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ESSAY ROUNDTABLE

Answering the Call of Conscience

Obie Clayton Jr.

Distinguished Professor, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, United States

Abstract

This essay shows how three institutions—family, religion, and education—coalesced to shape the moral life of John Lewis. Lewis was born into a very religious, though uneducated, family who wished to see their son receive the education they were denied. The young Lewis took their zeal for education and religion into seminary and later college. It was in college that Lewis developed an intolerance for discrimination and came to champion the civil and human rights of all individuals. His call of conscience would not condone the suffering and abuse being generated by a segregated society. This passion for human rights led to his rising into prominence in the political arena, where many referred to him as the "conscience of the nation."

Keywords: civil rights; conscience; morality; equality; justice

It is my honor to contribute an essay on the legal and religious contributions of the late Congressman John Lewis. John Lewis has left his mark on both fields and used each effectively, over his life, to promote racial and social justice. Having grown up in Mississippi during the modern civil rights movement, I have had the privilege to meet many civil rights icons. However, John Lewis, who had a pronounced impact on my life and career and the fabric of our nation, stands out for more than one reason. Lewis stressed, above all else, the important role that religion plays in getting people to aspire to equal achievement for all. He lived his life at the intersectionality of race, class, and law, and his religious beliefs were foundational to his life. In the following pages, I address briefly how these themes played out over his career.

John Lewis was reared in a family that was religious, though not educated. His ties to religion, like those of other Blacks, were a natural outgrowth of the times. As has often been stated, during the pre–civil rights movement the church was the only forum available in which Blacks could express themselves or hold positions of power.[1] Not only did religion offer an escape from the harshness of life, but it also instilled hope for change. In many ways, the church (both Black and white) was viewed as the most effective vehicle for racial reconciliation. Lewis was a firm believer in this "social gospel" from an early age, and he took his religious zeal and thirst for education from rural Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee, where he studied religion at the American Baptist Theological Seminary and was ordained a Baptist minister in 1961. His desire for education did not end with his ordination. In 1967, he graduated with a degree in religion and philosophy from Fisk University. Both the American Baptist Seminary and Fisk are historically Black institutions, and these experiences had a pronounced effect on Lewis that he cherished throughout his life. It was this collegiate exposure to philosophical ideas, peaceful nonviolent tactics for social

[1] Obie Clayton, Jr., ed., *An American Dilemma Revisited: Race Relations in a Changing World* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), 191–93.

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change, and similar-minded young Blacks that instilled in Lewis the belief that religious people must voice their opinions for change and to speak up even at the risk of provoking right-wing hysteria: "In my estimation, the civil rights movement was a religious phenomenon. When we'd go out to sit in or go out to march, I felt, and I really believe, there was a force in front of us and a force behind us, 'cause sometimes you didn't know what to do. You didn't know what to say, you didn't know how you were going to make it through the day or through the night. But somehow and some way, you believed—you had faith—that it all was going to be all right."[2]

It is popular knowledge that the late John Lewis devoted his life to the civil rights movement. In 1962, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference elected him to its board because of his dedication, commitment, and youth.[3] In 1963, he was chosen as chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He spent countless hours protesting racist laws and practices and was arrested more than forty times between 1960 and 1966. While with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, his work took him from sit-ins to freedom schools, from voter registration drives to advocating for legislation to make the vote a guarantee and a right for all Americans. John Lewis's work and ideals touched the lives of many—among whom I am counted. For example, Lewis was a major proponent of education, and he believed that education was needed for all, regardless of race or social standing. He and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sought to fill the educational gaps in the Deep South through people's schools.

