

27 Oct
1957

Interview by Martin Agronsky
for "Look Here"

27 October 1957
Montgomery, Ala.

After Sunday services at Dexter on 27 October, seventy-five church members assembled in the auditorium to watch Agronsky, host of the weekly NBC television program "Look Here," interview their pastor.¹ Though broadcast nationally, viewers in more than thirty-five counties of Alabama did not see the program after vandals sabotaged the transmission by wrapping a chain around the WSEF-TV transmitter just prior to air time.²

In his introduction to the interview Agronsky described King as "famous in every country beset by the problem of color." After answering Agronsky's questions concerning the Montgomery bus boycott and defending Eisenhower's handling of Little Rock, King suggests that the white South suffers a guilt complex: "I think much of the violence that we notice in the South at this time is really the attempt to compensate, drown the sense of guilt by indulging in more of the very things that cause the sense of guilt." King also expresses the hope that "increasing industrialization and concomitant urbanization. . . will inevitably undermine the folkways of white supremacy" and wipe out racial segregation "before the turn of the century." In a 20 November letter Agronsky thanked King for his "most moving, honest, and courageous" appearance on the program. The following transcript is taken from a video recording.

[Agronsky:] Dr. King, good afternoon. Dr. King, almost overnight you became an international figure as a result of the bus boycott here in Montgomery, and because you used in the movement passive, or nonviolent, resistance. Why did you use this method, sir?

[King:] Well, in order to answer that question, I would have to deal with two aspects of the problem. First, there was the boycott, and then the emergence of the nonviolent emphasis. Now, let's deal first with the boycott. I would say that we decided to boycott the buses because the people felt that they could no longer accept the injustices and indignities inflicted upon them on the city buses. They felt that it would be more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation.

[Agronsky:] What sort of injustices or indignities?

[King:] Well, such things as having to stand over empty seats, and the time, many of the bus drivers themselves were discourteous. There was a problem of

1. Martin Zama Agronsky (1915–1999), born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, received his B.S. (1936) from Rutgers University. He worked as a World War II correspondent for NBC and conducted interviews with six successive presidents from Eisenhower to Carter. He later served as moderator of the public affairs television show "Agronsky and Company."

2. Contacted in Washington, where he had flown after the filming, Agronsky blamed the blackout on "one or more rather primitive people" who were "fearful of what a spokesman of the Negro community of Montgomery might say" ("Vandals Hit As Cowardly By Agronsky," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 October 1957; see also George Prentice, "TV Interview Blacked Out by 'Sabotage,'" *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 October 1957).

paying a fare on the front door, and occasionally having to go to the back door to board the bus. Many things like this. And the masses of people came to the point that they could no longer accept it: the cup of endurance had run over. And so after deciding to boycott the buses, we decided that the movement needed some discipline and dignity; that a boycott in and of itself could be a very dangerous thing if it didn't have some guidance. And after thinking through this, the emphasis on Christian love came into being, along with the whole Gandhian technique of nonviolent resistance.

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[Agronsky:] Christianity, Christianity and Gandhism. Now how do you mean, how did you apply that, Dr. King?

[King:] Well, I mean this: that, if we think of a boycott merely as an economic squeeze, we were not boycotting. And I, I like to think of our movement, here in Montgomery, as more than a boycott, because a boycott is suggestive merely of an economic squeeze. And that can be a very unchristian thing. It can be immoral.

[Agronsky:] You anticipate, really, a question I was going to ask you; how you would reconcile the Christian ethic with an economic boycott?

[King:] Well, I think if it stops with the boycott, and it doesn't have the element of love and nonviolent resistance; it is opposed to the Christian religion. I faced this problem at a very early stage in the whole struggle. How could this method be reconciled with the Christian faith? And, at points, I started thinking that this was the method used by persons at points who, who were seeking to defy the law of the land. And all of these things came to my mind. And then I reasoned that what we were actually doing was not exactly working on a negative, trying to put a company out of business. That was never our aim. We were not seeking to put the bus company out of business, but to put justice in business. We were dealing with a positive point.

And I also reasoned that what we were doing turned out to be a very Christian act, because the system of segregation tends to set up false standards, and it scars the personality of the individuals of both races. And from that, I came to see that the longer we continued to accept it, without opposing it in some form, we failed to be our brother's keeper. Because as long as we sit in the back of the bus, it tends to give the Negro a false sense of inferiority, and so long as white persons sit in the front of the bus only, it tends to give them a false sense of superiority. And I felt that some leavening reality should come into being, so men would live together as brothers and forget about distinctions. And that became, to my mind, the very moral element. And I came to see that what we were doing was actually massive non-cooperation, and not so much a boycott.

