagination of African Americans and the hearts of many individuals and groups that found racial discrimination repulsive and unconstitutional.

At the workshops, Lawson sought to teach his young students the potency of love as the core of the nonviolent action. He wrote in the foundational document of the newly formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC): “Love is the central motif of nonviolence,” and, “it matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while pressing in love.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, he logically equated love with nonviolence, validating Jesus’ command of resistance to dismantle power structures without lifting arms. But how can “love” be transformed into actions that absorb “evil,” in this case the evil of racial segregation at the lunch counters, humiliation in the buses, and violence to African American women, men, and children, all because of their skin color?

Through his deep study of theology, Gandhi’s life and philosophy, and the history of nonviolence, Lawson had concluded that nonviolent action requires three main components: discipline, self-sacrifice, and strategic techniques of confrontation. Caroline Luce notes Lawson’s views: “Practicing nonviolence [...] requires tremendous sacrifice, self-control, and discipline, which allows an individual to channel his or her anger and fear into strength based on love.”<sup>73</sup>

Gandhi argued that nonviolent struggle requires training similar to that of a soldier. In a 1940 article, “Nonviolence of the Brave,” he responded to an individual who expressed doubts about the method of nonviolence, saying, “the non-violence [*satyagraha*] cannot be learnt by staying at home. It needs enterprise. In order to test ourselves we should learn to dare danger and death, mortify the flesh and acquire the capacity to endure all manner of hardships.”<sup>74</sup> Gandhi prepared himself by exerting inner discipline in all aspects of life through diet, sleep, speech, physical exercise, as well as prayer, reading scriptures, and reading books of history and philosophy. He exhorted the fellow to lead a disciplined life and prepare themselves to endure hardships—arrests, beatings, humiliations, and even death. For this, he provided the examples of individuals and movements from scriptures and historical instances—from Socrates, the Sermon on the Mount, and many others.

While Gandhi gave specific instructions to exercise self-control before launching mass nonviolent campaigns, Lawson uniquely developed the method of role-playing to train the student activists for nonviolent resistance, first to desegregate Nashville downtown lunch counters and then other sites. At his workshops, Lawson “would ask two people to stand at the front of the room. One person would be tasked with verbally assaulting or even slapping the other person to determine how the first person would respond.” Lawson wanted the participants to be “realistic” and experience firsthand physical and emotional pain they would endure.<sup>75</sup> He asked participants to dress as professionals, refuse bail, never hit back, and stay disciplined. One of the student participants in the Nashville sit-ins, Bernard Lafayette states: “the purpose here in the training was to give emotional conditioning, because it’s one thing to tell someone intellectually [...] But to take them through a role play where someone would slap you and push you [...] The thing that was so amazing to me is, our role play is exactly what happened when we got down there.”<sup>76</sup> The role-plays became the source for psychological preparation for enduring physical and emotional assaults reminiscent of “turning the other cheek” as taught by Jesus.

Lafayette is referring to the campaigns to confront racist laws, which energized students who trained for several months. Before the launch of sit-in campaigns to desegregate downtown stores and lunch counters, the spirit of courage and dedication imbued the participants. Halberstam reports John Lewis’ thoughts:

“They [students] were certain that they would all be arrested. Certainly, some of them might be beaten up, and it was quite possible—Jim Lawson had never tried to minimize the consequences—that some of them might even be killed. All they had was their faith, and they were bound together by that.”<sup>77</sup> Such a spirit of courage, trust in the cause, and kinship sustained the participants throughout the physical and emotional hardships, including beating, incarceration, and humiliation.

