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Adin Ballou's vision of nonviolence

John Dear | Nov. 15, 2011 On the Road to Peace

Once, a journalist asked Leo Tolstoy who he thought the greatest American writer was.

"Adin Ballou," Tolstoy answered.

The journalist was puzzled. Who? He had never heard of Adin Ballou. Few people had.

Unfortunately, even today, few people know about Adin Ballou.

But I agree with Tolstoy. Not only was Adin Ballou an original thinker and a significant writer, but I consider him one of the most influential Christian peacemakers in our history.

Last week, after speaking at the Lexington Heritage Museum near Boston, I fulfilled a long dreamed of pilgrimage to Hopedale, Mass., to visit the memorial, community home and grave of this great visionary.

Standing by Adin Ballou's grave, I gave thanks for his steadfast witness to peace and original insistence on Gospel nonviolence.

Adin Ballou's name and work has been a source of wisdom and inspiration to me for 30 years. I urge those interested in peace and nonviolence to study his life and writings, and recommend the excellent website set up by "the Friends of Adin Ballou" [1] as a good starting point. (The quotes and information that follow come from this website.)

"Adin Ballou is the major theorist of nonviolence before Tolstoy and Gandhi," my friend historian Michael True writes in his book, *To Construct Peace*. "Ballou's work was known to both of them, and particularly important to Tolstoy."

Indeed, Tolstoy begins his mammoth anti-war masterpiece, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, by describing his discovery of Ballou's writings on Christian nonviolence, and how it affected him. Tolstoy spent the remaining years of his life expounding on Ballou's teachings. Tolstoy even wrote to Ballou and corresponded with him during Ballou's last year. Tolstoy would never have developed his thoughts on peace and nonviolence without Ballou, and Gandhi would certainly never have espoused his visionary nonviolence without Tolstoy.

Like other Abolitionists, Adin Ballou based his life on the ethical teachings of Jesus. But Ballou went further. Not only was he faithful to them throughout the terrible 19th century, he articulated a fundamental insistence on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, particularly the fifth antithesis: "Offer no [violent] resistance to one who does evil" (Matthew 5:39).

Whoever refers to this verse? Ballou spent his life struggling with it. I'd like to see present-day Christian and Catholic fundamentalists wrestle it.

Ballou called this commandment "the law of non-resistance," which Gandhi later translated into "the law of

nonviolence." For Ballou, it meant active, steadfast noncooperation with violence in all its forms. Tolstoy writes about Ballou's efforts to promote Christian nonresistance to evil:

> For fifty years Ballou wrote and published books dealing principally with the question of non-resistance to evil by force. In these works, which are distinguished by the clearness of their thought and eloquence of exposition, the question is looked at from every possible side. The binding nature of this command on every Christian who acknowledges the Bible as the revelation of God is firmly established. All the ordinary objections to the doctrine of non-resistance from the Old and New Testaments are brought forward, such as the expulsion of the money-changers from the Temple, and so on. Arguments follow in disproof of them all. The practical reasonableness of this rule of conduct is shown independently of scripture. All the objections ordinarily made against its practicability are stated and refuted. Thus one chapter in a book of his treats of non-resistance in exceptional cases. He owns in this connection that if there were cases in which the rule of non-resistance were impossible of application, it would prove that the law was not universally authoritative. Quoting these cases, he shows that it is precisely in them that the application of the rule is both necessary and reasonable. There is no aspect of the question, either on his side or his opponents', which he has not followed up in his writings. I mention all this to show the unmistakable interest which such works ought to have for [those] who make a profession of Christianity, and because one would have thought Ballou's work would have been well known, and the ideas expressed by him would have been either accepted or refuted. But such has not been the case.

It amazes me how we continue to ignore Adin Ballou, whom Tolstoy heralded as the most important American writer. Tolstoy took up Ballou's cause and spread Ballou's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount until it was picked up by an Indian Hindu in South Africa.

Gandhi's life and thought were transformed and influenced every Christian movement for justice and peace that followed. (The Friends of Adin Ballou website includes an excellent lecture by Michael True which traces the effect of Ballou on Tolstoy and Gandhi, and how Ballou's teaching eventually bore good fruit.)

"I committed myself to total abstinence from all war, preparations for war, glorifications of war, commemorations of war and... any resorts whatsoever to deadly force against my fellow-men [and women]," Ballou writes in his autobiography. "I would neither fight, vote, pray for, nor give any approval of any custom, practice or act which contravened the law of perfect love toward God, my fellow moral agents or the universal highest good. I would have no deadly weapon on my person or in my habitation. Thus I was an unmistakable peace man from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet."

As the biography and other information at "Friends of Adin Ballou" explain, Ballou was a devout Christian who became a Unitarian Universalist minister, a well-known preacher, writer, lecturer, social reformer and newspaper publisher. His staunch involvement with the Abolitionist movement and his close friendship with the heroic leader William Lloyd Garrison inspired his thinking and visionary peacemaking.

