Adin Ballou and the Religious Roots of Nonviolence

First of all, I want to thank Rev. Bruce Taylor for inviting me to be with you this morning, and for your beautiful opening hymn, “Wake, Now, My Senses,” by Adin Ballou. Singing it, I was reminded me of two favorite sayings of the late poet, William Stafford: “Wars we didn’t have saved many lives.” And “Every war has two losers.” As someone deeply committed to inter-religious engagement, as well as peacemaking and nonviolence, I must say that any domination that claims Adin Ballou, as you rightly do, has much to recommend it.

Among Ballou’s achievements as a activist, pamphleteer, and peacemaker, include his valuable insights regarding what he called “non-injurious or un-injurious force,” and what we now call “nonviolence.” His Christian Nonresistance, 1846, is perhaps the first extended discourse on nonviolence in history. He was a staunch abolitionist also, in his long and productive life as head of the Hopedale Community, Unitarian minister, and historian of Hopedale and Mendon. In addition to his remarkable autobiography and correspondence with Leo Tolstoy, he may have been known to Gandhi. In fact, Ballou struggled with questions and concerns similar to Gandhi’s, who began his own “Experiments with Truth,” in the 1890, fifty years later.

The rhetoric, style and tradition that informed Ballou’s explorations on nonviolence were decidedly Christian, like Tolstoy’s, but unlike Gandhi’s which, though ecumenical at base, drew on the centuries long commitment to ahimsa (to do no harm) in India among Jains and Buddhists, long before the Christian era. And every time I return to Christian Nonresistance, I am deeply impressed by his reasonableness, in defining nonresistance, its relationship to scriptural truths and democratic governance, as well as his informed defenses of the concept.

For Ballou, Tolstoy, and Gandhi, as well as various American apostles of nonviolence, from the time of the Quakers, including William Lloyd Garrison, Dorothy Day, and Dr. Martin Luther King, religious teachings were central and remain so, for many people today. Over the past fifty years, nonetheless, as with many moral concepts,
the language has become more secular, focusing on strategy, on what works, what
doesn’t work and why. Especially important are the research and scholarship of Gene
Sharp, the greatest theorist of nonviolence since Gandhi, and his Albert Einstein
Institution, Boston, Sharp, nominated by the Nobel Prize for Peace by the American
Friends Service Committee, has identified 189 methods of nonviolent action and written
brilliant evaluations of successful nonviolent campaigns over the past century. He is a
thoughtful commentator on the current movement in Egypt, his work having been
important to nonviolent activists challenging other oppressive regimes in the Philippines,
Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and, more recently in Iran. Many of Sharp’s writing are
available free on the internet at www.aeinstein.org

Ballou discourse on nonviolence, with its deep religious roots, similar to the
writings of more recent writers, including Thomas Merton, Thich Naht Hahn, the Dalai
Lama, and the Reverend Walter Wink’s, Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third
Way. And although all religious tradition began with a commitment to peacemaking
and nonviolence, all of them have subverted it, by making alliances with the war-making
state, as scholars and theologians have indicated in Subverting Hatred. Christians
pretty much sold out by the 4th Century when Augustine came up a defense of “just
wars.” That gave Christians the o.k. to kill for Christ, if you spared noncombatants,
among other things. That possibility was rendered irrelevant in modern warfare, where
the bombs fall abundantly on innocent civilians.

Adin Ballou obviously lived prior to our manufacturing of weapons of mass
destruction. As one of the characters in Flannery O’Connor says of Europeans, “Back
then, arms manufacturers were not as sophisticated as we are.”

I must admit to a special affection for Ballou, among the nonviolent activists I have
written about, perhaps because of his naturalness, intelligence, and sense of humor. In
the preface to Nonviolent Resistance, which he sent forth “on its mission of
reconciliation,” he acknowledges that although his doctrine of “nonresistance” is a “very
unpopular doctrine, it is as ancient as Christianity, and as true as the New Testament.”
But since it is little understood and often spoken against, he entreats his readers “to divest
themselves as much as possible of prejudice, and patiently examine what he had here
written.” He then refers to estimates that, “since their experiment commenced,” violence
and war have killed 14 billion to 35 billion human beings. “Can non-resistants make a
greater loss than this?” he asks, or “Can their principle of action result in a greater
expenditure of life and happiness? No.”

Ballou’s sophisticated reflections on the transformation of conflict indicated that
understood the concept of nonviolence or non-injurious force as modern theorists do, as a
means, method, strategy for resisting injustice and humiliation, for resolving conflict
without killing or hurting people, and for bringing about social change without killing or
hurting people. Although initially a compatriot of William Lloyd Garrison and other
abolitionists, Ballou refused to embrace the Civil War as a holy war.

He rightly regarded nonviolence as method of peacemaking, not as “passive
resistance,” but as a force, or like Martin Luther King, as a “power,” in exposing
injustice in order to reclaim human dignity. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for
example, King used a medical metaphor, saying that exposing consequences of apartheid
or segregation in order to end it, was like lancing a boil in order to heal the body plagued
by infection.

