CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Conviction, Conflict, Community: A Conversation with George Rupp

Ethics Matter

George Rupp, **James Traub**

Transcript

Introduction

JAMES TRAUB: Good evening. I'm James Traub. Welcome to the Carnegie Council's Ethics Matter series.

Our guest tonight is George Rupp, who has had an extraordinary career as a professor of theology, the dean of the Harvard Divinity School, the president of Rice University, the president of Columbia, the president of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). George is now in the middle of writing a book, at least tentatively titled—should I say "tentatively titled" or "titled"?

GEORGE RUPP: Tentatively titled.

JAMES TRAUB: —tentatively titled *Global Quest*. So I can't promise that when the book comes out it will bear that title. The book, I think it's fair to say, sums up George's thoughts from half-a-century's experience in the academy and the humanitarian world.

George, thank you so much for being here this evening.

GEORGE RUPP: Thank you for inviting me.

Remarks

JAMES TRAUB: The thing I really want to focus on this evening are the kinds of thoughts that you talk about in the book, which really has a lot to do with the role of religion in the public space. So I wonder if before we talk about that you can talk a little bit about your own upbringing. That is to say you are an ordained Presbyterian minister, and that's not just a profession, that's a calling. So could you talk a little bit about where your religious calling came from?

GEORGE RUPP: Yes, I can. I grew up in New Jersey of immigrant parents, neither of whom had gone to higher education and who were members of a local Presbyterian church that I attended. I think it's fair to say my interest in religion came from that early family experience.

But it was very contrary to the tendencies in general in my family. As my father said to me when I first indicated I might go to theological seminary, "I'll tell you right now, you will never put up with what Americans expect Protestant ministers to put up with."

JAMES TRAUB: What did he mean by that?

GEORGE RUPP: Well, I think he felt that Protestant ministers were subservient to their congregations, had to trim their sails anytime there was any kind of disagreement. I certainly recognized that was a place where I would have some real difficulty.

I nonetheless got more engaged with religion because I became very active in the Civil Rights Movement in the end of the 1950s, early 1960s, and the people with whom I was involved were almost all based in religious institutions.

JAMES TRAUB: When you say you were involved, tell us what is it you were doing?

GEORGE RUPP: I was initially involved in a predominantly black church in Jersey City, which was not too far from where we lived. Those activities were everything from organizing demonstrations to educational programs for kids and so on.

Also, in college I went to a predominantly black church in Princeton, Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, which was to me far more intriguing in all sorts of ways than the beautiful white Presbyterian church right on the edge of the campus.

So there were a variety of ways in which I became involved in religion. I finally decided I would go on and get a theological degree, but I would go on and get a Ph.D. as well, because I wasn't certain that I would really be able to tolerate being a parish minister, which turned out to be a good precaution.

JAMES TRAUB: But all this was happening just as the 1960s were getting started. So it sounds like your own religious experience also got inflected by 1960s commitments to social justice.

GEORGE RUPP: That's correct. There were specific individuals who were extremely influential in that, in particular Ben Anderson, who was the minister at the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church; and a guy named Bob Castle, who just passed away, who was the Episcopal priest who was the minister of the predominantly black church, St. John's, in Jersey City.

JAMES TRAUB: So I guess it's a little bit like Barack Obama, in the sense that your religiosity was also very much intertwined with your sense of commitment to social justice.

GEORGE RUPP: I think that's true. But that also was significant because it meant that my religious inquiry from the beginning had a kind of social context, rather than the kind of individualism that very often characterizes especially Protestants and especially evangelicals.

JAMES TRAUB: That's really what I wanted to focus on this evening. So in this book that George has written, which he sent me a copy of in manuscript form, I think it's fair to say that the kind of master theme is the limitations of the secular liberal world—I think the phrase you use is "secular modern Western individualism" and the dead-end that that has driven us into.

One thing that occurred to me in the course of reading it is that you spent—we're now going to hop over your entire career, which I'm happy to come back to in the course of the evening—but you spent all those decades at institutions—two major universities, one major NGO—which are arguably the bastions of a certain form of liberalism in America, deeply secular modern liberalism.

So I wonder if part of the reason why this issue resonates so much with you is some reaction against what you find, especially in the academy, that particular form of secular liberalism, that almost recoiling from religious or spiritual commitments.

