

Kenneth Boulding *speaks*

Kenneth Boulding is a man of many talents and one of the most creative thinkers in the world today. Although best known as an economist, he has also contributed to the world as an analyst of social forces, a researcher in conflict resolution, a pioneer in general systems, an interpreter of Quakerism, and as a poet. Many movements have benefitted from his keen, analytical mind, his skill as a speaker, his ability as a writer, and his wit and humor. In each movement he has served as an analyst, a synthesizer, a provocateur, and a forecaster.

Born in Liverpool, England, in 1910, he attended the Liverpool Collegiate School and then New College, Oxford University. After a two-year period as a Commonwealth Fellow at the University of Chicago, he taught at Edinburgh University. In 1937 he moved to the United States and in 1948 became a citizen. He has taught at several colleges and universities, including Colgate, Iowa State University at Ames, the University of Michigan, and the University of Colorado. For brief periods he has also taught in Canada, Jamaica, and Japan.

In 1941 he married Elise Biorn-Hansen, now an eminent sociologist. They have five children.

Undergirding his life has been his deep religious faith and his commitment to the basic beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). He has been one of its most able interpreters and catalysts.

The range of his writings is wide and the list of his books, pamphlets, and articles tremendous. The excerpts which follow are taken primarily from his writings on philosophy and religion as he speaks:

ON THE MEANING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY . . .

"The twentieth century marks the middle period of a great transition in the state of the human race. It may properly be called the second great transition in the history of mankind. The first transition was that from precivilized to civilized society which began to take place about five (to ten) thousand years ago. This is a transition that is still going on in some parts of the world, although it can be regarded as almost complete. . . . Even as the first great transition is approaching completion, however, a second great transition is treading on its heels. It may be called the transition from civilized to post-civilized society. . . . If the word technological or the term developed society is preferred, I would have no objection."

". . . about 25 percent of the human beings who have ever lived are now alive and . . . something like 90 percent of all scientists who have ever lived are now alive."

"The great transition is not only something that takes place in science, technology, the physical machinery of society, and in the utilization of physical energy. It is also a transition in social institutions."

". . . there is no inevitability and no determinism in making this great transition. . . . there are a number of traps which lie along the way and which may either prevent man and his planet earth from making the transition altogether or delay it for generations or even thousands of years. The first most obvious and immediate trap is the war trap. . . . Another possible trap which might delay the attainment of the transition for a long time is the population trap. A third possible trap is the technological trap. . . . Any one of them could be fatal. Not one of them has to be fatal."

ON WAR AND PEACE . . .

“ . . . the evil institutions of human society are most likely to be reformed when two conditions are fulfilled. The first is that the institution should be economically unprofitable. The second is that it should be morally intolerable.”

“Just as war is too important to leave to the generals, so peace is too important to leave to the pacifists. It is not enough to condemn violence, to abstain from it, or to withdraw from it. There must be organization against it; in other words, institutions of conflict control, or, in still other words, government.”

“If I were to nominate the activity which is now open to mankind and which would increase most dramatically the probability of his survival, I would nominate a massive, intellectual effort in peace research—that is, in the application of the social sciences to the study of conflict systems and especially of conflict systems in their international aspect.”

ON PRODUCING FUTURE-ORIENTED INDIVIDUALS . . .

“There is in the world today an ‘invisible college’ of people in many different countries and many different cultures, who have this vision of the nature of the transition through which we are passing and who are determined to devote their lives to contributing toward its successful fulfillment. Membership in this college is consistent with many different philosophical, religious, and political positions. It is a college without a founder and without a president, without buildings and without organization Its living representatives are still a pretty small group of people. I think, however, that it is they who hold the future of the world in their hands or at least in their minds. For this invisible college I am an unashamed propagandist.”

ON SOME SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF ECONOMISTS . . .

"In the light of this kind of image of the future, one might return to economics as it is practised by economists today and ask what kind of contribution are we making toward the successful handling of the enormous and precarious transition through which mankind is passing. The answer is fairly clear that we are making some contribution, enough indeed to have established us as the most successful of the sciences. . . . Our success has come in two fields: one in macro economics and employment policy and the other in the field of the analysis of economic behavior and the improvement of the information systems of powerful decision makers by such things as linear programming, program budgeting, and even game theory."

"In spite of the successes of economics, it has also had two rather conspicuous failures. I would suggest that its first major failure in the last generation, has been its failure to develop an adequate theory of economic development and to come up with an adequate set of policy recommendations for the poor countries who are not on the 'main line' of development. . . . The second failure of economics is in the field of urban poverty and deterioration and the whole matter of the provision of a decent physical environment. A related area which economists have neglected, again perhaps because there has been no real social organization which has provided a niche for these kinds of studies, is the study of the economics of threats, violence, crime, police, and the armed forces."

