RELIGIOUS RESOURCES AND THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

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D*avid Garrow, inaugurated the Hoover-Sharpe Conference* Our God is Able: A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement as an Ecumenical and Interfaith Movement, *on Sunday, April 23, 1995 with the following lecture.*

Forty years after the fact, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956 is correctly celebrated as far and away the most important event to help kick off the new wave of locally-based Black activism that characterized the years 1955 to 1965 across much of the South. We need to remember, above and beyond almost any other specific element of the Montgomery story, that absolutely no Black Montgomerian, either on December 2 or December 5, 1955, imagined that the protest upon which they were embarking would test their spiritual, and financial, resources for upwards of one full year. The boycott, as most students of the civil rights movement now know, was initiated because of the December 1, 1955 arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, who, unlike three other Black bus-riders, had refused to surrender the seat she had already taken on a Montgomery City Lines bus so that one newly-boarding white man could seat himself without having to sit next to, or even parallel to, a Black person.[1]

But the instigation of the boycott, as most careful students again already know, rested only in part upon Mrs. Parks's happenstance experience, for protest sentiment within Black Montgomery—particularly protest sentiment concerning the treatment of Black riders on the city's busses—reached back well before the fall or winter of 1955. Half a century earlier, when segregation had first been imposed in Montgomery streetcars in the summer of 1900, Black citizens had mounted a boycott until the new municipal ordinance was clarified to indicate no one had to give up a seat unless another was available. This was precisely the circumstance that later led to Mrs. Parks' arrest. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, some Black Montgomerians found inspiration in the occasionally unpredictable calls for resistance to segregation that came from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church pastor Vernon Johns. In retrospect, however, by far the most important formative civic activism within Black Montgomery in those pre-1955 years stemmed from the 1946 founding of the Women's Political Council (WPC).

Formed by Black professional women whose efforts to desegregate the all-white League of Women Voters had been rebuffed, the WPC in the early 1950s resolved to take action regarding the offensive treatment that Black bus riders received at the hands of city bus drivers. WPC founding president Mary Fair Burks later recalled that Black Montgomery had been too slow to target the bus situation, that "everyone would look the other way." In December of 1949, however, Burks's Alabama State College English Department colleague Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a new faculty member at the college and a newcomer to Montgomery, made the unintentional error of seating herself toward the front of a City Lines bus while on her way to the municipal airport for a holiday flight to Cleveland. Rudely and abusively, the driver ordered her out of the "whites-only" seat and a shaken Robinson fled from the bus in fear. "I felt like a dog," she explained years later. "And I got mad, after this was over, and I realized that I was a human being, and was just as intelligent and far more trained than that bus driver was.

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But I think he wanted to hurt me, and he did...I cried all the way to Cleveland."[2]

In the wake of that experience, Robinson and Burks determined that the WPC would concern itself with the bus situation. "It was then that I made up...my mind that whatever I could add to that organization that would help to bring that practice down, I would do it," Robinson subsequently explained. "When I came back, the first thing I did was to call a meeting" of the WPC "and tell them what had happened."[3] Most WPC members—professors, high school teachers, or the spouses of relatively well-to-do professional men, such as Mrs. Irene West, the wife of a dentist—owned private automobiles and hence were far less dependent upon public transportation than were working class Black Montgomerians. When an opportunity to make good on Robinson and Burks's promise finally presented itself, in late 1953, the WPC acted with resolve.

The most important change to take place in Montgomery civic life, in the years prior to December of 1955, was the November, 1953 election of Dave Birmingham, a genuine racial liberal, to the three-member City Commission. Within a few weeks of Birmingham's victory, a group of Black civic activists, led by the WPC, met with Birmingham and his two fellow commissioners to complain about conditions on the busses. Blacks often had to stand beside empty, "whites-only" seats, and in the Black sections of town, busses stopped only at every second block, rather than on every block, as was the case in white neighborhoods. In addition, most drivers made Black riders pay their fares at the front of the bus, and then disembark and re-enter the bus through the rear door, so as to avoid their passing by the "white" seats. Finally, as Mrs. Robinson herself had experienced, some drivers were frequently hostile and abusive towards Black riders.

Nothing in particular resulted from that meeting, and a second one four months later, in March, 1954, produced only a promise that busses henceforth would stop on every block in Black neighborhoods. Robinson and other Black representatives argued in favor of eliminating the reserved, "whites-only" section in favor of a seating system whereby Blacks would seat themselves from the rear forward, and whites from front to back, so that no one would ever have to surrender a seat or stand over an empty one. But both city and bus company lawyers insisted that Alabama segregation statutes would not allow for such a reform.