[Agronsky:] Then you feel, really, that actually an acceptance of what you regard as evil is in essence a promotion of evil? Is that the—am I correct in understanding this was the basic philosophical thinking on your part?

[King:] Very definitely. I think it is just as bad to passively accept evil as it is to inflict it.

[Agronsky:] Gandhi, Dr. King, dramatized and defined the technique of non-violence. And yet, he also said that the only alternative to fear is violence. And that if that were the alternative, he would have to choose violence. Do you subscribe to that judgment of Gandhi, or would you disavow violence under any condition?

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[*King:*] Well, I think I would have to somewhat interpret Gandhi at this point. I don't think he was setting forth violence as the—as an alternative. I think he was emphasizing, or rather, trying to refute, an all-too-prevalent fallacy. And that is, that the persons who use the method of nonviolence are actually the weak persons, persons who don't have the weapons of violence, persons who are afraid. And I think that is what Gandhi was attempting to refute. Now in that instance, I would agree with Gandhi. That if the only alternative to violence—to fear is violence, and vice versa, then I would say fight. But it isn't the only alternative. And that is the one point that Gandhi was trying to bring out. It seems to me that there are three ways that oppressed people can deal with their oppression.

[*Agronsky:*] What are they, Dr. King?

[*King:*] Well, one is to rise up in open violence, in physical violence. And some persons have used that method. Persons who have been oppressed. But I think the danger of that method is its futility. I feel that violence creates many more social problems than it solves.

[*Agronsky:*] May I interrupt you there, Dr. King? There are today certainly people who are forced to endure a kind of injustice, that neither you nor even Gandhi, in his time, had ever seen. For example, would you regard the martyrs of Hungary's rebellion a year ago as misguided men in having used violence?³

[*King:*] I admire freedom fighters, wherever they are. But I still believe that nonviolence is the strongest approach. I think that would apply to the Hungarian situation also. I don't think it's limited to a particular locality. I think it should apply in every situation in the world where individuals seek to break aloose from the bondage of colonialism, or from some totalitarian regime, or from the system which we confront in America.

[*Agronsky:*] You truly believe, then, that nonviolence is the sole, the universal answer to injustice and oppression?

[*King:*] Very definitely. Very definitely. I feel that nonviolence, organized, I should say, organized nonviolent resistance, is the most powerful weapon, weapon that oppressed people can use in breaking aloose from the bondage of oppression. Now the other method that one might use is that of resignation, or acquiescence. But I think that is just as bad as violence. Because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

[*Agronsky:*] You make a difference, a distinction, between passive resistance and nonviolent resistance? Is that it?

[*King:*] Well, I think that can be something of a semantical problem. If passive resistance means just passively accepting violence or injustice, if it means cowardice and stagnant passivity, then there is a difference, because nonviolent resistance does resist. It is dynamically active. It is passive physically, but it is strongly active spiritually.

[*Agronsky:*] And in a sense, would you regard it as moving into the Christian philosophy, too? Do you mean the doctrine of turn the other cheek you regard as positive, rather than passive?

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[*King:*] I think it is positive, I think very definitely if it is used properly and accepted with the proper attitude, it is a very strong method, it is a method of the strong man, not the weak.

[*Agronsky:*] Dr. King, the editor of the local newspaper here proposed in an editorial the other day that I ask you to reconcile, as he put it, your passive resistance philosophy with your satisfaction, which you've expressed very clearly, over the use of bayonet force in the Little Rock situation.⁴ Well, I'll put that question to you. What is your answer to this editor?

[*King:*] Well, I might say that I did back the president in his action in Little Rock, Arkansas. I think it is quite regrettable and unfortunate that young high school students have to go to school under the protection of federal troops. But I think it is even more unfortunate that a public official, through irresponsible actions, leaves the president of the United States with no other alternative. So I did back the president, and I sent him a telegram commending him. Now, your main question is, and the question of [*Agronsky:*] (*the editor*) the editor of our local newspaper here is: how does this jibe with my whole philosophy of nonviolence?

[*Agronsky:*] How does it?

[*King:*] I believe firmly in nonviolence, as I have already said. But at the same time, I am not an anarchist. Now, some pacifists are anarchists, following Tolstoy.⁵ But I don't go that far. I believe in the intelligent use of police force. I think one who believes in nonviolence must recognize the dimensions of evil within human nature, and there is the danger that one can indulge in a sort of superficial optimism, thinking man is all good. Man does not only have the greater capacity for goodness, but there is also the potential for evil. And I think of that throughout my whole philosophy, and I try to be realistic at that point. So that I believe in the intelligent use of police force. And I think that is all we have in Little Rock. It's not an army fighting against a nation, or a race of people. It is just police force, seeking to enforce the law of the land.