These "freedom schools," as they were popularly called and for which Lewis advocated, were what drew me—as they did many others—to the civil rights movement. I was a product of the Mississippi freedom schools during the summer of 1964 in Meridian, Mississippi. I was truly astounded by the commitment that these young people exhibited in turning from students themselves to freedom school teachers. Violence and the threat of violence did not deter these young adults from working for change—not accommodation or moderation but meaningful societal change. I can unequivocally say that it was the work of these freedom school teachers that instilled in me the desire to work for change and the belief that real change could be achieved; this was the message that John Lewis embodied. Throughout his time working in the "Movement" and especially during the early stages, he believed that whites would oppose racial extremism when confronted with the violence faced by Blacks and that their white consciousness and morality would win out over their bigotry. For Lewis, many of those who opposed the "Movement" were simply misinformed, and this could be changed. As he said, "We saw that our attackers were also victims, victims of a negative indoctrination that taught the false values of superiority and inferiority, the sanction of violence and brutality, and the justification of inhumanity and hate."[4]

Lewis took his passion for change from protest leader to politics and sought legal remedies for the nation's ills. I became personally acquainted with John Lewis when he was a candidate for the Atlanta City Council in the late 1970s. During this time, I was new to Atlanta and tried to become involved in the civic life of the city. I had known John Lewis by reputation and sought out opportunities to hear him speak, and I was not disappointed. As we all know, he was never a great orator and was hampered by a speech impediment, but he was a great thinker, and, better yet, an unrelenting worker. Joseph Lowery had this to say in that regard: "Whatever was in him just had to come out."[5] What came out was the wisdom instilled through years of nonviolent training and a belief that extremist elements of society could be overcome by education, religion, and reconciliation. The same commitment,

[2] John Lewis, interview by Kim Lawton, *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*, PBS, January 16, 2004, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2004/01/16/january-16-2004-john-lewis-extended-interview/2897/.

[3] "Lewis, John," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 22, 2021, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/lewis-john.

[4] John Lewis, *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (New York: Hyperion, 2012), 163.

[5] Vincent Coppola, "The Parable of Julian Bond and John Lewis," *Atlanta Magazine*, March 1, 1990, https://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/the-parable-of-julian-bond-john-lewis/.

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sincerity, and tireless work ethic exhibited by Lewis in the 1960s led to his winning that city council seat.

In my view, the election was bittersweet because Atlanta during that time was a closed city, unwelcoming to newcomers, and Lewis was viewed as an Atlanta transplant even though he had moved to Atlanta in 1964 and relocated there permanently in 1967. Another element that confronted Lewis was his unwavering belief in ethics and morality, and he wanted those exemplified in both politics and politicians. I was in Atlanta to witness the battles that went on between Lewis and city council president, Marvin Arrington, and some other council members. There were no winners, but Lewis never lost faith in the need for transparency and ethics in government. Another Atlanta-area politician during this period was Manuel Maloof, and I must use his words as they capture the John Lewis who went on to turn his council seat into a congressional seat in 1986: "It's not easy to get into local politics and be the kind of person who has to deal with water, sewers and roads, John Lewis was never cut out for that. He's a visionary. Visionaries don't make good local officials. I would not say that John Lewis was a good local official, but he was the goddamn conscience of that council. He used to make those bastards so mad, they didn't know what to do!"[6]

The sentiment expressed by Maloof in the 1990s reemerged in 2011, when Lewis was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. President Obama called Congressman Lewis the "conscience of the US Congress."[7] For more than fifty years, working in the civil rights movement and in public office, no one could question the morality and fair play demonstrated by John Lewis. Being the conscience or the spokesperson for the unfortunate was always a trait of his. During his time in government, both local and national, he served both his constituents and those who were marginalized. His life was an exemplar of human decency. Several examples of his sense of human decency readily come to mind, the first being the Cuban riot at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta in 1987. This riot is commonly referred to as the Mariel prison riot, where Cubans rebelled after learning that they were to be returned to Cuba without a hearing on their humanitarian asylum requests. Lewis was one of the few people who the Cuban inmates asked to speak with, for they knew of his reputation for fairness.[8] Lewis was on record in opposition to other Georgia lawmakers in defending the inmates and their right to seek justice.[9]

Another human rights issue that comes to mind involves the 1996 Olympic Games hosted by Atlanta and the State of Georgia. Atlanta had recently passed a law giving gay couples the right to healthcare and other benefits. In reaction to this legislation, Cobb County passed a resolution stating that "lifestyles advocated by the gay community not be endorsed by government policymakers because they are incompatible with the standards to which this community subscribes."[10] Many in the gay community pushed for the Olympic volleyball venue proposed for Cobb to be moved. Representative Newt Gingrich, the Republican Whip at the time who represented a portion of Cobb County, urged that the site not be moved, saying, "There are absolutely zero reasons to move the Olympics out of Cobb because of political blackmail."[11] Other human rights groups and members of congress backed the move not to support the Cobb resolution. This group included Senator Barbara Boxer of California

[6] Coppola, "The Parable of Julian Bond and John Lewis."