Robinson and Burks may not have been happy with the city's responses, but the WPC's efforts during that winter of 1953-1954 clearly established the group as what Montgomery historian J. Mills Thornton III has correctly termed "the most militant and uncompromising organ of the black community."[4] Then, of course, on May 17 and 18 came news from Washington of the Supreme Court's revolutionary ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. Just three days later, the resolutely polite Robinson sent Montgomery Mayor W. A. Gayle a friendly but firm letter. After thanking Gayle for the previous meeting and for the improvement in bus-stop practices, Robinson reiterated the seating reforms the WPC was seeking and then pointedly noted how "three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate. More and more of our people are already arranging to ride with neighbors and friends to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers." Then Robinson made the point explicitly: "There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of busses. We, sir, do not feel that forceful measures are necessary in bargaining for a convenience which is the right of all bus passengers. We, the Council, believe that agreeable terms can be met in a quiet and unostensible manner to the satisfaction of all concerned." After pointing out that Mobile, Atlanta, Macon, and Savannah already employed the seating system advocated by the WPC, Robinson warned Gayle that Montgomery should do likewise, "for even now plans are being made to ride less, or not at all, on our buses. We do not want this."[5]

Despite her tactful language, Robinson was hoping, especially in the wake of another unproductive meeting with city officials on June 1, that Black community senti-

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ment would indeed develop in favor of a boycott. That did not take place during the remaining months of 1954. Then, on March 2, 1955, racist treatment on Montgomery's busses returned to the fore when fifteen year-old Claudette Colvin was forcibly arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a crowded vehicle so that white riders could sit down. Both Robinson and E. D. Nixon, a labor and NAACP activist, hoped that Colvin's case might offer a vehicle around which the Black community could mobilize in protest against the situation on the busses. However, both the particulars of Colvin's arrest, as well as her personal circumstances, weighed heavily against such a choice.

In mid-March, just three days after Colvin was convicted of assault and battery, in addition to violating the state segregation statute, Black favorite Dave Birmingham lost his re-election bid to the City Commission. Robinson and others met with city and bus company officials once again in June, but only six months later, with Mrs. Parks's arrest, did Robinson and her colleagues finally find themselves with the chance for which they had been hoping. The detailed narrative of how Robinson and her compatriots, beginning late in the evening of December 1 and stretching straight through into the mid-morning hours of December 2, got the boycott underway by mimeographing and distributing thousands of flyers calling upon all Black Montgomerians to stay off of City Lines busses on Monday, December 5, does not need to be recapitulated here. But their activities—in a context where Black women, acting quickly and very much on their own, can justly be given much of the credit for sparking and instigating what would soon become a world-famous mass movement—both in December of 1955 and earlier, were absolutely essential to all that would grow out of the evening of December 1 and the early morning of December 2.

This *pre-history* of the Montgomery bus boycott is not only crucial for giving credit where credit is due, it is also necessary for establishing a central interpretive point which must be made clear even if it in part runs counter to our overarching theme here today: the origins and instigation of the Montgomery bus boycott, this lecture's very title notwithstanding, did *not* in any direct or immediate way grow out of Black Montgomery's religious institutions *or* religious underpinnings. *However*, come midday on Friday, December 2, a fundamental shift began, a shift whose early stages may have been both subtle and vague, but nonetheless a shift the importance and significance of which continued to grow throughout the ensuing weeks of that winter *and* throughout the following months of the spring, summer, and early fall of 1956: namely that once the Montgomery boycott *did* get underway as a mass movement, it was *indeed* to a very significant extent a religiously-sustained and religiously-*understood* endeavor, an endeavor that indeed became more and more spiritually oriented, and more and more religiously buttressed, the longer it continued.

The first event marking the beginning of that shift came not from Jo Ann Robinson and the WPC—though Robinson, Burks, and other leading WPC members had all been active members of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, both during and after the pastorship of Vernon Johns—but from their most energetic male activist colleague, E. D. Nixon, who knew without having to ponder that the women's thousands of leaflets would succeed in generating a Monday mass boycott *only* if they could secure the enthusiastic support of Montgomery's ministers. With that requirement in mind, Nixon phoned one of the younger and more energetic preachers, Ralph D. Abernathy, pastor of the sizeable First Baptist Church and secretary of the city's Baptist Ministers' Alliance. Nixon asked Abernathy's advice with regard to convening a community-wide meeting of Black leaders, and Abernathy recommended that they call the meeting for that very evening at the Dexter Avenue Church under the auspices of the Ministers' Alliance.

