

ESSAY ROUNDTABLE: JOHN R. LEWIS’S LEGACIES IN LAW AND RELIGION

Introduction: “Be Bold”: The Legacy of John R. Lewis

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Abstract

This essay introduces the roundtable, “John R. Lewis’s Legacies in Law and Religion.” A civil rights icon and long-standing US congressman representing Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District, Lewis was often described as the moral conscience of the US Congress and the nation. The essays in this roundtable explore the many facets of Lewis’s moral leadership, with particular attention to his influence on law and religion. This roundtable is a testament to what it means to speak up, speak out, and be bold in defense of justice.

Keywords: civil rights; human rights; justice; moral leadership; courage

On July 17, 2020, our world lost a hero, Congressman John Robert Lewis. A civil rights icon and long-standing US congressman representing Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District, Lewis was often described as the moral conscience of the US Congress and the nation. Like so many of us, I was heartened when I saw him pictured in news reports of the newly painted Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, DC, standing with Mayor Muriel Bowser. Those iconic photos from late in Congressman Lewis’s life captured his legacy as a resolute leader in moral struggles from the civil rights era through today. His life stood as an unwavering testament to courage and steadfast commitment to justice.

Lewis dedicated his life to protecting human rights and securing civil liberties. In 1963, at the age of 23, he was a keynote speaker at the historic March on Washington. During the height of the civil rights movement, from 1963 to 1966, Lewis was named chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which he helped form. In 1965, he was beaten while leading protesters across the Edmund Pettus Bridge for a voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. He served in Congress as representative of Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District from 1987 to his death in 2020.

The Emory community was the beneficiary of Congressman Lewis’s grace and wisdom on many occasions. In his remarks to the graduating class of 2014, after receiving an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, Congressman Lewis charged graduates to “go out there and do your best to seek justice, and never ever turn back, never ever give up.” On March 22, 2017, Congressman Lewis joined Emory Law alumni and guests in Washington, DC, for an event at the National Museum of African American History and Culture to honor Emory Law’s Centennial. The location was significant, as Congressman Lewis had co-introduced legislation in 1988 that eventually led to the museum’s construction. At the event, Congressman Lewis observed, “As long as there is an America—and I think we’re going to be around for a while—this museum will tell the story and the struggle and the history of a people who never gave up and never gave in; they kept dreaming.” During a discussion with Lewis, Emory Law associate professor Fred Smith, Jr., asked him, “Do you have recommendations or suggestions to those of us who are willing to get into a little bit of trouble?” Lewis responded that we have a



moral obligation to act when something is not right. “To speak up,” he said. “To speak out, to be bold.”

It was at that Emory Law Centennial event that the full funding of the John Lewis Chair for Civil Rights and Social Justice was announced. Two years before, Emory Law had received an anonymous \$1.5 million gift to help establish the John Lewis Chair for Civil Rights and Social Justice and then successfully raised an additional \$500,000 to endow the chair fully. The endowed chair was envisioned as a lasting tribute to Lewis’s legacy that will establish Emory Law as a leader in teaching, research, and community engagement, focusing on areas “where racial discrimination persists despite legal advances made during the civil rights movement of the last century,” including “restriction of voting rights, racial dimensions of mass incarceration in the United States and the treatment of undocumented immigrants” as then Dean Robert Schapiro described the role.

As announced earlier this year, Professor Darren Lenard Hutchinson, contributor of the final essay to this roundtable, has joined Emory Law as the inaugural John Lewis Chair for Civil Rights and Social Justice as of the 2021–2022 academic year. Professor Hutchinson will help us pursue a bold curriculum in the study of civil rights, human rights, and social justice at Emory.

In September, Southern Company Foundation, Inc., provided a \$5 million gift to establish the Emory University School of Law Center for Civil Rights and Social Justice. The foundation’s commitment is the largest single gift to Emory Law to date. This gift, combined with the newly filled John Lewis Chair for Civil Rights and Social Justice, ensures Emory’s leadership in interdisciplinary civil rights and social justice scholarship, research, teaching, and evidence-based policy reform. The new center will also facilitate community outreach that will improve the lives of individuals who experience violations of their civil rights and who have been affected by social injustice. We embrace the challenge and responsibility of carrying on this important work.

As this roundtable in the *Journal of Law and Religion* invites us to consider, Congressman John Lewis was a leader who left an indelible mark on the fields of law and religion. His life was a testament to the power of what is possible when law and religion intersect with a profound moral intuition. As the essays in this roundtable indicate, Lewis blended the cadences of a preacher and the commitment of a community organizer with the compassion of a legislator who sought equal justice under law. He died at a time when the nation is challenged to consider how Black lives matter, and when scholars of Black theology, Black politics, and Black history are rising to the pinnacle of their fields and generating new understandings of the experience of African Americans in the United States. Lewis was a pastor in the Black Christian tradition, but he built bridges to the Jewish community and defended the Muslim community. He departed this earth in a time of turmoil over civil rights—particularly voting rights—but his long legacy of speaking out on immigrant rights and LGBTQ rights shows him to have been an early leader on these issues, which have assumed new importance today. This roundtable is a testament to what it means to speak up, speak out, and be bold in defense of justice.

Now more than ever, I hope we can follow Congressman Lewis’s example to be bold in our own lives and work.

Acknowledgments. Portions of this introduction, including quoted material, have been drawn from public statements issued by Emory University School of Law.