



Dialogue

Creating the Next 60 Years

Project Report

ICU 60th Anniversary Project Lecture
Passionate Conviction and Inclusive Community
By Dr. George Rupp

Date: September 17, 2013



60th Anniversary Project
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY



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Introduction

Dr. George Rupp was invited to give a lecture at the International Christian University on September 17th, 2013. ICU President Junko Hibiya opened the presentation by thanking the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) for bringing Rupp to Japan, and she gave the audience a brief outline of his distinguished career. Dr. Rupp has thus far served as the youngest dean ever of Harvard Divinity School, and has also served as president at both Rice University and Columbia University. He is currently a senior fellow at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

Lecture

Rupp opened his lecture by discussing the idea of convictions. An individual's convictions, he says, are those affirmations, commitments, and practices that lie at the core of their "personal and social identity." He described how some believe strongly that their convictions are "absolutely right, and others are unquestionably wrong." Other people "decline to discuss such convictions," and ask that people show tolerance for the beliefs of others. Rupp stated that while both mindsets may have been useful in the past, in this age of globalization, neither extreme is viable on its own.

The Al-Qaeda attack on September 11, 2001 is an extreme example of the conflict



between these two mindsets, but many other examples exist. The conflicts in Ireland, Chechnya and Sri Lanka are all examples of religious or social conflict, Rupp said, and with such “carnage” looming over the world, he believes that the Western idea of secular liberalism will naturally become more attractive. This liberalist school of thought holds that “...religions and other ideological views should be tolerated, but must remain private convictions that do not shape public outcomes.” Rupp reminded the audience that, while the number of right-of-center voices are increasing in both the US and Japan, the secular liberal view was “dominant in much of the world in recent decades.”

Rupp referred to a line from a poem by William Butler Yeats called *The Second Coming*, which he believes captures the situation well: “the best lack all

conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

The etymology of the word “conviction” may hold some answers to the conflict that stems from it, according to Rupp. The Latin word from which conviction comes means, “to overcome” or, “to conquer.” Therefore, he continued, conviction means to be convinced of something and have all doubts removed. However, Rupp added that it also refers to the act of finding someone guilty of a crime. He concluded that it “connotes confidence, certainty, corroboration of views that opponents dispute. But the word is deployed to identify perpetrators of what is taken to be evil as often as it is used to designate advocates of worthy causes.”

Rupp admitted that it is difficult to go against the idea that “passionate convictions” should be kept under control, particularly now that terrorism is such a threat to peace. However, while a stance of tolerance is attractive, it cannot be based in simple “openness to all views” and “acceptance of multiple perspectives.” It must also acknowledge and evaluate the core values that motivate the people who are bringing these conflicts to life. This approach follows the traditional standpoint that more than one perspective could be valid, and therefore “rejects any claim to exclusive truth.” However, it also recognizes that convictions can legitimately influence both personal preferences and public policies. Neither of Yeats’ extremes – “lack of conviction” or “passionate intensity” – is adequate. Many can claim to have great passion for their own convictions, and “lack of conviction” is both an unfair description of secular ideology demanding tolerance, and a stance that cannot help but lose out to passion.

Rupp believes that the West needs to take the central path with more “robust, public appraisal” of these conflicting views that until now “have been relegated to the status of private preferences.” He stressed that since everyone knows that personal convictions have an influence on society, “we can no longer afford the luxury of pretending that is not the case, even if the alternative is less comfortable than an ethos that simply tolerates any and all positions.”

As globalization continues to progress, the world’s various cultures will come into greater contact with each other, and Rupp thinks that we should have a more comparative perspective that involves giving public attention to what would normally be private opinion. This comparative perspective will allow for both external and internal criticism, allow us to compare what are “ostensibly quite different communities,” and also allow us to see the great diversity within what are nominally “unified traditions.”



Rupp described how this diversity can be seen by comparing 4th century Catholics in North Africa, the 15th century Christian Orthodox Church in Constantinople, and 18th century English Deism. It can also be seen in the rich Jewish traditions, which are normally simplified as simply “orthodox, conservative, and reform.” Even greater variety can be seen in Hinduism, which Rupp believes is even more remarkable as the religion developed only in India. Buddhism is almost the ultimate example of variety, according to Rupp, as it spread out across Asia, and eventually further, blending with other religions and cultures as it went and spawning an “almost limitless” number of permutations, all the while living in peace with other traditions. Rupp described Islam as “the third great missionary religion” after Christianity and Buddhism, and that it too has become rooted in a great variety of cultures. Islam is another good example, Rupp says, as it resisted complete indigenization, partly by requiring liturgical study of the Quran to be undertaken in Arabic. However, even with that resistance, there is still “great diversity in Islam, far more than is suggested...by the tendency of the West...to identify Islam with the Arabian Peninsula.”

Rupp emphasized that religious people almost never take the stance that their own beliefs are only personal priorities, and that their faith should be removed from any discussion of public policy. They believe in their convictions, and publicly advocate the benefit their convictions could bring to society. Rupp admits that it would surely “be safer” if such convictions were kept private, as the world is embroiled in conflict that is at least partly based in religious beliefs, but that viewpoint is often “not acceptable to those whose deepest convictions would be relegated to the status of private preferences.”