Born in 1803, Adin Ballou fought slavery for decades. In response to the violence of pro-slavery terrorists upon several Abolitionists, Ballou developed his theory of nonviolent resistance. His most well-known work, *Christian Non-resistance*, outlines his case for active nonviolence. Another major work, *Practical Christian Socialism*, explains his vision of Christian communal living, structured egalitarianism and social justice, which allowed for private property and the profit motive, but disallowed any use of violence.

In 1839, Ballou and his friends published the "Standard of Practical Christianity," a series of guidelines for Christians that renounced cooperation with government through the methods of nonviolent love. Signers also renounced war, slavery, alcohol, licentiousness, covetousness, capital punishment, worldly ambition and corporal punishment for children.

"We cannot employ carnal weapons nor any physical violence whatsoever," the signers agreed, "not even for the preservation of our lives. We cannot render evil for evil ... nor do otherwise than 'love our enemies.'"

In 1841, he and his friends bought 258 acres of rural farmland near the Rhode Island border to create an intentional Christian community of peace, love, nonviolence and equal sharing. Ballou called his utopian Christian community "Hopedale." At its height, it had about 230 full-time members. (Gandhi later built similar communities in South Africa and India, except that he opened his ashrams to all faiths. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin likewise tried to create farming communes for the poor and peace workers.)

Hopedale lasted for 15 years and remains an outstanding experiment in Christian communal living. Today, the center of the community, where Ballou once lived, is a tiny park with a statue of Ballou in the middle.

As the Civil War broke out, many Christian abolitionists who espoused "non-resistance" renounced their nonviolence in support of war against Southern racists. William Lloyd Garrison publicly gave up his Gospel peacemaking in favor of violence to end slavery.

The war broke up the fragile movement. But Adin Ballou and his friends stood firm in Gospel nonviolence. They refused to support killing even for the noblest cause. He said Christ knew what he was talking about, that war would never bring true peace and that Christ's commandment of "non-resistance to evil" worked if tried.

We catch some of Ballou's insistence in a series of quotes which Tolstoy picked as his favorites:

> Jesus forbids me to resist evil-doers by taking eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blood for blood, and life for life.
>
> Non-resistance alone makes it possible to tear the evil out by the root. To offend another, because he offended us... means to repeat an evil deed ... to encourage the very demon whom we claim we wish to expel. Satan cannot be driven out by Satan, untruth cannot be cleansed by untruth, and evil cannot be vanquished by evil.
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> True non-resistance is the one true resistance to evil. It kills and finally destroys the evil sentiment.

Adin Ballou died in Hopedale on April 20, 1890, and is buried with his family at the cemetery on the edge of town. After Ballou's death, Tolstoy lamented how Ballou's message was never mentioned in his obituary. He noted how Ballou was called the spiritual guide of his community; how he delivered between 8,000 and 9,000 sermons; how he married 1,000 pairs; and how he wrote 500 articles; and yet the teaching to which he devoted his life -- "non-resistance to evil" -- was never discussed.

"Ballou differs from some other religious pacifists in asserting the necessity of [active] resistance to human evil," Michael True writes. "This resistance may occur in two forms: moral resistance, such as example and persuasion, and also what he calls 'non-injurious, benevolent physical resistance.' As examples of the use of non-injurious physical force, he points to the restraint of a madman, holding a delirious sick person on the bed, or compelling a child from injuring another."

For Ballou and later Gandhi, nonviolent, nonresistance to evil must be active. Ballou thought Tolstoy's writings advocated passivity, and Christ was anything but passive. Ballou was also one of the first to teach active nonviolence not just from a religious or biblical basis, but from natural philosophy, saying that active nonviolent resistance to evil was eminently more practical than violent resistance.

"Times and generations are coming that will justly estimate me and my work," Ballou wrote toward the end of

his life. "For them, I have lived and labored, rather than for my contemporaries. To them I appeal for vindication and approval."

Ballou took a gamble and based his life on the truth of active nonviolence and Christian peacemaking. He believed that because this was God's will, his work would bear good fruit, even though he might not live to see it.

Ballou was right. His teachings, one could argue, changed the world. I honor his courageous adherence to the nonviolent Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount, and hope that more of us can take that same gamble. Ballou teaches us to think long and hard about Jesus' teachings on nonviolence, to experiment with them in our own lives and communities, and to promote them as far and wide as possible. I wish every Christian and Catholic church in the world would take up the lessons of Adin Ballou to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus.

"A better future is dawning," Ballou writes in *Christian Non-Resistance*, "and it is needed to help develop the coming age of love and peace. A great transition of the human mind has commenced, and the reign of military and penal violence must ultimately give place to that of forbearance, tolerance, and mercy."

As I stood by Adin Ballou's grave last Monday, red, yellow and orange leaves fell gently around me through the warm sunshine. I prayed that his vision of a new world of nonviolence would come true even in our own violent times. May his teachings, vision and example continue to bear fruit and inspire us to welcome that new world of peace, love and nonviolence.

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John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [2], has just been published by Orbis Books. It explores Jesus as the God of life, calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[3]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[4]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[5]*, are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John Dear's website [6].

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