Lafayette rightly called Lawson’s workshops a “nonviolent academy” in “Nashville: We are Warriors.” From Lawson, the student activists learned a theory of nonviolence—and through bootcamp style training, as it were, learned also to strengthen the spirit, to forge bonds with one another, and to fight for justice. Raymond Arsenault credits Lawson’s leadership for creating a fine, dedicated, and disciplined group of student resisters: “Grounded in the mixture of social-gospel Methodism and insurgent Gandhianism, Lawson’s intellectual and moral leadership gave the local Nashville movement a strength of purpose that no other student group could match.”<sup>78</sup> Lawson’s Methodist roots had provided him with the foundation for dedicating himself for social justice. The Social Gospel Movement originating in the nineteenth century synthesize personal religiosity with social justice concerns and actions. In the early twentieth century, the Methodist Federation of Social Service was founded by lay people and ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church to affirm their commitment to social justice and social action. As a leader and teacher, Lawson himself demonstrated the spirit of Methodist values to bring social transformation; he endured beating and abuse. He was arrested and expelled from the Vanderbilt University School Divinity School for his radical actions, in particular for inciting a revolution of Nashville lunch counter sit-ins in the spring of 1960.

## **DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE SIT-INS: A MOVE TO STAND UP FOR JUSTICE**

Along with developing theory and tools for preparing nonviolent resisters, Lawson honed the specific method of lunch counter sit-ins, which was the primary mode of direct action to desegregate Nashville downtown stores. But the techniques also included boycotts, marches, and freedom rides for confronting social and economic injustices. Historically, Gandhi’s movement to end the grip of the colonial regime in India and other nonviolent mobilizations throughout the world used creative methods of protests, including civil disobedience, non-cooperation, boycotts, and marches. In this vein Sharp identifies such various forms of nonviolent direct action common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century nonviolent movements.<sup>79</sup>

Gandhi himself, however, predicted that the method of nonviolence would be refined further. He wrote in 1940: “we are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.”<sup>80</sup> Lawson’s precise methods and theoretical refinement of nonviolent action represent a significant step in discovering new possibilities in the field of alternative ways to defeat structures of violence. Lawson developed strategic new techniques rooted in the principle of love, which would invigorate young student organizers to successfully execute methods of nonviolent resistance. During his tenure as a leader and organizer, Lawson has systematized his methods into a four-step program: 1) focus 2) negotiation 3)

direct action, and 4) follow up. Such categorization guides participants to mobilize effective campaigns.

Gandhi described active nonviolent action as the other side of love. Lawson framed “nonviolence as love in action and ‘always connected to strategies and blueprints for change.’”<sup>81</sup> Here we focus on the example of the sit-in movement and how it represented Lawson’s philosophy of love-force and “redemptive suffering. As has been mentioned earlier, the historic Nashville sit-ins movement of 1959 (small scale such movements occurred in the 40s) was conceived after the heart-wrenching testimonies of African American women who faced indignity and hostility by the racist policies of stores in downtown Nashville and by the “white only” lunch counters. Lawson saw this public segregation as the opportunity to launch a sit-in campaign that would be oriented toward desegregating downtown Nashville and demanding human dignity for all.

The movement was egalitarian, and Lawson refused to give any exceptional treatment to anyone on the basis of gender or background. From its inception, he allowed women to assume leadership roles. Lawson provided specific directions about how to act when the men and women resisters found themselves in difficult situations. For example, he stated, “I tried to teach that when we went to jail, we should turn the jail into a classroom [...] We tried to turn it into a way station for discovering more about ourselves and more about our struggle.”<sup>82</sup> The students received guidelines for behavior that was consistent with “love” for the opponent, not one of mockery or anger toward the aggressor. Some of these instructions included “don’t laugh out loud,” “show yourself friendly and courteous at all times,” and “do remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.”<sup>83</sup> These rules strategically incorporated the doctrine of “love your enemy” in the most difficult circumstances: facing beating, racial slurs, and provocations for fist fighting. The last instruction in the list served as a reminder of the great resisters who affirmed the power of love and sacrifice.

Importantly, for Lawson, nonviolent struggle cannot simply be a tactic or technique; he agrees with Gandhi that it is a way of life, of being with God. Prominent theologian and ethicist of the twentieth century John Howard Yoder provides a deep insight into nonviolence when he says: “rooting nonviolence in a religious vision of history forbids that the renunciation of violence be thought of as a mere tactic or technique,” even though some resistance movement have used it as a technique.<sup>84</sup> As a theologian himself, Lawson emphasized the moral and religious commitment throughout his teaching and preparation as he spent ample time in the study of the theology and deep inner reflections on the ethics of Jesus’ love. Yoder echoes the thinking of MLK, Lawson, and Gandhi saying, “before it is a social strategy, nonviolence is a moral commitment; before it is a moral commitment, it is distinctive spirituality.”<sup>85</sup> The religious/spiritual rootedness of sit-ins inspired the participants and posed challenges to the racist laws and lawmakers. The success of the movement evinces the praxis of love.