This religious diversity also provides room for self-criticism of beliefs, and presents the opportunity for people to more easily accept the values of others. This minority view needs to have a stronger voice. For example, Rupp stressed, there are moderate Muslims who make an effort to live alongside other religions, and believe in Jihad as a spiritual struggle, not a violent one. These are the Muslims who are competing with the extremists for the right to represent Muslims as a whole, and their voices need to be heard.

However, among those moderate Muslims are also those who are critical about the secularism and individualism of the West. They view Western culture as materialistic and hedonistic, and therefore lacking in all conviction. This tends to lead to a “passionate intensity” that may be reminiscent of that intensity shown by the most extreme of Muslim adherents. Therefore, Rupp believes that in order to encourage greater internal criticism within Islam, the West has to be prepared to be criticized itself for the prevailing trends in its own traditions. As he said, “We can more effectively engage opposition if we are willing to address social patterns deplored not only by those who attack us, but...including even many of our friends and allies around the world.”

For example, John Locke was noted to have helped lay down the traditions of the present-day “political and economic orientation of Western liberal democracy.” However, Locke also believed in the formation of the state to protect against “excesses of individualism.” Similarly, Kant was concerned with preserving human freedom and moral autonomy while also acknowledging the power of scientific knowledge. More importantly, Kant believed that this freedom and autonomy was imbedded in a shared

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philosophy that required interaction with others.

Rupp pointed out that even Adam Smith –the poster boy of unconstrained markets and individualism in the US – argued that it restrictions on them. Smith might not be in the public interest to allow individuals and private groups to pursue profit freely, and



that state should impose restrictions on them. Smith clearly “affirmed the pursuit of individual interests only in the context of a network of social relations.”

Rupp referred to the idea of denying individuality found in Buddhism, and suggested that it gives some insight into why glorifying individualism is inadequate. As Rupp put it, “To construe the self as an individual entity is to fail to appreciate the co-dependence of all reality.”

The idea can also be found in other religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism, in which individuals are seen as making up a part of the community as a whole. Rupp also pointed that that while some religions seem to glorify the individual, they actually subordinate “the self to a more encompassing normative structure.” For

examples, the affirmation that “atman is Brahman” in Hinduism does not actually emphasize the individuality of a person, but shows that the individual is an integral part of the whole. The ancient Greek idea of the “soul,” adopted by some Christians, seems to be an affirmation of the individual, but it also emphasizes the necessity to “love, enjoy, and worship the divine reality for which it is destined.”

Rupp underlined the implications of unconstrained individualism and an unregulated free-market economy. He feels that this combination would further increase the gap between rich and poor, and emphasize private interests over public good. The burden on poor individuals, those least able to bear that burden, would increase but more importantly, the positive role that communities play in society would be destroyed. However, on a more positive note, he believes that greater global integration could also lead to more inclusive sense of community.

Rupp admits that this goal of an inclusive global community may remain simply a



utopian ideal, but as such, it could influence society by increasing the role of the community, and by constraining individualism that does not benefit society as a whole.

Rupp believes that a more



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inclusive community can only be realized when the world adopts a variety of public policy initiatives. In America, this would entail structural change that would shift the focus to programs that address the gap between the rich and poor. On a global scale, this would entail introducing trade agreements that benefit the poorest countries, and increasing aid targeted at those needy communities looking for a way up. Rupp stated that globalization should be inclusive, with the focus on the public good, governments, and community, not on private interests, markets, and individuals.

Rupp is certain that this goal of inclusive community does not require cultural or religious homogeneity, which means that the world does not necessarily need to accept the ideas of Western secularism. Many large societies have developed “social institutions and cultural mores that support an inclusive community,” and the existence of such societies in Western Europe and Southeast Asia suggests that pluralism requires stable secularity where diversity can be freely expressed. However, a completely neutral environment is not necessarily a requirement, as can be seen in the historical religious dominance in those same regions, with Christianity in Europe and Hinduism in India. China and Japan are also examples of societies in which different traditions now co-exist peacefully.

These examples are important because they stand against the provincialism that presumes only Western secular traditions can allow for a variety of communities to flourish. The mix of “consumer society and mass culture” that the West has produced “invites vigorous criticism” and is often “little more than a social system minus its ethical and normative grounding.”

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Rupp clarified his point in detail by saying that, "...such passive accommodation to the hedonism and materialism of secular culture cries out for a reconnection to the roots of more particular communities. Such 'more particular' communities may be grounded in a substantial range of traditions: religious, ethnic, cultural, educational, political, and even vocational. In each case the communities affirm external norms that guide their shared practices. This pattern is most readily recognizable in religious communities, especially if they represent a minority tradition within a larger society, but it is also evident in other voluntary associations."

Rupp concluded his lecture with a statement of hope regarding the above-mentioned "particular communities."

"What such particular communities have in common is more or less self-conscious resistance to accepting the conventional patterns of the prevailing culture as adequate to their own deepest convictions. But positively, such a community holds out the promise of a richer, fuller social system, because it affirmatively incorporates community within it. A society so ordered would be a worthy achievement of globalization and could rightly claim to be an inclusive community."

Following his lecture, Rupp answered a number of questions from his engaged audience, clarifying his points and expanding on other ideas. Finally, Junko Hibiya concluded the session, and to a round of applause, thanked Rupp for his stimulating lecture.