For too long we have thought of peace as merely the absence of war, as a “void,”
allowing the rhetoric of war-making and violence to dominate public discourse, as if war
were the only means of resolving or transforming conflict. In a poem written in the late
1960s, “A Life at War,” Denise Levertov linked our on-going wars with the First World
War, that “senseless slaughter,” as Ernest Hemingway calls it. “We have breathed the
grits of it in, all our lives,” Levertov said, “our lungs are pocked with it, the mucous
membrane of our dreams coated with it, the imagination films over with the gray filth of
it.” That’s the bad news.

Over the past forty years, nonetheless, peacemaking through nonviolent means has
proved to be a powerful force, in bringing down dictatorships all over the world, bringing
an end to the Cold War and to apartheid in South Africa, and liberating much of Eastern
Europe. New organizations such as “Nonviolent Peaceforce,” founded in 1999, sponsor
skilled peacemakers to intervene in dangerous areas such as Sri Lanka, Mindanao,
Guatemala, Sudan. Peace, conflict, and nonviolence studies, informs 400 programs—at
Notre Dame, Clark, Tufts, Brandeis, and California universities.—and research centers
around the world. Christian denominations, have placed nonviolence on an equal footing
with the just war teachings, as in the Catholic bishops’ pastoral, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” 1983.

Through their courage and sacrifice, heroes and heroines of nonviolence have emphasized the religious roots of nonviolence. As King said, “Jesus gave us the inspiration, and Gandhi gave us the method.” He might have included Adin Ballou and Leo Tolstoy, as well as a host of prophets from other religious bodies, such Daniel and Philip Berrigan.

The spirituality and practice of peacemaking were obviously central to the teachings of Jesus, his first words being “shalom,” “peace,” but more accurately, “be thou whole.” Professor Walter Wink, Union Theological Seminary, has provided an important explication of the New Testament passage about turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, and surrendering our cloak as well as our coat. Jesus’ advice was not to remain passive in the face of injustice, but to confront it, in his culture, turning the other cheek meant that an assailant had to strike you with his back hand, an acknowledgement of your humanity; walking an extra mile subjected your guard to possible criticism by increasing your punishment beyond the law, and giving up your cloak meant exposing yourself, which was an embarrassment to others, more than to yourself.

For Gandhi, also, nonviolence of what he called “satyagraha,” meaning “truth force,” rather than “passive resistance”; for as he said, he was never passive about anything. In his religious writings, he spoke of a “soul force,” that spiritual or psychological strength that enables a person person to assert his or her humanity and to realize his or her bond with every human being. Through nonviolent action, the people of India would reclaim “soul power” that enabled them to reclaim their native culture and to achieve independence.

As Americans we have a rich tradition of nonviolence and peacemaking, one of the richest in the world, dating from the early Quakers, from Thomas Paine, who called himself “a citizen of the world,” and William Lloyd Garrison and his motto, “Our country is the world; our countrymen are all mankind.” This commitment to the welfare of the wider community informs the lives and writings of Eugene Victor Debs, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, among others, though students seldom learn about the tradition in school or religious education.
At this moment, we have no excuse to remain ignorant of this legacy, with the rich resources of Gene Sharp, his work translated into thirty languages, and available free on the internet. It is relied on by nonviolent activists on behalf of peace and justice throughout Eastern Europe, as well as in Iran.

Being peacemakers requires our learning the art and skills for transforming conflict, for we are not born with them. As people with religious commitments, we can also claim and encourage the spiritual insights and traditions, the deepest and most enduring legacy of Francis of Assisi, and the historic peace churches, Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren.

Daily, in the most violent contexts, nonviolent activists and peacemakers, as Levertov says, in “Making Peace,” reclaim the tradition, defining peace as “a presence, an energy field more intense than war…/ a grammar of justice, syntax of mutual aid…/…each act of living one of its word, each word a vibration of light—facets of a forming crystal.”

In this brief reflection, I have tried to say something about the spiritual, as well as the historical roots of nonviolence, and our indebtedness to the great Unitarian/Universalist, Adin Ballou in helping us understand it. In spite of their limitations in building cultures of peace, organized religion do offer social settings for the encouragement of a spiritual life and nonviolent communication. Our hope rests in our ability to reclaim “the power that is in us,” as Levertov says, that “soul force” deep within,

Over the past two weeks, the people of Egypt, responding with surprising restraint to their assailants, challenge us to re-commit ourselves to resist violence and oppression. In addition to their courage and persistence, they speak a language of hope that resonates with Levertov’s poems on the movement to end the war in Vietnam and our reliance on weapons of mass destruction. These lines, in language that Adin Ballou would understand, are from her poem, “About Political Action in Which Each Individual Speaks from the Heart”: 
When solitaries draw close, releasing
each solitude into its blossoming

when we give to each other the roses
of our communion…..

When we taste in small victories sometimes,
the small, ephemeral yet joyful
harvest of our striving,

great power flows from us,
luminous, a promise. Yes!....Then

great energy flows from solitude,
and great power from communion.

--Michael True

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