### ***NONVIOLENCE AS LOVE IN ACTION AND PROMISE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS***

The forgoing analysis demonstrates how Jesus’ principle of love vis-à-vis direct action in the Nashville sit-in campaign represented the center of the theory and practice of nonviolent civil resistance for Lawson

and those he organized. Theologically, the notion of love in action struck a chord with the challengers of racism, which has been documented in the books by David Halberstam and John Lewis. In the following section, I show how the principle of love in action also afforded philosophical, ethical, and strategic coherence to the movement requiring self-sacrifice.

Philosophically, the biblical foundation for their campaign for justice appealed to the students, who came from Christian backgrounds. “Lawson drew from of chapter 5 of the book of Matthew. Jesus’ rejection of the status quo, and his decision to love his enemies had greatly impressed Lawson as a young student,” writes Caitlin Parker. Lawson called the Sermon on the Mount, “a strategic kit,” which showed how to “resist the wrongdoer, the evildoer.”<sup>86</sup> Such a tool-kit demands faith in the humanity of the opponent and the practice of “a healing love.” Lawson set a high bar for his student participants when he asked them to “accept their [oppressors’] fundamental humanity and take responsibility for the management and control of their anger, of their fear, of their animosities.” When love is put in action, it seeks to transform the opponent, so a “beloved community” is created: it is the “realization of God’s Kingdom on the earth.”<sup>87</sup>

Lawson’s instructions capture Jesus’ commandment and resonate with Gandhi’s succinct definition of nonviolence offered in a 1936 letter: “It is no nonviolence if we merely love those that love us. It is nonviolence when we love those who hate us.”<sup>88</sup> For such love the Greek term *agape*, which appears a few times in the Synoptic Gospels, has been used. Anders Nygren, a great scholar on *agape*, describes it as a “divine force” and “creative.”<sup>89</sup> Lawson sought to strategize the divine force of love creatively, so the oppressors realize their own misdoings. Furthermore, the shared hymnals, the physical space of the church where most of the workshops were held, and Jesus’ model of sacrifice energized the nonviolent resisters to endure assaults, beating, and imprisonment, helping to create strategies and methods for nonviolence. The result of such love/nonviolence has been recorded in history books. The students of Nashville sit-ins responded with love and restraint to the violence. Television news showed students “facing burning cigarettes ground into their arm, ketchup and mustard being poured on their heads.”<sup>90</sup> Students courted their arrests instead of quitting the resistance struggle. The result: mobilization of thousands of fellow young adults, support of those who once opposed desegregation, changes in laws, and the taking down of “white only” signs.

Ethically, the African American and also other students participating in the sit-ins at the lunch counters, designated only for whites, created moral dilemmas for the staff at the downtown Nashville stores and restaurants. At the instructions of Lawson, students dressed as professionals and demonstrated calm and discipline. Halberstam narrates the panic among the white community members who witnessed the students’ demeanor and resolve: “Their posture—it was one of the first things any observer noticed—was absolutely impeccable, for on this day they all stood tall [...] their sense of purpose was obvious.” He further notes the ambivalence of the “white community,” which was shocked by such defiance. The news of African American students’ demand to be served at the lunch counters spread like wildfire. “The news was terrible for the storeowners,” reports Halberstam, and, further, “what was even worse [was] that no one knew what to do.”<sup>91</sup> The showing of well-behaved young adults confused the store staff, who are supposed to serve their customers. The owners began to close down the counters.