GEORGE RUPP: I think the causality is a little more complicated than that, in the sense that I did

view religious commitment and convictions as deeply rooted in communities and with very substantial social ramifications.

Also, when I was finishing up my higher education, it was a period when I think the self confidence of secular liberal intellectuals was at an all-time high, and religion was deemed to be really just a matter of a cultural lag, and it would be not very long before we would all recognize that secular liberalism was the answer, rather than all of these odd religions movements.

I found that some of my favorite people are those sorts of secular liberals. Maybe my favorite of all is Derek Bok, who was the president of Harvard then, who seemed to me a wonderfully principled, ethical person, but was pretty dubious about religion as having any future—modified some, I would have to say, when his daughters became very interested in religion, but that is a longer and more personal story than I will get into.

So I felt strongly that it was important to embrace the value of critical inquiry that Harvard or Rice or Columbia represented, but also to push back against the presumption that the default world view that the whole world was gravitating to was the kind of secular individualism that the faculty at a university represented, which seemed to me clearly not the case.

JAMES TRAUB: I wonder, because when people with a deep religious commitment complain about America's secularism, it always strikes me as a little odd, because is such a more religious country than almost any major Western European country. So is it only in the academy where there is this kind of default contempt or disregard for religion? Is that really a problem in American culture more broadly?

GEORGE RUPP: I think it is. To take the first part of that, certainly it is true in the academy, and in part in the academy it has been. I think this is all changing, and that's why I am engaged with writing about this. But it has been true in the academy, in part as a reaction against the kind of religiosity that is very much in evidence in America.

But I think if we look at the matter globally, the problem with having the presumption that default truth is—let's leave off secular—that it is modern Western individualism, whether secular or religious, for people outside the United States it doesn't make that much difference whether it is secular or religious.

The problem is the presumption of individualism. That is deeply resented and resisted and opposed in most of the world, except in some parts of Western Europe. Until we recognize how our assumption that individualism of the sort that has developed in the modern West is going to be acceptable in—well, take your pick, in Africa, in Asia, or in the Middle East—until we get over that, we are not going to really be able to engage with international issues that we are confronting all the time, because we are unaware of how deeply unacceptable our default position is to all those other communities.

JAMES TRAUB: So let's take that piece then for a second, the individualism, the discomfort with American Western-style materialism. I am going to read something. This is my little blurb for your book. I am going to read a passage where you talk about this. You are talking about the Islamic world.

You say: "Even those of the religiously committed who oppose exclusionist extremism and hostility to all outsiders are often strongly critical of what they see as the corrosive individualism and secularism of the West. Passive accommodation to the hedonism and materialism of secular Western culture is

in this view to lack all conviction. The sense of such accommodation, in turn, generates further support for the passionate intensity that the most extreme positions represent."

Now, I think what you are saying there is that there is some link between this kind of consumerist, single-minded, individualist, Western form of nihilism, from the point of view of traditional cultures, and the repudiation that leads to terrorism. It struck me as a kind of post-9/11 way of thinking about why terrorists are attacking America and the West. Am I overdrawing it or is that the point?

GEORGE RUPP: No, I think you're not overdrawing it. I say, somewhat defensively, that the passage you quoted is playing with the poetic formulation "the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." So the complications of the syntax are partly drawing on Yeats's poem, which if you don't all have it in your head, would make it a little bit more confusing.

JAMES TRAUB: I wasn't actually trying to draw attention to any problems in the syntax. I thought it was just fine.

GEORGE RUPP: But it is a very complex set of relationships. I think there is no doubt that the deeply held resentment of the United States in, let's just say, traditional communities, in this case the traditional Muslim communities, does in fact elicit or press toward a kind of extremism to oppose that because it is unacceptable and hedonistic and materialistic and all the other terms that you quoted me as invoking.

JAMES TRAUB: Okay. So, George, let's say that's so. I don't know whether that's so, but it at least seems to me plausible. So one reaction is, "Well, that's why we really need to spark a debate inside the Islamic world, so that people are no longer as bound to fundamentalist views." But I think your point is: No, this is not just the fundamentalists; this is ordinary people who are not at all, as you say who reject all that stuff, who nevertheless feel this anger. If that is so, what exactly can we do about it?

