

TWO-MINUTE TALKS*

by

Joseph Needham

F.R.S., F.B.A.

*Given over the air 19.4.82 to 25.4.82 in
the Late Night series of Thames T.V. entitled
"Sit Up & Listen"

with

Greetings and Best Wishes

I

FOR more than two hundred years after the first introduction of muskets to Japan, the Japanese banned all use of fire-arms in their closed country. Noel Perrin has told this story to encourage those who believe that mankind should do the same with all nuclear weapons. But today the world is one, with its trade links, telecommunications and orbiting satellites—not an isolated country. I feel that the mastery of atomic energy as well as nuclear weapons, of laser beams, space flight and computerisation, is something that is set before mankind to achieve. What we know, we cannot un-know. Nor can we refuse new knowledge. But we can decline to use. Long ago I found some remarkable words in a Taoist book of the eighth century, the *Kuan Yin Tzu*. The writer was talking about many wonders of Art and Nature—including the making of exceedingly sharp swords. “Only those who have the Tao,” he wrote, “will be able to perform such actions—and better still, not perform them, though capable of performing them.” Mankind must learn this lesson, how to know, yet to refrain. The price is going to be survival itself, no less.

II

MY old friend Jack Putterill, Vicar of Thaxted in Essex, called his autobiography "The Quest for Social Justice". And quite right too, for that message has long been proclaimed there. John Robinson, the Dean of Trinity College, has written some remarkable words about this. The self-renouncing love of one's neighbour is a desperately desirable thing, and the leavening of the whole of life by it is the Church's primary aim. But it is not the primary aim of politics, and Christians make a great mistake if they think it is. Within politics, justice is not an inferior substitute for love; it is love's current coin, love's only legal tender, within the world of systems. If you go into politics with anything else as your basic objective, you will only succeed in being unrealistic, ineffectual and ultimately disillusioned. That's why so many people say "they only talk; they never do anything", for justice is the manifestation of love in actual action and practice. It was all summed up in what John Lilburne said at the Debates of the Commonwealth Army in Saffron Walden Church in 1648: "The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as well as the greatest he."

III

HISTORY, after all, is not a matter of repetitive cycles, not just a replay of old tapes. Social evolution, with its background of cosmic and biological evolution, is an inescapable fact, which people of all religions, or of none, must take into account. Primitive savagery gave place to the modern world, and, as many believe, capitalism will give place to socialism. There will be a world community and government, though we may not live to see it. At every stage it has often seemed that something good is destroyed, but goodness, truth and beauty always rise again from seeming death and destruction. The future will be played out on stages we can hardly imagine, perhaps in terms of computer technology or biological engineering, perhaps in terms of space travel to other worlds, but it will always be in terms of good and evil, and the good will always be victorious in the end. That is the message of all social evolution.

Long ago, Jalal al-Din Rumi, the Persian poet who died in 1273, wrote:

“I died from mineral and plant became,
Died from the plant and took a sentient frame,
Died from the beast and donned a human dress—
When by my dying did I e’er grow less?”

IV

I REMEMBER long ago an excellent film called "The Man in the White Suit". It was about a young chemist who invented a process for making plastic clothes which repelled all dirt particles, but this caused such havoc in the cloth and laundry industry that the invention had to be suppressed. At the end, one of the directors looks out of the window at the young chemist disappearing, and says: "Well that's the last we'll see of Mr. Smith. Or so we hope!" In 1381 they said "that's the last we'll see of Wat Tyler and John Ball of the peasant democrats". In 1848 they said "that's the last we'll see of the Chartists and their silly talk of votes for working men". That's the last we'll see of the Quakers. Or the Copernicans, those crazy people like Galileo who say that the earth goes round the sun. Or so we hope. But in fact the spirit of truth never dies. It springs up again and goes dancing on. And so it always will.

"They cut me down, and I leapt up high;
For I am the life that'll never never die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me;
For I am the Lord of the Dance, said he."

V

IN the midst of the terrible unemployment figures of today, we don't know how much is due to capitalist policy, and how much is technological. But there's no doubt that the time of robots and silicon chips is coming, indeed is already here. Already we can see that men and women will have to be paid a generous living wage for a five-hour week, or even less, not a forty-hour one. Look at chemical factories, with their feedback systems, which not only have sensors to check moment by moment how the product is coming along, but automatic arrangements to put it right, and "keep it on the rails". Once this idea is firmly planted in people's minds, any sense of shame attached to the word "dole" becomes nonsensical. We need a non-pejorative word for the wages or salary one will get for not working more than five hours a week, or less. I'm glad to see that this is now coming, for people are called "unwaged" instead of "on the dole". But training for all this leisure is urgently necessary, and should now be a pressing national concern. Let people paint, dance and play in orchestras. Let them look after National Parks in wild places. Let them lovingly preserve old railways. The time has come when mankind can have fun. As René Clair showed in his famous film "À nous la Liberté", we can leave three chaps to look after the factory, and the rest of us can go fishing.

VI

MUCH evil is due to ignorance. All the way up from primitive tribal life mankind has been finding out more and more about the world we live in, and surely this was one of God's purposes in creating life and letting it evolve. Have you heard that verse of Rudyard Kipling's, supposed to be spoken by a Norman knight in the Middle Ages?

“My privy and well drain into each other
After the custom of Christendie
Fevers and fluxes are wasting my mother,
Why is the Lord afflicting me?
The saints are powerless for all I offer,
And so are the clergy I used to fee;
Henceforward I'll keep my cash in my coffer
Because the Lord is afflicting me.”

Hygiene and public health was one of the things that mankind had to learn the hard way, and slowly. In 1722 in St. Andrew's Church in Holborn, Edmund Massey preached a sermon violently attacking the new method of inoculation for the smallpox, then recently introduced from China, because, he said, it took away from God the right to afflict whomever he pleased, and kill them too. But thirty years later Isaac Maddox, Bishop of Worcester, preached another sermon from that same pulpit, in which he hailed the technique as one of the finest discoveries Christians could use to preserve life and health. So it goes.

VII

SOMEBODY once said that “religion is what a man does with his solitariness”. But for many people corporate action is of the essence of it. One can’t adequately worship God except as a group. Ideas don’t come out of one’s own head, but rather from the play of mutual discussion and thought, with difficult questions and well-pondered answers. The Chinese have always known this. They go in for many meetings today, and in former times Confucians held a great service once a year on the Sage’s birthday, while the Taoists had an impressive liturgy in which many participated. They expressed this point well—in a couple of proverbs I’m very fond of. For example they say *san-ko chhou phi Chiang, so chhêng i-ko Chuko Liang*, which we could translate very freely as “three dirty mechanics are as good as one Duke of Wellington”. Or, as people say in Nanking, *san tsu thou wei i hsien jen*—“three pigs’ heads make one wise man”. Or more elegantly, *san jen hsing pi yu wo shih*—“where three men are walking together, one of them will certainly be able to teach me something”. That comes out of the “Discourses” of Confucius himself, and nothing could illustrate better the social element that is at the heart of all religion and all science.