By physically presenting themselves at the lunch counters, student activists had created a moral

predicament for their opponents. In such proximity, the staff and owners see the “face” of the students, to use the Levinasian concept. For Emmanuel Levinas, the “face to face” encounter is the basis of ethical responsibility for the Other.<sup>92</sup> Here the Other was African Americans who were not even considered full humans by some US laws. The Jim Crow laws denied not only personhood to African Americans, they subordinated them to a position of the Other, without any autonomy or feelings. According to Levinas, when the face brings itself into direct relation with the Other, it “presents itself and demands justice.”<sup>93</sup> The students demanded the justice of desegregation, without shouting slogans or slurs but simply by sitting, facing the counters’ staff and owners. Televisions also broadcasted their faces and thousands felt the ethical responsibility to fight alongside these students.

Strategically, the sit-in campaign at the lunch counters utilized the most communal and primal principle of human life: to serve food and share food. By denying hospitality to the young people, the store owners were exhibiting hostility, denying the principle of *agape*, love of the highest kind. Philosopher Jacques Derrida sees the ethics of love in terms of “hospitality,” welcoming the other.<sup>94</sup> Lawson ingeniously dramatized the denying of the basic need of food and hospitality, just as Gandhi had done in his mass mobilization to break the unjust salt taxation of the essential necessity of human life.

The sit-ins by the “Nashville Warrior” students asserted their full personhood. They had questioned the rules of the game of their oppressors. In philosopher Charles Mills’ views, that would be an act of complete defiance because “the whole point of subordinate black experience, or the general experience of oppressed groups, is that the subordinated are in no position to doubt the existence of the world and other people, especially that of their oppressors.”<sup>95</sup> By demanding an equal treatment from the storeowners, students asserted their subjectivity as persons as opposed to “subpersons.”<sup>96</sup> This strategic and organized movement sent shockwaves to all corners of the United States and beyond. The participants of the campaign helped challenge the spirit of humanity in the nation and awakened African Americans and their allies throughout the US and beyond. According to the reports: “By the end of 1960, some seventy thousand young adults had sat in, mainly Black, but with increasing numbers of whites, Thirty-six hundred of them were jailed. Speedily, but silently, the signs designating ‘Whites Only’ came down in public accommodations and private institutions.”<sup>97</sup> The sit-in campaigns energized not only the young people but adults and offered a strategic model of the power of love-force.

### ***CONCLUDING INSIGHTS: THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES***

Lawson’s emphasis on “Jesus’ love” as his core guiding principle for mobilizing nonviolent action against oppression and violence raises a broad question of the applied value of religious principles and practices in nonviolent resistance movements. According to Michel Foucault, “since life and death are at stake, we can understand why revolts have easily been able to find their expressions and their mode of performance in religious themes.”<sup>98</sup> Foucault suggests that promises of other-worldly ends motivate revolutionaries; however, in Lawson’s movement the principles were invoked to realize the promised land here—in Nashville and the other Southern states. Nevertheless, the life and death struggle, although

undertaken for social and political goals, is elevated through religious symbolism. Importantly, it is not simply a veneer of religious themes that supplies consolation to participants; the deep truths embedded in religious traditions become foundational for creating specific strategies.

In his book, *The Supremacy of Love: An Agapic Centered Vision of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics*, Eric Silverman writes that “it was Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan that included everyone in the scope of agapic love.”<sup>99</sup> This inclusion of “everyone” in the circle of love has the potential to transform the way we confront injustice and those who commit violence. However, Silverman’s book does not focus on Jesus’ teachings about including one’s “enemy” in the circle of the neighbor, nor does it engage with the question of how to resist the forces of violence, outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the passages in the Sermon on the Mount offer a full understanding of the applied value of *agapic* love for addressing forces of oppression. Not surprisingly, Gandhi, as mentioned earlier, although a Hindu, found a vision of confronting injustices in Jesus’ teachings.