That night's meeting began with a prayer, but threatened to go off course when the president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA)—a more inclusive groups than the Baptists, of course—sought to take exclusive charge of the entire enterprise. Eventually,

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however, the group resolved that in addition to distributing additional, slightly revised copies of Robinson's leaflet, Monday's bus boycott would culminate with a community-wide mass meeting at the large Holt Street Baptist Church at which a decision could be made as to whether the one-day endeavor should be extended further.

Had it not been for the disastrous performance of IMA President Reverend L. Roy Bennett at the Friday evening meeting, it is all but certain that the Monday boycott, and the Monday-night meeting, would have gone forward under the formal sponsorship and rubric of Montgomery's Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Removing Bennett, however, was seen as necessary by virtually everyone who had been present on Friday, and by the end of the weekend there was a consensus that since neither the WPC nor the local NAACP were inclusive enough to serve the role, a brand-new organization would have to be launched to guide the boycott. At a Monday afternoon leadership meeting, initially scheduled to plan the program for that evening's mass meeting, the group approved Ralph Abernathy's suggestion that they constitute themselves as the "Montgomery Improvement Association." When the floor was opened for the nomination of officers, Dexter Avenue Church member Rufus A. Lewis—a well-known civic figure and something of a rival of E. D. Nixon's—immediately put forward the name of his pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lewis's recommendation of King was motivated, in at least some small part, by a desire to avert the selection of either Bennett or Nixon. But, on the whole, Lewis's preference was based on King's readily apparent professional and personal strengths. First, his articulate speaking skills and impressive educational background, both of which had played significant parts in his 1954 selection as Vernon Johns's successor at the upper-class Dexter Avenue Church, would go a long way toward attracting the support of Black professionals. Second, and even more importantly, just as Nixon had recognized in his initial call to Abernathy, King was a minister, and a *Baptist* minister, a status that would appeal both to other clergy in the community and, most crucially, to the regular churchgoers who comprised perhaps a significant majority of Black Montgomery.

Lewis and Nixon's shared realization that the resources and stature of the Black church would have to be fully utilized in order to make the activists' boycott a truly *mass* movement was, in retrospect, perhaps the most crucial step of all in transforming what had started as a secularly-led effort into something far greater. The Black leadership, already deeply pleased and impressed by the virtually universal Black community support of the boycott during the early hours of Monday, further agreed that expansion of the struggle into a multi-day protest would await a show of hands at the evening mass meeting. But, even prior to the rally, few doubted what the consensus of sentiment would be.

What occurred in Black Montgomery that Monday was first and foremost a reflection of how universal Black sentiment was about the treatment regularly accorded Black bus riders. The vast, overflow turnout for the evening rally was further testimony to that fact, even well before MIA President Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., stepped to the pulpit following an invocational prayer and a selection of Scripture. King began with a long testimonial to Mrs. Parks's integrity and then reminded his listeners that "we are Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest." He declared that "the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right," and referred twice to the guarantees of the U.S. Constitution and once to the Supreme Court's prior vindication of Black Americans' quest for equal rights.

After invoking those legal and political principles, King also cited both God Almighty and Jesus of Nazareth. In closing, he stressed that "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all our action," and not stoop so low as to hate our white antagonists. The pursuit of justice must be guided by Christian love, for along with justice, "Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith."[6] Christian love and the biblical principles, more so than philosophical non-violence, were the dominant

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themes and emphases in King's largely spontaneous December 5 oration. The crowd that evening unanimously affirmed a resolution calling for Black riders to remain off the busses indefinitely until "some arrangement" was worked out with white officials, and the crowd also endorsed the protest's three rather modest demands: (1) that the bus company adopt the WPC's previously-championed seating policy whereby Blacks would seat themselves from the back to the front, and whites from the front toward the rear; (2) that drivers behave courteously toward all riders at all times; and (3) that Blacks henceforth be allowed to apply for the currently "whites only" bus driving jobs.

The following day King told reporters, "We are not asking for an end to segregation." Instead, he emphasized, "All we are seeking is justice and fair treatment in riding the busses. We don't like the idea of Negroes having to stand when there are vacant seats. We are demanding justice on that point." The MIA leaders rightfully appreciated just how modest their demands were, and that stark modesty, along with the polite relations they had enjoyed with white officials, especially during Dave Birmingham's term on the City Commission, went a long way toward explaining their expectation that a negotiated settlement would no doubt be reached before long.