GEORGE RUPP: Well, I think you have put your finger on what I would agree is the long-term solution. The subtitle of *Global Quest*, if it stays, will be something like "seeking inclusive communities." I think that the response has to be in the long run what the moderate Muslim, who certainly is there, would argue, namely we have to be able to have communities that include diversity within them.

I think we undermine our capacity to make that case when we work on the assumption that the way to get to those sorts of communities is have everybody agree with us in terms of the kind of frame of reference that is modern Western liberalism or individualism, because that seems as if it is defining what the inclusive community will be based on, what we already think we have achieved here.

The challenge is to shape communities that really can incorporate diversity within them. If we take an example that is in front of all of us right now, Syria is a huge tragedy that is unfolding before our eyes. Anyone who proposes a solution to the crisis in Syria that does not include a role, not only for Sunnis but also for Shia, and even for Alawites, the sliver of the Shia community that has been controlling Syria under the Assads, unless there is a move toward a community that does not insist on having all members of it adhere to one ideology, there is absolutely no way of solving a problem as complex as Syria.

If we have any doubts about that, we can just look at Iraq, where there was some chance, in fact, that a pluralistic community might have come out, but Nouri al-Maliki has increasingly insisted that the Shia control everything, which means that we are basically having the Sunnis go back to war.

So this isn't just a theoretical, abstract concern. It has to be possible to build a polity that includes multiple communities.

JAMES TRAUB: But even a secular modern Western liberal—me, for example, or probably some people in the audience—

GEORGE RUPP: Almost everyone in the audience.

JAMES TRAUB: Well, I don't want to tar everybody with that epithet. [Laughter]

—would completely agree with what you have said about them; that is to say: Yes, clearly, until it is going to be possible, under who knows what kind of dispensation, to have a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, multicultural polity in the Middle East, which is itself a vastly more diverse world than, let's say, most East Asian countries are, there is never going to be peace. So, fine, that is an important understanding.

But I think your point, though, is that there is a connection between our own acceptance in our own life and the need to make changes in our own culture and our ability to speak to those people. That would be different from my saying, "I'm going to just be the same old secular, modern, Western, liberal individualist that I have always been, but of course I am going to write a nice little article saying that the Syrians have to learn to live with each other."

So what does that have to do with us?

GEORGE RUPP: Well, I think, in terms of our interactions with those other societies, what it has to do with us is that we have to approach our interactions without the presumption that we already have the answer and it is institutionalized in the United States and we just have to get the rest of the world to get to that same point. We have to recognize that there will be multiple models for incorporating multi-culture, multi-religious communities into a single whole.

I do think that the United States is much further along in doing that than most other societies in the world. So I am not suggesting that we in this country have the same challenge that Syria has.

JAMES TRAUB: In terms of the acceptance of "the other."

GEORGE RUPP: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: In that case, you could say, "Fine, we're already there. This is one thing America is good at, is accepting of the other."

GEORGE RUPP: We have lots of other challenges, but I think on this one variable the United States, in fact, is further along in the direction that the global community also has to go. I think that is true.

JAMES TRAUB: But you are also saying, if I understand it rightly, that all those people in the 1960s who had a kind of "end of history" sense about the world, that we are all moving towards this rationalist, technocratic, individualist, etc., world, were wrong, history has proven that they are wrong, that these other things, these traditional things, have an overwhelmingly powerful hold on people, including even American people.

So let's also talk a little bit about what you think—I mean you use the term "dead end," that this way of thinking is a dead end, and you describe the kind of vacuity of consumer culture. So if we think for a second about us, not the world out there—and you used the expression "we need a new

communitarianism"—what does that mean?

GEORGE RUPP: It means that we will have to move beyond assuming that the only value is constructed around individual accumulation. We will have to reaffirm the standing of public goods of a whole range of instances. We will have to recognize that investments in institutions and capacities that are society-wide rather than individually based are necessary.

The challenge is, it seems to me, really quite enormous for us. I think, for starters, the aggressively increasing disparities between income and wealth, between the bottom and the top, will have to be grasped and countered with public policies.

The pathetic underinvestment in infrastructure and other social goods is going to have to be engaged.

