

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
Sept. 20, 2009**

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)*

## ***Ken\_sis in Action***

**by Donne Hayden**

This past week I listened to a radio interview with Dr. George Ellis, a Quaker cosmologist, and Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Here is how the interviewer introduced Dr. Ellis:

*George Ellis points to the recurring ethic of nonviolence and self-sacrifice that runs throughout the major religions and the lives of human beings who've changed the world, figures such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and in Ellis' native South Africa, Nelson Mandela and Stephen Biko. As a Quaker Christian, George Ellis values the key image of the ethic of Jesus found in the New Testament. It uses a Greek word, kenosis, to describe Jesus' sacrifice of His life and His power for the freedom of others.<sup>1</sup>*

A little background on *ken\_sis*. In ancient Greek the word refers to “the action of emptying,” from *kenoun* “to purge or empty,” from *kenos* “empty.” The use of the word in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (see above) has generated a branch of theology called, not surprisingly, “kenotic theology.”

More than a willingness to sacrifice for family or friends (which might be an instinct related to preservation of the species), *ken\_sis* is a willingness to sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> Krista Tippett, “Science & Hope,” Interview with Dr. George Ellis, *Speaking of Faith*, May 10, 2007. <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/scienceandhope/transcript.shtml>

oneself, *to put aside self-interest*, for a greater good that may include perfect strangers. From a *kenotic* angle, the significance of the crucifixion is more about Jesus' willingness to sacrifice the self *for the good of others* than about "paying" God back for all humankind's sins. Executed by crucifixion as traitors were, Jesus relinquished his status as respected and beloved teacher and suffered a humiliating death rather than lead his followers into violent resistance. In doing so, he became the supreme model for *ken\_sis*, and paradoxically, his influence long-outlasted those who executed him. As Dr. Ellis said in the radio interview, "... often, the true nature of things is paradoxical. And the Christian paradox is that the true nature of power is in weakness and suffering. That is the true nature of power. And it is transformative."

Another and more recent example of *ken\_sis* is the nonviolence practiced by the followers of Mahatma Gandhi, and one of the best examples of that was the protest outside Darasana Salt Works on May 12, 1930. No television cameras were there to record the events, but a memorable scene in the movie *Gandhi* re-creates what happened when Gandhi's followers tried to close a salt works plant run by the British. The scene in the movie unfolds like this:

Gandhi has claimed that India's salt belongs to India, and that he will lead a protest against the British at Darasana Salt Works. In an attempt to nullify Gandhi's influence, British officials have him arrested and put in jail. In spite of this, his followers, the *satyagrahis*, are determined to follow his teachings of non-violence and continue his plan to close the salt works. As women set up First Aid tables beside the road near the entrance to the salt works, white-clad men line up in ranks of five and six. Knowing they face injury or death, the men begin walking up to the British soldiers and do not stop until British soldiers beat them down with steel-tipped wooden cudgels. As

soon as one rank falls, the women come help them away, and another rank of six approaches the soldiers. They make no sound, they do not resist; they simply walk into the beatings. The movie scene is difficult to watch; it lasts perhaps five or six minutes. In reality, over 1300 *satyagrahis* were beaten senseless throughout a day and night.

In 1930, before television and 24/7 news coverage, only one representative of the media was present at Darasana Salt Works that day: an American UPI correspondent named Webb Miller. Miller was sickened by the cruel atrocity he witnessed, and his written report was so graphic that many newspapers refused to print it (I won't read it to you this morning for the same reason). After Miller accused the British government of censorship, however, his eyewitness account was finally published, turning world opinion against British occupation of India and furthering the cause of Indian independence. In the movie, the character based on Webb Miller (played by Martin Sheen) telegraphs the following report to his newspaper:

*They walked both Hindu and Muslim alike with heads held high without any hope of escape from injury and death. It went on and on into the night. Women carried the wounded and broken bodies from the road until they dropped from exhaustion. But still it went on and on. Whatever moral ascendancy the West held was lost here today. India is free for she has taken all that steel and cruelty can give and she has neither cringed nor retreated.<sup>2</sup>*

This powerful form of non-violent resistance is called "*satyagraha*," Mahatma Gandhi's modification of the English phrase "passive resistance," which he disliked because it seemed to describe the actions of the weak. He coined the term *satyagraha* from two Sanskrit words: "*satya*" meaning Truth, which he said "implies love," and

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<sup>2</sup> *Gandhi*, directed by Richard Attenborough, Columbia Pictures, 1982.

*agraha*, meaning “firmness” which “engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force.” *Satyagraha* means “the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence.” In the actions of the *satyagrahis* at the Darasana Salt works, we see how powerful such a force can be. “[Gandhi] trained his followers to accept suffering, not to retaliate. And by doing so, he reached into the heart of the British oppressors,” says Dr. Ellis.<sup>3</sup> The *satyagrahis* at Darasana Salt Works were an example of *ken\_sis* in action.