However, following an utterly unproductive meeting with white officials on December 8, King, Abernathy, and their colleagues began to realize for the first time that they might well have a far more difficult undertaking on their hands than they had previously thought. There was no slackening of Black community support, however, with each day's empty busses being matched by enthusiastic turn-outs at two more church rallies on December 8 and 12. The Black community's own self-generated alternative transportation system was functioning well, and even as the boycott stretched into its second week, some leading participants began to realize that sentiment for maintaining it indefinitely, if need be, was probably stronger and more enthusiastic among the *mass* of Black Montgomerians than it was among the more politically-experienced Black civic elite.

This crucial point, perhaps more important and more unacknowledged in the existing literature than any other concerning the early months of the boycott, is one we need to explicitly highlight: more than anything else what made Montgomery a truly *mass* movement was the way in which the initiative for continuing the struggle came *more* from the "followers" than from the ostensible "leaders." Although we do not as yet have access to any comprehensively *participant*-based rather than "leader-" informed sociological study of the boycott, we need to be explicitly on notice that the *mass*-level perspective on the struggle may well, even from very early on, have been decidedly more *faith*-oriented than was the case with the more politically-oriented MIA leaders. It is unfortunate that, given the passage of time, we may *never* have such a study.

During a second unproductive negotiating session, a segregationist white pastor whom the city officials had invited to attend, discoursed on how preachers should stay out of politics. In reply, MIA president King struck a more explicitly religious note than had theretofore been articulated by any of the protesters: "I can see no conflict between our devotion to Jesus Christ and our present action. In fact, I see a necessary relationship. If one is truly devoted to the religion of Jesus he will seek to rid the earth of social evils. The gospel is social as well as personal."

By the first weeks of January, 1956, white opposition to the Black community's goals had intensified further, and the MIA leadership, their expectations of a negotiated settlement now all but wholly erased, began to consider responding to the white obduracy by replacing their "separate but equal" seating proposal with an all-out request for desegregation of the busses. White Montgomery had been far faster than the MIA to recognize the Black community's protest as a more-than-symbolic frontal challenge to the principle of white racial supremacy, and only come mid-January did Black activists fully begin to acknowledge that what they had first envisioned as a civic policy tussle had already turned into something much riskier and far larger.

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The increasing dangers facing Black Montgomery, and the deepening commitment that they, in turn, called forth, were most starkly exemplified by the individual experiences encountered by Martin King: first his arrest and jailing on a trumped up traffic charge, and then, on January 30, by the bombing of his home while he was speaking at an MIA mass meeting. Most significant of all, however, was the purely and intensely private spiritual crisis of faith that King underwent in the kitchen of his home late on the night of January 27. It is a crisis that I, and others, have written about extensively elsewhere. Up until then, King said later, the church "was a kind of inherited religion, and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must...if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life." That night, however, "I discovered that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself...I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night...Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage." Then, "it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth.' "

Above and beyond its biographical centrality, King's spiritual transformation bears notice in our present context for two reasons, both of which have already been noted. First, it bears notice with regard to how the laity of the protest may well have understood the seriousness of the struggle sooner than did their leaders. Second, it bears notice with regard to how the intensity of the endeavor, and, ergo, the faith resources necessary for sustaining it, increased dramatically during the latter half of the month of January. Looking back later at the bombing of his home, King explained that the "religious experience" he had a few nights earlier "had given me the strength to face it."

Soon after the bombing, the MIA filed a constitutional challenge to City Lines' segregated seating policy in federal district court, and soon thereafter talk spread that Montgomery authorities were aiming to indict as many bus protest leaders as they could identify under an old and previously obscure state anti-boycott statute. Some MIA leaders privately wondered whether the boycott needed to be maintained now that the fundamental legal question had been joined. But, when the question was raised at a February 20 mass meeting, the vote to stay the course was almost unanimous. One activist explained that "the morale of the masses, once again, revived the morale of the leaders."

The very next day the state court criminal indictments were indeed handed down, precipitating what appeared to be the MIA's gravest crisis yet. The Black community, however, responded to the charges with a new show of determination, and the new legal onslaught put the Montgomery story on front pages across the nation, thereby drawing significant new support to the MIA's side. At the next mass meeting King again spoke about how the MIA must utilize "the weapon of love," and forsake any hatred. Professing a calm resolve despite the likelihood of an upcoming criminal conviction, King, the following Sunday, told his Dexter parishioners that his "faith in man is, at bottom, a faith in God."