In addition to above mentioned voices, the contemporary American author bell hooks has defined love in a new light. Her *Love Trilogy* offers fresh ways to think about love. Women’s roles are acknowledged as co-partners in the struggles of justice and equality. Lawson’s mother with her sagacious question sparked the light of love in his mind. As an intellectual who was influenced by Sojourner Truth (an American abolitionist) among others, and is committed to justice and equality, hooks poignantly coalesces all elements of love discussed earlier. Yet she also offers love as an antidote for suffering:

Love in action is always about service, what we do to enhance spiritual growth. A focus on individual reflection, contemplation, and therapeutic dialogue is vital to healing. But it is not the only way to recover ourselves. Serving others is as fruitful a path to the heart as any other therapeutic practice. To truly serve, we must always empty the ego so that space can exist for us to recognize the needs of others and be capable of fulfilling them. The greater our compassion the more aware we are of ways to extend ourselves to others that make healing possible.<sup>100</sup>

Her work supplies contemporary reading of the love that also highlights women’s concerns.

Historically, Christian thinkers and movements, including Tolstoy, the Quakers, and the Mennonites, made Jesus’ command to “overcome evil with good” central to their positions against ills of war, military force, and violence. Modern intellectuals like Walter Wink and John Yoder argued for “creative deviance of oppressive authority,” not simply a quiet withdrawal.<sup>101</sup> Lawson credits Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Protestant Christian minister, for inspiring him through his books, including the *Manhood of the Master* (1913) and *The Meaning of Prayer* (1915). The former work focuses on various topics such as “sincerity,” “power of endurance,” self-restraint,” and “fearlessness.”<sup>102</sup> Fosdick opposed racism and injustices and championed civil liberties through his prolific writings and sermons situating Christian teaching in the middle of the everyday challenges facing humanity. Lawson experienced the value of the disciplines of endurance, self-restraint, and fearlessness and made it come alive for his student activists, guiding them to see the promised power of love.

In recent history, Cesar Chavez, an American labor leader who was also inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, led Mexican farmworkers in a nonviolent struggle to claim their rights and equality. Chavez used the popular Mexican Catholic practices of penance, pilgrimage, and fasting to mobilize a revolution. These austere religious practices supplied tools for the resistance as well as energized the participants to sacrifice for the cause. Even though Chavez belonged to the Catholic religious tradition and used Mexican Catholic symbolism, the practical applications of religious principles were understood by people across religions. Not surprisingly, Chavez's *La Causa*, "the Cause"—a name for his organizing efforts to create just conditions for Mexican farmworkers—was supported by followers and leaders of many different religions, including Christians from several denominations, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.<sup>103</sup>

The tradition of lived theology and its practical application for social and political change is not limited to Christianity. In addition to Gandhi's classic example, which synthesized spiritual disciplines with political aspirations, many of India's social reformers applied religious principles of the unity of all beings and the ethic of universal care to address problems of all forms of inequities. Buddhists build their service modalities on the Buddha's teachings of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *mettā* (friendship). The current Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama appeals to Chinese people to find peaceful resolutions for current issues. In the 1920s, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a close friend of Gandhi from the Pashtun region, now in northwest Pakistan, led a significant mass movement of nonviolent direct action among people with warrior ethic. Khan interpreted the Islamic teaching of *jihad* (struggle) in terms of a superior weapon. He created a nonviolent army, the *Khudai Khidmatgar*, the "Servants of God," and told his followers: "I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able stand against it [...] That weapon is patience and righteousness."<sup>104</sup> Over a hundred thousand members took the oath of active nonviolence and opposed the British systems of oppression.

In contemporary times, religious leaders and believers such as Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama, and Mata Amritamayi Ma (known as the hugging saint) incite their followers to find inspiration in theological principles and ethical commands in order to confront environmental degradation, xenophobia, and injustice. The Parliament of the World's Religions, the largest global interfaith organization, seeks to promote common good and harmony through bringing religious communities together. Such forums foster dialogue within and across religious communities and action plans to work toward the vision of a just, equitable, and diverse world culture.

During the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, through his lived theology and his practical strategies of nonviolent direct action, rooted in Jesus' ethic of love, Lawson continues to offer guidance for confronting the issues of violence toward Black people and other minorities, gender discrimination, immigrant rights, and economic inequities. In a recent conversation he told me, "The Black Lives Matter Movement is my own expectation for the twenty-first century. A nonviolent movement that moves across the nation for dismantling the structures of injustice and poverty and healing of the nation."<sup>105</sup> Carrying the legacy of the "Rosa Parks-Martin King Struggle," he has shown the potential impact of nonviolent methods for political and social change—or what Lawson terms "love in action."