Most of us probably understand ethics and morality as human creations, but Dr. Ellis believes that “there are deep ethical truths built into the physical universe,”<sup>4</sup> the essence of which is *ken\_sis*, the emptying of the self on behalf of others as Jesus did on the cross and as the *satyagrahis* did at Darasana. In fact, he holds that “*ken\_sis* is the underlying [ethical] law of the cosmos.”<sup>5</sup> This universal ethical principle, characterized by the ultimate act of love, is something which exists for us to discover, he says. It is not surprising that—as a cosmologist and professor of applied mathematics—he explains his theory using mathematics as an analogy. “Mathematicians *discover* the nature of mathematics despite what they *want*,” Dr. Ellis said.

*What I mean by that is something like the following. It was a great shock to mathematicians when they discovered that the square root of two is irrational. That's not something that they wanted. The number pi is irrational. That's also not something mathematicians wanted. What I'm pointing out here is that mathematics exists and is discovered. It's not invented by humans. It's something which is discovered. Therefore, in some sense, it exists in order to be discovered.*

*The view on ethics I take as an ethical realist is it's the same, the nature is sitting*

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<sup>3</sup>Tippett Interview.

<sup>4</sup> Tippett Interview.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy C. Murphy & George Francis Rayner Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics*, (Fortress Press, 1996), page 251.

*there in some sense waiting to be discovered. And the deep nature of ethics ... is what we call kenotic ethics. Kenosis being letting go or giving up on behalf of other people.*

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*...I envisage ethics as being a universal thing... It is there because of the nature of God. It is something we discover and don't invent. That's why I made that point about mathematics. And it is discovered to be the same by all these religious traditions.<sup>6</sup>*

As another example of *ken\_sis* in action, Dr. Ellis mentions “the peaceful end of apartheid in his native South Africa,” something that, in his words, “defied the calculus of rationality.” When he talks about working against apartheid with his South African Quaker meeting, Ellis sounds as much a mystic as a mathematician. For instance, he said: “The South African situation all the time was teetering on the brink of disaster, and it was an absolutely amazing thing to all of us . . . Every time it looked worse and worse, it looked like it was going to go right over the brink, something would pull it back and would save it.” This “something” Dr. Ellis identifies as *ken\_sis*, “the really, really deep transformative principle, which was also in the life of Christ, of course, when he sacrificed himself on behalf of others.”

*Ken\_sis* can be applied to “contemporary history and politics, including the war in Iraq,”<sup>7</sup> a war begun and continued to make us “secure” from terrorist acts. Dr. Ellis maintains that “You are secure if you have no enemies. . . . how do you change enemies into friends is the true question which underlies true security.” As an example of how

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<sup>6</sup> Tippett Interview.

<sup>7</sup> Tippett Interview.

*ken\_sis* can work during wartime, Ellis cites a letter he received in 2004<sup>8</sup> from a Scottish soldier, David Christie. As I read the letter, imagine how the war in Iraq and Afghanistan could change if our nation had the courage to live according to this deep universal ethic.

David Christie writes:

*In 1967 I was a young officer in a Scottish battalion engaged in peacekeeping duties in Aden town in what is now Yemen. The situation was similar to Iraq, with people being killed every day. As always, those who suffered the most were the innocent local people. Not only were we tough, but we had the power to pretty well destroy the whole town had we wished.*

*But we had a commanding officer who understood how to make peace, and he led us to do something very unusual, not to react when we were attacked. Only if we were 100 percent certain that a particular person had thrown a grenade or fired a shot at us were we allowed to fire. During our tour of duty we had 102 grenades thrown at us, and in response the battalion fired the grand total of two shots, killing one grenade-thrower. The cost to us was over 100 of our own men wounded, and surely by the grace of God only one killed. When they threw rocks at us, we stood fast. When they threw grenades, we hit the deck and after the explosions we got to our feet and stood fast. We did not react in anger or indiscriminately. This was not the*

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<sup>8</sup> In 2004, Ellis received the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. "The Templeton Prize . . . honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works. Established in 1972 by the late Sir John Templeton, the Prize aims, in his words, to identify "entrepreneurs of the spirit"—outstanding individuals who have devoted their talents to expanding our vision of ultimate purpose and reality. The Prize celebrates no particular faith tradition or notion of God, but rather the quest for progress in humanity's efforts to comprehend the many and diverse manifestations of the Divine." *Templeton Prize* website, <http://www.templetonprize.org/abouttheprize.html>

*anticipated reaction. Slowly, very slowly, the local people began to trust us and made it clear to the local terrorists that they were not welcome in their area.*

*At one stage neighboring battalions were having a torrid time with attacks. We were playing soccer with the locals. We had, in fact, brought peace to the area at the cost of our own blood. How had this been achieved? Principally because we were led by a man whom every soldier in the battalion knew would die for him if required. Each soldier in turn came to be prepared to sacrifice himself for such a man. Many people may sneer that we were merely obeying orders, but this was not the case. Our commanding officer was more highly regarded by his soldiers than the general, one must almost say loved. So gradually the heart of the peacemaker began to grow in the man and determination to succeed whatever the cost. Probably most of the soldiers, like myself, only realized years afterwards what had been achieved.*

In these young Scottish soldiers who permitted themselves to be attacked without retaliation and in their commanding officer who understood the power of self-emptying, we see demonstrated *ken\_ sis*, the “true nature of power,” the “Force born of Truth and Love.” For two thousand years, whether we understood the message or not, we have had before us the Christian example of *ken\_ sis*, self-emptying, which could transform the world were it practiced and its power acknowledged.