"The successes of economics should not blind us to the fact that its subject matter is a system far more complex than the systems which are studied by the natural scientists, . . . and we must recognize that our most elegant models can be no more than the crudest of first approximations of the complex reality of the systems which they purport to represent."

ON THE "COWBOY" AND THE "SPACEMAN" ECONOMIES . . .

"The closed earth of the future requires economic principles which are somewhat different from those of the open earth of the past. For the sake of picturesqueness I am tempted to call the open economy the "cowboy economy", the cowboy being symbolic of the illimitable plains and also associated with reckless, exploitive, romantic, and violent behavior, which is characteristic of open societies. The closed economy of the future might similarly be called the "spaceman" economy, in which the earth has become a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution, and in which, therefore, man must find his place in a cyclical, ecological system which is capable of continuous reproduction of material form even though it cannot escape having inputs of energy."

ON THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES . . .

"The full impact of the social sciences may not be felt for a hundred years simply because we are still so far from any really adequate knowledge process in the study of the whole sociosphere."

"... if we are going to take the social sciences seriously, we should at least establish a world network of social data stations, analogous to weather stations."

"I am struck . . . with the relatively meager resource which is devoted to the problem of human learning, in spite of the fact that this is the core of virtually all development processes."

"It is because I feel that we are only at the beginning of these developments in social information collection and processing that I am optimistic about the future of the social sciences."

ON THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS . . .

“For early Friends, Quakerism was primitive Christianity revived. They felt they were performing in their own lives the great music which the gospels record, whereas the other churches were merely handing out the score.”

“The inward light for George Fox was no pale intellectual illumination, but a consuming holy fire which not only revealed sin but brought you out of it.”

“Two things distinguish the Quakers from the Puritans. . . . One was the sense of truth as something not merely handed down by authority, but as something which had to be discovered by each person for himself, by his own inward work. This indeed is the essence of the doctrine of the light within. The second characteristic set them off even more sharply—it was a belief in perfectionism, or the view that obedience to the light within, or the inward teacher as it was frequently called, would lead into a life without sin which would exemplify the truth so inwardly revealed. This is a dangerous doctrine, inasmuch as it easily leads to self-deception. Nevertheless, it accounts for a great deal in the testimonies and in the organization of the Society of Friends.”

“The object of Quaker meditation is not so much to achieve union with the divine as to receive instruction from the divine, and very practical instruction at that.”

“It is part of the genius of the Society of Friends that it has been able to unite in a single fellowship of mutual affection and concern both the intellectuals and those who carry out the great common tasks of life. The Good Shepherd gathers us all in one flock, and only as we are so gathered, without either pride or envy, can knowledge be made perfect in love.”

ON THE EVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF QUAKERISM . . .

"I believe the evolutionary potential of the Quaker mutation is very far from exhausted, and indeed, has hardly begun to show its full effects. I believe, furthermore, that the Society of Friends has a vital role to play in the future development of mankind, small perhaps in quantity but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden which it may imply would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole."

". . . I think Quakerism is an example of a mutation which was in a sense premature and before its time. The Quaker belongs to a kingdom that is not yet."

". . . the ethical positions which are peculiarly characteristic of the Society of Friends seem to me to be more appropriate in the post-civilized world to which we are hopefully moving than in the world of civilization from which we are emerging."

". . . the Society of Friends has a great intellectual task ahead of it in the translation of its religious and ethical experiences and insights into a conscious understanding of the way in which the kind of love we treasure and covet can be produced, defended, and extended."

"I believe the next major task of the Society of Friends is to mobilize this intellectual potential and to catch a vision of the great intellectual task to which it is called. If it can respond to this vision, its evolutionary potential may be great indeed."

". . . it is precisely in religious experience that one finds the evolutionary potential that looks forward to the ultimate future of man."

ON GLIMMERS OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE . . .

"Human history is a record of the fulfillment of the evolutionary potential of the human nervous system. As such, it has its ups and downs, but knowledge once gained is very hard to lose. It is a very fundamental principle here that when error is detected, it suffers, and when truth is detected, it prospers. The liar is always in more danger from being found out than the truthful. It is the world itself that speaks truth to power, for without truth, power cannot remain powerful."

"Intelligence is precisely the manipulation and alteration of the survival functions in order to increase the probability of survival of ideas and artifacts which do correspond to truth and I would add with somewhat less certainty to objective ideas of goodness and beauty. It is through religious faith the intelligence is already at work and this intelligence may be glimpsed and may be cooperated with through 'a sharp dart of longing love', as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it."

"It is not too much to hope, therefore, that man can learn to fly the great engines of change that he has made and that it may carry us not to destruction but to that great goal for which the world was made."

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