## NOTES

- 1 Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 41.
- 2 *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York (Washington, D.C.: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 1999)
- 3 Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984); David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1998) also published as a Kindle edition (New York: Open Road Integrated Media).
- 4 For several years, through the James Lawson Institute, he has offered training to activists who are committed to social change: “James Lawson Institute”, accessed 11/5/2020, <https://jameslawsoninstitute.org/>
- 5 L. W. Isaac, D.B. Cornfield, D.C. Dickerson, J.M. Lawson, Jr., & J.S. Coley, “‘Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement,” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, 34 (2012): 156.
- 6 Natalya Cherry published an article with the title, “James M. Lawson, Jr. Called by King ‘The Greatest Teacher of Nonviolence in America,’” *Methodist History*, 54, no. 3 (2016): 192-201.
- 7 Dennis C. Dickerson, “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Methodist History*, 52, no. 3 (2014):169.
- 8 Dickerson, “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,”168-186; Isaac et al, “‘Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement,” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, 34 (2012): 155-184; Cherry, “James M. Lawson, Jr. Called by King ‘The Greatest Teacher of Nonviolence in America,’” *Methodist History*, 54, no. 3 (2016): 192-201; Kent Wong, Ana Luz Gonzalez, and Reverend James Lawson, Jr. *Nonviolence and Social Movements: The Teachings of Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016.
- 9 Lawson avoids the “omnibus” term, “the Civil Rights Movement” for the various struggles of African Americans. Instead he prefers to use names that identified regional grassroot nonviolent direct action and nonviolent civil resistance movements. James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 7, 2020.
- 10 For Gandhi, “nonviolence,” meant not simply a personal virtue, but active nonviolence in all forms, personal, tactical, and strategic. This is the reason he coined *satyagraha* (holding on the Truth; Truth-force) to replace the generally used term, “passive resistance.” In his interpretation, Gandhi rendered nonviolence as “technique, process, and method,” and thus, went beyond the traditional Hindu/Jain/Buddhist understanding of non-harming as a virtue or personal discipline. Also see about various meanings of nonviolence: Mary Elizabeth King, “The Ethics and ‘Realism’ of Nonviolent Action,” in *Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory*, ed. C. J. Brown and Robyn Eckersley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 273-285.

- 11 Cherry, “James M. Lawson, Jr. Called by King ‘The Greatest Teacher of Nonviolence in America,’” 199
- 12 Halberstam, *The Children*, 31 (All references are from the Kindle edition).
- 13 Halberstam, *The Children*, 31.
- 14 James Lawson, interviewed by author, 4/15/2020.
- 15 James Lawson, interviewed by author, 4/15/2020.
- 16 James Lawson, interviewed by author, April 15, 2020.
- 17 A.J. Muste, *Not by Might: Christianity, the Way of Human Decency* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 21.
- 18 M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, tr. Mahadev Dasai (New York: Dover Publications, 1983), 68.
- 19 In 1940, Gandhi wrote in the Harijan. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Delhi: Publication Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958-1994), Vol 78, 384.
- 20 Juan Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder* (New York: Sterling, 2004).
- 21 Preeti Sharma, “The Philosophy of Nonviolence,” in *Nonviolence and Social Movements: The Teachings of Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.*, eds. Kent Wong, Ana Luz Gonzalez, and Rev. James Lawson, Jr. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016), 9.
- 22 In a January 31, 2020 conversation, Lawson told me that since he was four years of age, he felt the need to fight for justice and felt a deep sense of higher force. He would raise his voice against any form of prejudices and discrimination while he was in high school. James Lawson, interviewed by author, January 31, 2020.
- 23 “The Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr.,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, accessed 11/6/2020, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/reverend-james-m-lawson-jr>
- 24 Dickerson “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” 169.
- 25 Rev. James Lawson, Jr. interview for Religica, “Notes from an Architect of Non-Violence – Non-Violence Today,” *Religica*, Podcast audio, 2020, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/james-lawson-notes-from-architect-non-violence-forces/id1448005061?i=1000455614046>
- 26 Halberstam, *The Children*, 38.
- 27 At times, Howard Thurman has been criticized for this, and has been termed as a “mystic,” but he articulated the Jesus’ ethic of love that inspired MLK, Lawson, and many other African American leaders.
- 28 Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Volume 68, 235. The conversations were published in Harijan, March 14, 1936. Gandhi is referring to 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love

does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” (From New International Version)