So we have no shortage of challenges that we need to confront here, and I think we have no way of even beginning to frame them or generating the political will to address them, if the unit of analysis is simply the individual and his or her prosperity.

JAMES TRAUB: But there are plenty. Among people who would call themselves communitarian, there are people who sound like you and then there are people who are much more conservative. David Brooks is a kind of communitarian, but he would probably listen to you and say, "Well, that's communitarianism used as a pretext to mobilize the state on behalf of people." Whereas a more conservative communitarian would say, "No, no, no, this focus on the state is itself one of the things that atomizes local communities, voluntary associations." So they would focus much more on reinforcing private associations and all sorts of intermediate bodies, and they would say you're talking about a nanny state, which not only would they say is bad economically, they would probably say it is not even good communitarian-wise.

GEORGE RUPP: I think that is actually a very astute reaction on the part of those people embodied in you, because I think the challenge—there is no question that having no mediating institutions between the state and the individual is one way of getting to where we are, where in fact people relate to each other only as individuals and as a state.

So I think building viable mediating structures, more particular communities, is extraordinarily important and very challenging. There are many dynamics in our society that undermine that, as anyone who tries to lead a mediating institution in this society would report—as leaders of churches, leaders of Kiwanis clubs, leaders of any number of other such institutions.

But I do think the David Brooks version of communitarianism, which I identify with a lot, is correct. We do need to also have policies that encourage the development of these more particular communities. Don't think that they are tolerable only in the short term or that they are only designed for people who aren't really able to stand on their own feet, or all sorts of other ways of denigrating and disparaging them, but rather that they are important to the very fabric of the society as a whole.

JAMES TRAUB: But just so we understand, what is it that you would say is lacking in this secular individualist? You talk about the social justice issues, how the focus on markets and so forth means that poor people are left out. But there is also a spiritual point, that there is some lack there. So what is it that all those secular individualists are missing out on in terms of a vision of the good life?

GEORGE RUPP: It seems to me that the good life, as not only religious but also as many secular traditions have taught it, includes an affirmation of the individual, but the individual as connected to

others and in the end subordinated to larger causes than just his or her individual well-being and accumulation and so on.

The challenge for modern Western individualism is to recover a way of affirming that connection of individuals to increasingly inclusive communities—first, obviously, family, but then local communities, and in the long run what I would argue, a universal community, which I think is the sort of bedrock for the kind of international assistance and development and so on that I advocate in the book.

JAMES TRAUB: So at the kind of level of the individual, you are saying that this neo-liberal free market, that everything is a market world, in some level is spiritually empty? Is this a kind of incurable? Is this simply the diagnosis of the world we live in? You describe it as a sickness that needs to be addressed, but is it perhaps so fundamental to the world we occupy now that it is almost beyond being addressed in that way?

GEORGE RUPP: I think it is certainly very fundamental to the world that we occupy right now, and I think it is a deficient vision or sense of what the highest aspirations of humanity have historically been and can be again. The question is how we can move a society like ours, which is probably the most individualistic and the most dependent on market-driven incentives and materialist satisfaction —despite all the religious rhetoric in the background, the question of how the United States can engage the problems in that worldview seems to me the central challenge that we face.

I think what our detractors around the world sense is that is the case. We really have gotten ourselves—you have quoted my dead-end several times—but then I say, to use a softer metaphor, a shallow channel where we are in danger of running aground. Maybe that is a little closer to fair.

But other societies see the deficiencies in where we have wound up and don't like it. As much as they envy our wealth, as much as they admire the fact that we can do all sorts of things, they also see in their own traditions, their own local communities, values that they are not willing to give up in order to imitate us. We can relate to those societies only insofar as we recognize how we look to them rather than just how they look to us.

JAMES TRAUB: Is there a kind of happy medium that exists in the world? That is to say, since you described, I think rightly, the United States as the supreme home of this individualist liberalism, when you look at Scandinavian countries—I mean do you look elsewhere and think, "It would be good for us in some deep way to be more like that"?

GEORGE RUPP: Well, I think there is a lot we can learn from a lot of other societies. I think from the Scandinavians we can learn a lot about the ways in which individualism can be affirmed without having the kind of gross disparities between the top and the bottom, etc., etc., that we have. I think that it is important to learn that from the Scandinavians.