The increased press attention being focused upon the protesters often spotlighted the fundamentally popular nature of the boycott. As Jo Ann Robinson told one Black newspaper, "The amazing thing about our movement is that it is a protest of the people. It is not a one man show. It is not the preachers' show. It's the people's. The masses of this town, who are tired of being trampled on, are responsible. The leaders couldn't stop it if they wanted to." Visiting journalists and outside supporters also regularly noted how the crucial institutional base of the protest, above and beyond the organizational structure of the MIA, lay in the Black church. As the most influential of the boycott's new outside counselors, Bayard Rustin, put it, the Montgomery movement "is strong because it is religious as well as political. It has been built upon the most stable institution of the southern Negro community—the Church."

In mid-March, the Black community's heightened spiritual fortitude was further tested by the widely-expected conviction and sentencing of Dr. King. King himself reacted almost serenely, and while his exposure to Rustin

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and other advisors like Glenn Smiley now gave his public comments a greater emphasis on "nonviolence" than had been the case earlier, King rarely failed to underscore that "passive resistance and nonviolence is the gospel of Jesus."

Three months later, as the protest soldiered on, hoping that higher federal courts would affirm an early June victory that the MIA had won in its constitutional challenge against segregated seating, the participants' fortitude was tested yet again, by a public allegation from former officer Reverend U. J. Fields that some MIA leaders had used boycott funds for their personal enrichment. Under considerable pressure, Fields soon withdrew his charges, but for MIA activists the internal accusation of financial misconduct was one of the most painful and faith-testing experiences of the entire protest. Perhaps the most astounding thing about the Montgomery bus boycott, something that has not been adequately appreciated or emphasized in subsequent histories, is how mass support for the undertaking *never weakened* as time went by. Come September, King told Rustin that "the people are just as enthusiastic now as they were in the beginning."[7]

Faith and fortitude were finally most emphatically rewarded in an accident of timing that many participants took as an explicit sign that more than just the U.S. courts were on their side. On November 13, as MIA leaders sat in a courtroom waiting for a local judge to hand down an expected injunction halting the operation of the MIA's phenomenally successful car pool system, an Associated Press reporter arrived with word that the Supreme Court had just affirmed the lower court order striking down segregated bus seating. The mandate would not take effect for several weeks, but a joyous King told journalists that "the universe is on the side of justice." Five weeks later the official desegregation of Montgomery's busses formally took place.

Although the origins of the Montgomery protest did not come from within the Black community's religious institutions or religious leadership, in retrospect we must acknowledge that the deep and resolute faith which enabled the mass of Black Montgomerians to stick with a more than year-long boycott, that initially *no one* had envisioned as a long-term endeavor, is the most important and dramatic aspect of a fascinating and much celebrated story. While both the physical and leadership resources of the city's Black churches were of course drawn on again and again once the boycott *did* get underway, the most crucial resource of all for the Montgomery protest was the quiet yet intense and widespread spiritual *faith* that so much of Black Montgomery brought to and relied upon during the twelve and a half months of the boycott. Montgomery was indeed a *mass* movement, in fact perhaps the most "mass" movement of the entire twentieth-century civil rights era, but it was not *just* a mass movement, for at bottom, and first and foremost, it was a mass witness, a community's mass expression of a faith in the future, and faith in God, that was far more overt and evident in 1955 than is the case today in 1995. □

NOTES

1. This is an edited version of Mr. Garrow's lecture text. Most footnotes have been omitted. Readers should consult David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), pp. 11-82; and also sources reprinted in Garrow, ed. *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-56* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989).
2. Garrow interviews with Mary Fair Burks (29 July 1984, Salisbury, MD) and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson (5 April 1984, Los Angeles). See also Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Garrow, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Southern Changes* 7 (October –December 1985): 21-27, reprinted in Garrow, *The Walking* City, pp. 607-19.
3. Garrow interview with Robinson (5 April 1984, Los Angeles).
4. Thornton, "Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956," *Alabama Review* 33 (July 1980), as reprinted in Garrow, ed., *The Walking* City, p. 330.
5. Robinson to Gayle, 21 May 1954, as reproduced in full facsimile in Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started* It, p. viii.
6. See Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40 (January 1986): 5-20, at 14-15.
7. King to Rustin, 20 September 1956, as quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 79.