29 Gandhi responds to a letter from “an Indian Christian” who writes a long letter underscoring the coherence between Gandhi’s *ahimsa* and Jesus’ love, saying, “to rule love out as a social virtue is to deny the existence of not only the religion of Jesus but of all the great religions of the world and to give way to fear which is the ruling passion in the world today.” Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 74, 423-424.

30 Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 68, 238. In response, Gandhi presaged, “Well, if it comes true it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.”

31 Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 5.

32 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 79.

33 James Farmer (1920-1999), another civil rights leader, closely followed Gandhian campaigns of 1940s in India and sought to translate *satyagraha* in the context of the freedom movement of the south. He served alongside MLK and he organized the first Freedom Ride in 1961.

34 *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*, directed by Martin Doblmeier (Alexandria, VA: Journey Films, 2019), DVD.

35 In 1929, W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American writer and historian, wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi requesting a message for “American Negroes” to be published in his magazine, *The Crisis*. Gandhi’s message was published in *The Crisis*: “Let not the 12 million negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are grandchildren of slaves. There is dishonour being slave-owners. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past.” Du Bois, W.E.B., “Gandhi and the American Negroes”, Gandhi Sevagram Ashram, accessed 11/ 5/2020. <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-articles/gandhi-and-the-american-negroes.php>

See also Sudarshan Kapoor, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

36 Isaac et al., “Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in Southern Civil Rights Movement”, 2012, 160.

37 Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, & Dynamics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 155.

38 “The Secret History of South Asian and African American Solidarity,” Black Secret History, accessed, 1/15/2020, <https://blackdesisecrethistory.org/>. Also, see Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). The book traces the history of African American encounters with Gandhian philosophy and methods of nonviolence and provides a rich history of the pre 1950s traditions that formed the foundations for interpreting Gandhian concepts in the context of southern US.

- 39 James Lawson, interviewed by author, January 15, 2020.
- 40 James Lawson, interviewed by author, January 15, 2020.
- 41 Dickerson “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,”176.
- 42 “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.” Dickerson, “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” 170.
- 43 James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 1, 2020.
- 44 “Toward the Beloved Community: Story of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council”, accessed August 24, 2020. [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/61\\_nclc.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/61_nclc.pdf). In this document Lawson is listed as the first vice chair of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. According to Lawson, the Council was founded by Kelley Miller Smith and Andrew White. My Interview with Lawson, August 26. 2020.
- 45 James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 1, 2020. The committee was founded by James Lawson.
- 46 James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 1, 2020. The committee was founded by James Lawson.
- 47 Halberstam, *The Children*, 40. Rev. Kelly Miller Smith “had welcomed Jim Lawson to Nashville on his arrival...he encouraged Lawson to start holding workshops as soon as he could and offered the basement of his church for their meetings.” Ibid, 56.
- 48 James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 1, 2020.
- 49 For example, from Fisk University, American Baptist Theological Seminary, and other colleges in the area.
- 50 James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 1, 2020.
- 51 “The Nashville Sit-In Story,” accessed 11/5/2020, [https://www.crmvet.org/crmpics/albums/60\\_nashville\\_liner.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/crmpics/albums/60_nashville_liner.pdf)
- 52 Halberstam, *The Children*, 49.
- 53 Halberstam, *The Children*, 60.
- 54 Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Power of Nonviolence,” in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 30.
- 55 Gene Sharp, “Nonviolent Action: An Active Technique of Struggle,” in *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, eds. Robert Holmes and Barry L. Gan (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 249.
- 56 Gandhi wrote in *Harijan* in 1935. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 67, 263.
- 57 James Lawson, interview by author, February 1, 2020.
- 58 Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (Athens, GA:

University of Georgia Press, 2001), 60.

59 Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Time for Freedom has Come,” in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 75.