[*Agronsky:*] And this would be your answer to the editor. To explore another facet of the Little Rock situation, are you satisfied with President Eisenhower's performance on the racial issue?

[*King:*] Well, I guess to answer that question, I would need to make a general statement. That is, that the Negro has been betrayed at many points by both political parties, I don't want to make this a party situation. I don't think either party can boast of having clean hands in this area. It is my conviction that both parties have failed to take the strong stand in the area of civil rights that they could take.

[*Agronsky:*] Having called down a plague on the houses of both parties, do you, are you, satisfied with President Eisenhower's performance in this particular situation, Dr. King?

4. The editorial also criticized the efforts of white officials who had threatened to block broadcast of the program on local TV: "Are Montgomerians school children that some uncommissioned censors should spoonfeed them, telling them what it's wholesome for them to hear and what unwholesome?" ("Banned in Boston," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 October 1957).

5. Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist who wrote extensively on civil disobedience and nonviolence.

27 Oct [King:] Well, with the Little Rock situation, yes. I think the president should
1957 be commended for the positive and forthright stand that he is now taking in the
area of civil rights, in general, and in the situation in Little Rock, Arkansas, in
particular.

[Agronsky:] But you are dissatisfied with the overall performance of both the
president's party and of the Democratic Party?

[King:] Oh, yes. I think both parties could improve, and I think both parties
must come to the point that they see the moral issues involved, rather than mak-
ing a political football out of the civil rights issue.

[Agronsky:] The implications being you think they still are doing that?

[King:] At points, yes.

[Agronsky:] Dr. King, what directed you to the ministry, or perhaps, more per-
tinent for the purpose of this discussion, what directed you to Gandhism and to
nonviolent resistance, what influence?

[King:] My intellectual odyssey to—pilgrimage to nonviolence was a rather
long thing. But, briefly, I can state it, I think. The first thing that came to my mind
in this area, was my reading of Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience when I was
a college student.⁶ And, of course, that fascinated me a great deal. It was one of
the best things that I had read at that time.

Later, I went to theological seminary. There, I came in contact with the whole
stream of what is known as the social gospel, which was headed in this country by
[Walter] Rauschenbusch, who taught at one of the theological seminaries many
years ago. And of course the emphasis there is that the Christian religion must
not only be concerned about saving the individual soul, but also dealing with the
social evils that corrupt the soul. So that I am, I have been deeply influenced by
the social gospel. And this caused me to become concerned about finding a
method whereby social evils could be removed from society. And I think, at that
time, I read most of the major social philosophers, and social philosophies. I read
the works of Marx and the whole communistic entities.⁷ And from the very be-
ginning, I was never moved by communism and its suggestions as to how to re-
move the problems that we confront in society.

[Agronsky:] And Gandhi?

[King:] Pardon?

[Agronsky:] Where did you come to Gandhi?

[King:] I came to Gandhi in the same setting, in theological seminary days. I
had heard of Gandhi. But I remembered hearing a message by the president of
Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, who had just returned from India. He
spoke in Philadelphia on his trip to India, and the whole philosophy of Gandhi,
and passive nonviolent resistance. And I was so deeply moved by the message that

6. Henry David Thoreau originally delivered "Civil Disobedience" as a lecture at the Concord
Lyceum on 26 January 1848; the essay first appeared in print in 1849.

7. King later asserted that he spent his 1949 winter vacation reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and
The Communist Manifesto (*Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 92).

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I went away and bought several books on the Gandhian, on Gandhi and the Gandhian technique. And at that point, I became deeply influenced by Gandhi, never realizing that I would live in a situation where it would be useful and meaningful.

[Agronsky:] And actually used it in, actually would apply it in this country?

[King:] Yes, that's right.

[Agronsky:] The Supreme Court decision on integration of the public schools has certainly changed life tremendously in our whole country, and certainly here in the South more than any other place. What do the words "all deliberate speed," as stated in the Supreme Court school decision, mean to you?⁸

[King:] Well, I think it means that we must move on toward the goal of integration with wise restraint, taking under consideration local conditions. It's a sort of gradual integration, rather than a forthwith approach.

[Agronsky:] Would you call yourself a gradualist in terms of integration?