[7] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President Honoring the Recipients of the 2010 Medal of Freedom" (transcript), The White House, February 15, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/15/remarks-president-honoring-recipients-2010-medal-freedom.

[8] Ken Sugar, "Cuban Inmates in Atlanta Prison Ask for Witnesses to Agreement," *United Press International*, November 29, 1987.

[9] Michael Camp, "The Mariel Cubans and John Lewis's Legacy on Human Rights," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 3 (2021) (this issue).

[10] Kristine F. Anderson, "Plans for '96 Olympics in Atlanta Threatened by Large Gay Protest over Site Selection," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 1994, https://www.csmonitor.com/1994/0513/13032.html.

[11] Anderson, "Plans for '96 Olympics Threatened."

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and representatives Pat Schroeder of Colorado, Gerry Studds and Barney Frank of Massachusetts, and John Lewis of Georgia. Based on public outrage over the Cobb decision, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games moved the planned venue out of Cobb County.

As these two cases illustrate and through the laws he sponsored or supported, Lewis was fair-minded, inclusive, and concerned about goodwill for all. Lewis was motivated by a perennial question: "What is the purpose of a nation if not to empower human beings to live better together than they could individually? When government fails to meet the basic needs of humanity for food, shelter, clothing, and even more important—the room to grow and evolve—the people will begin to rely on one another, to pool their resources and rise above the artificial limitations of tradition or law. Each of us has something significant to contribute to society be it physical, material, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual."[12]

Lewis' social activism often collided with the laws and mores of the nation and according to his office during his Washington career. On October 8, 2013, Lewis was arrested at rally on Capitol Hill to demand immigration law reform and dignity and respect for immigrants.[13] He had previously been arrested twice at the South African embassy protesting apartheid and twice at the Embassy of the Sudan protesting genocide in Darfur. News headlines noted that Lewis had been "busted for 45th time"—his fifth arrest as a congressman.[14] What better epitaph than "conscience of the nation" for a congressman being arrested for protesting for the rights of those who cannot.

In this brief essay, I have attempted, through the historical record, common knowledge, and personal encounters, to show how John Lewis embodied morality, ethics, and conscience —traits of character that are so badly needed today. Lewis grew up during a period when poverty, racism, and cultural isolation were wreaking havoc on the nation. They still do. The conditions that were prevalent during the rise of the modern civil rights movement have become even more acute since. Contemporary society is experiencing little racial or political cooperation as evidenced by the Black Lives Matter Movement, the rise of white nationalism, unwarranted police shootings, the siege of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and voter suppression legislation in more than forty states. Lewis's grit and belief in the goodness of humanity, transparency in government, and fairness for all are needed today more than ever.

We live in a time when I think John Lewis would have said that moral and ethical individuals have the opportunity to exert their influence—and they must make their voices heard. However, many Americans, white and Black, have become disillusioned with our institutions and have become silent. This silence will not bring about the much-needed change advocated by Lewis. In Lewis's words and actions, now is the time to work to reverse the extremist tide of resistance to human rights by cautioning our leaders and challenging them to take proactive stances. Now is the time for "good trouble, necessary trouble."[15]

[12] Lewis, *Across That Bridge*, 10.

[13] William Douglas, "Rep. John Lewis Busted for 45th Time," McClatchy DC Bureau, October 8, 2013, https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/article24756802.html.

[14] Douglas, "Rep. John Lewis Busted for 45th Time."

[15] John Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html.

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