60 John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 76.

61 Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 60.

62 Ronald E. Riggio, “What is Charismatic Leadership? Leading Through Personal Conviction,” Last Modified May 8, 2018, <https://online.stu.edu/articles/education/what-is-charismatic-leadership.aspx>

63 Halberstam, *The Children*, 99-100.

64 Veena R. Howard, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism: Nonviolence and Social Action* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

65 James Lawson, interviewed by author, April 15, 2020.

66 Halberstam, *The Children*, 78.

67 Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 14, 217. Gandhi wrote this article en route to India. It signifies his thoughts about the struggle against the British regime in India.

68 Sharma, “Philosophy of Non-violence,” 17.

69 “This Far By Faith – Witnesses to Faith: James Lawson,” PBS 2003, [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/james\\_lawson.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/james_lawson.html)

70 Quoted in Howard, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism*, 140.

71 Quoted in Howard, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism*, 76-77.

72 Dennis Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55,” *Church History*, 74, no. 2 (2005): 234.

73 Caroline Luce, “Awakening: the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in *Nonviolence and Social Movements: The Teachings of Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.*, eds. Kent Wong, Ana Luz Gonzalez, and Rev. James Lawson, Jr. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016), 45.

74 Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 79, 153-154.

75 Sharma, “The Philosophy of Nonviolence,” 22.

76 Quoted in Sharma, “The Philosophy of Nonviolence,” 22.

77 Halberstam, *The Children*, 106.

78 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press,

2006), 87.

79 Gene Sharp, "Gandhi's Political Significance today," in *Gandhi: His Relevance for our Times*, eds. C. Ramchandaran and T.N. Mahadevan (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1964), 149.

80 Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 79, 134

81 Caitlin Parker, "The Nashville Sit-Ins: A Model for a Movement," in *Nonviolence and Social Movements: The Teachings of Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.*, ed. Kent Wong, Ana Luz Gonzalez, and Rev. James Lawson, Jr. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016, 56.

82 Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience*, 50.

83 Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, 98. According to James Lawson, "he developed the list of instructions during their preparations for the campaigns and shared with the committee members" (James Lawson, interviewed by author, February 14, 2020).

84 In her chapter, "The Ethics and 'Realism' of Nonviolent Action," Mary E. King argues that nonviolent action can be used "as an active method or technique used by civilians for achieving social and political change...." King, "The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory," 273.

85 John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence: A Brief History*, ed. Paul Martens, Matthew Porter, Myles Werntz (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 42-43.

86 Parker, "The Nashville Sit-Ins: A Model for a Movement", 55.

87 Parker, "The Nashville Sit-Ins: A Model for a Movement", 55.

88 M.K. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1990), 78.

89 Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York: Random House, 1966), 283-285.

90 King, Mary Elizabeth. "What Makes Lawson's Role Unique?," James Lawson Institute, 2020, <http://jameslawsoninstitute.org/history/>

91 Halberstam, *The Children*, 103-104.

92 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985)

93 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingus (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 294.

94 Linnell Secomb, *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 149

95 Charles Mills, "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience," in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8. In this essay, Mills underscores the absence of the African American experience in the Western Philosophy.

96 I use Mills's phrase, "subperson" to characterize an "invisible," "oppressed person."

97 King, "What Makes Lawson's Role Unique?" James Lawson Institute, 11/3/2020, <http://jameslawsoninstitute.org/history/>

98 Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, tr. Jeremy Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 131.

99 Eric Silverman, *The Supremacy of Love: An Agapic Centered Vision of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 77

100 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 130-131.

101 David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 217.

102 Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Manhood of the Master*, (New York: BiblioLife Reproduction Series, 2015), 3.

103 Luis D. Leon, *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 1.

104 Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*, 193.

105 Lawson continues to hold monthly workshops at the Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles: "Rev. James Lawson's Nonviolence Workshop Online," *United Methodist Church*, accessed 2/15/2020, <https://www.holmanumc.com/events/rev-james-lawsons-nonviolence-workshop-online/>. During my conversation, Lawson articulated his vision. James Lawson, interviewed by author, August 26, 2020.