[King:] I think not. I think the word gradualism, especially as it is used now, in the South, I think gradualism is so often an excuse for escapism, and "do nothing-ism," which ends up in "stand still-ism." And I think we must move on toward this great goal, which is ahead. So, if that is the meaning, I am not a gradualist.

[Agronsky:] You're not a gradualist in that sense.

[King:] I think at points we must reexamine this whole emphasis that the approach to desegregation must be gradual, rather than forthwith or immediate.

[Agronsky:] I assume that you regard the boycott as a method of gradualism and I wonder if we could make a specific application of the, how the boycott might work on a national basis, not just here in Montgomery. It did work here. Can it be expected to work elsewhere, on a national scale? And, I wonder, isn't there the danger of reprisal in the form of a white boycott of Negro services? Or even violence, which you say you abhor, might you not precipitate violence?

[King:] I would not advocate the indiscriminate use of the boycott method. I think many things must be taken under consideration; the possibility of counter-boycotts, and other things that might upset the whole economic basis of the Negro community. I think it has to be organized; there has to be a great deal of unity from the leaders and the people themselves. On the other hand, I think this method of nonviolent resistance can be quite effective all over the nation, in any situation where social evil is present, if for no other reason than that nonviolent resistance has two sides. The nonviolent resistor not only avoids external, physical violence, but he avoids internal violence of spirit. He not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but he refuses to hate him, and he stands with understanding goodwill at all times.

[Agronsky:] Dr. King, let's talk for a moment about the opponent, in this case,

8. A year after finding segregated public education unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled in 1955 that desegregation would be the responsibility of local school systems. The Court required only that desegregation be implemented "with all deliberate speed," a vague remedy that allowed for southern resistance and delay (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 [1955]).

27 Oct 1957 it being those in the South, I presume, who resist integration. It's been said by a white minister here in Montgomery, among others, that with the bus boycott, you struck at the white South's Christian conscience, that was his definition. His observation implies, really, I think, a sense of guilt on the part of the white South, he implies it. In your opinion, does the white South have a guilt complex?

[*King:*] I think so. I think we would have to say that there is something of a guilt complex. I think that explains some of the actions that we notice now. Psychologists would say that a guilt complex can lead to two reactions. One is repentance and the desire to change. The other reaction is to indulge in more of the very thing that you have the sense of guilt about. And I think we find these two reactions. I think much of the violence that we notice in the South at this time is really the attempt to compensate, drown the sense of guilt, by indulging in more of the very thing that causes the sense of guilt.

[*Agronsky:*] You really feel that, you prefer to make this sort of a psychiatric interpretation?

[*King:*] Yes, I think that's . . .

[*Agronsky:*] Dr. King, at the age of twenty-seven, you became a famous, a very controversial figure, as you well know. And as we've observed in the course of this conversation, you became this almost overnight. Now, can you describe to me a bit of what it was like, the pressures, the fear you must have felt at all times, and especially for your family? What was it like? What did it do when you . . . ?

[*King:*] Well, at times, it was very difficult, I must admit that. Many, many threats, especially in the early stages of our struggle here. And these things tend to get next to you. I admit, that there were points and there were times that I moved around, actually afraid within. Also . . .

[*Agronsky:*] When your house was bombed, certainly?

[*King:*] Well, by that time, I had had a deep religious experience. I was prepared for that, strangely enough, because . . .

[*Agronsky:*] Prepared for a bombing, Dr. King?

[*King:*] I was prepared for almost anything that occurred. I had come to feel, at that time, that in the struggle, God was with me, and through this deep religious experience, I was able to endure and face anything that came my way. Now, I think that still stands with me. After a long process of really giving my whole life to a religious way and to the will of God, I came to feel that, as we struggle together, we have cosmic companionship. And of course, my wife was always stronger than I was through the struggle, so I didn't have the problem of having a wife who was afraid and trying to run from the situation. And that was a great help, in all of the difficulties that I confronted.

[*Agronsky:*] Dr. King, to apply now the bus boycott and general feeling that one finds here in Montgomery to the overall problem with white and black in the South: what has the boycott done aside from integrating buses in Montgomery? Have the relations between the whites and the blacks here improved? Have they

improved, say to the point where an interracial approach to school integration could be attempted? Or, Dr. King, and this is an important question, has your method, has the boycott, brought perhaps still more bitterness?

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[*King:*] At points, I think it has. Very frankly, I think there is a great deal of bitterness. However, I would say that this is something of a necessary phase of the evolution of a transition. Channels of communication are temporary, temporarily closed, but I don't think this is permanent. This is the response that you always get in a moment of social change. Privileged classes rarely ever give up privileges without strong resistance. But I think these sort of jangling discords will soon be transformed into meaningful symphonies of racial harmony in which we will be able to work out the problem. And I don't think it will be in the, in, in many, many years off, but it will be in the not too distant future.

[*Agronsky:*] And you really feel that in the long run, then, it has been a beneficial experience and has not increased hatred, even though momentarily there is a bitter and sharp division?

[*King:*] That's right, yes.

[*Agronsky:*] Dr. King, what do you see ahead, I mean in the future pattern of race relations in the United States?

[*King:*] Well, I'm quite hopeful about the future pattern of race relations. I realize that there will be difficulties, and the reactionaries of the white South will make it more difficult, in order to get to this goal of integration. But I think there are other things at work which will defeat all barriers in the long run. For instance, there is increasing industrialization and concomitant urbanization. These things will inevitably undermine the folkways of white supremacy. The white South, there are many persons, young white men, are good businessmen, and they see that bigotry is a very costly thing. I think also the Christian church will be forced to continue to take a strong stand and urge its members to match profession with practice. And also, the determination of the Negro himself to achieve freedom will be one of the greatest forces to bring about integration, and the rolling tide of world opinion will force the federal government to take even a stronger stand. So that I'm quite optimistic about it. I think we live in one of the most momentous periods of human history. These are great days to be alive. And I feel that, before the turn of the century, segregation on the basis of race will be non-existent.

[*Agronsky:*] Thank you, Dr. King. This is the way the man who led the Montgomery bus boycott sees its meaning, as the application of Christian principle to a national problem. And he feels violence is never an answer to anything. Good afternoon.

[*Narrator:*] From the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the NBC Television Network has brought you "Look Here" with Martin Agronsky. "Look Here" will return next . . .

Vt. NBCC-NNNBC.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MONTGOMERY STORY

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How 50,000 Negroes found a new way to end racial discrimination.

DECEMBER 5, 1955
WALK TO FREEDOM

DECEMBER 21, 1956
VICTORY FOR JUSTICE

DECEMBER 5, 1955--THE DAY OF THE PROTEST, EVERYONE WALKED...



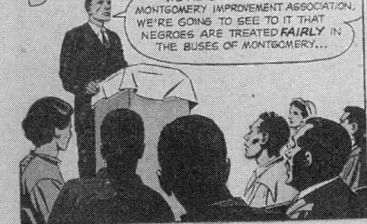
...OR RODE IN A FRIEND'S CAR... OR HITCHED A RIDE WITH NEGRO TAXI DRIVERS.



OUR PROTEST IS A SUCCESS! NO ONE'S RIDING THOSE BUSES.

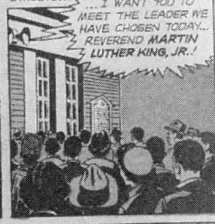


DURING THE DAY WE FORMED A COMMITTEE. THAT NIGHT WE HAD MEETINGS IN THE CHURCHES.



WE'RE CALLING OURSELVES THE MONTGOMERY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION. WE'RE GOING TO SEE TO IT THAT NEGROES ARE TREATED FAIRLY IN THE BUSES OF MONTGOMERY...

THE CROWDS WERE HUGE. WE USED LOUDSPEAKERS SO THAT THOSE WHO COULDN'T GET IN COULD HEAR WHAT WAS HAPPENING FROM OUT ON THE STREETS...



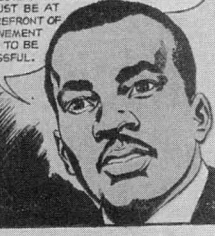
I WANT YOU TO MEET THE LEADER WE HAVE CHOSEN TODAY... REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

AT THAT TIME I KNEW MARTIN LUTHER KING ONLY SLIGHTLY, BUT I SOON LEARNED THAT A NEW AND IMPORTANT LEADER HAD COME ON THE SCENE--ONE AMERICA WOULD FEEL PROUD OF...



YOU ALL KNOW OF THE SUCCESS OF OUR ONE-DAY PROTEST. BUT A SINGLE DAY IS NOT ENOUGH. LET'S STAY OFF THE BUSES UNTIL WE CAN RIDE THEM WITH DIGNITY. LET'S WALK TO FREEDOM.

THIS IS A NONVIOLENT PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE. OUR CHIEF WEAPONS ARE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL FORCES. WE DEPEND ON LOVE! LOVE AND GOODWILL TOWARD ALL MEN MUST BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF OUR MOVEMENT IF IT IS TO BE SUCCESSFUL...



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FOR comic book, "Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story" (November-December 1957)

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