I don't think that northern Europe is the place to look for a vivid embrace of particular communities that really shape individuals, because in some ways the individualism doesn't have the same social pathology that our versions do. But it does in fact have the kind of isolation of individuals from communities that I think is still undesirable.

I must say I have spent a lot of time in recent years in Africa and in early years in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. I think that other religious traditions bring resources here that do locate the individual in increasingly inclusive frames of reference. Communities is one way of describing it. There are lots of others.

I think there we have a lot that we can learn. But it is very difficult for us now, the broader public, to even countenance that, especially in the academy, where we think that religion is just a cultural lag anyway.

JAMES TRAUB: Let's talk about the academy. One of the things that George writes about a lot in the book is the need to make these and other kinds of changes in the academy.

You make the really interesting point that there is—it's what I think of as the "Bible as literature" phenomenon. When I was at university, I took a class in the Bible as literature, meaning the Bible had been successfully disinfected of any of its actual faith-based elements and I can read it as if it were a Greek myth.

You point out that there is this increasingly rigid line between theology and the study of religion, which starves the study-of-religion world of so much that it can gain from theology. Could you talk about that a little bit?

GEORGE RUPP: I think, first of all, reading the Bible as literature is terrific, and I'm glad you did that. I'm sure you benefited from it. I also think that the study of religion has been an enormously positive influence in Western higher education because it has helped to place Western traditions in the context of the broader history of religions. I think that has been very positive.

But I also do think it is the case that the kind of normative dimension that would come from Christian theology or constructive Hindu philosophical reflection or Buddhist affirmation, rather than just analysis, that normative and constructive dimension is an impoverishing of religion that the academy is especially liable to.

Even when I was president of Columbia, I rarely quoted *The Spectator*, the student newspaper. I just happened to be reading *The Spectator* today. There is a really interesting segment in one of the inserts in it. There is a very interesting discussion of religion at Columbia. It's a very intriguing quotation from students—and from some faculty in fact.

It just lays out the challenges for people who are seriously engaged with religion in the kind of secular ethos that Columbia is. It is a very intriguing piece. Very honest, people are straightforward, but they are very clear about affirming their own religious convictions, but recognizing also the value of the kind of study or discussion that goes on at a place like Columbia.

JAMES TRAUB: Did that, by the way, strike you as the kind of article that would not have been likely to appear 15, 20 years ago, in that it represented some greater willingness to acknowledge the validity of religious commitments?

GEORGE RUPP: I think that's probably true. I would say in the 1970s I don't think—I mean this is a student newspaper, and this was a long segment, three or four pages of newsprint, and lots of quotes, and respectful quotes, of people both criticizing religion but also then making positive sounds about it. I think that would have been less likely 40 years ago.

JAMES TRAUB: So that kind of hegemonic version of secular individualism is perhaps now already on the wane, that you are now speaking to an audience that is more willing to listen to this kind of thing.

GEORGE RUPP: I think that even in the academy—

JAMES TRAUB: That's what I mean. If it is even in the academy, then it must be more broadly accepted.

GEORGE RUPP: I think it is hard not to say "even in the academy." The academy really has been a little of a subculture, even within this society. There are just too many people in international relations and foreign policy and history and so on who are looking at the world outside of the United States, especially outside of the United States and Europe. It is preposterous to say religion is a cultural lag. It has been a dominant theme of much of both the controversy, but also then the potential of interactions internationally, in the last decade anyway.

JAMES TRAUB: At the same time that you have a kind of ideological atheism that didn't exist before—Dawkins, Dennett, people like that—"naturalists" they would call themselves. Now, I guess you would think that means anti-religion is on the march. But maybe it means the opposite, that the reason for that is a fear on the part of the secular that, even in the academy, the assumption of the rightness of secularism, that default secularism, is in fact on the decline.

GEORGE RUPP: I think that is a very apt observation. Obviously, we are dealing with gross stereotypes here. But if we take the kind of dominant ethos of the 1970s at Harvard, which you know well, that ethos would have thought it was simply unnecessary to have serious intellectuals bother with arguing a case for atheism against religion.

JAMES TRAUB: Right. And there was no one to argue against, except you.

GEORGE RUPP: Yes. I won't name the faculty member at Columbia who was also quoted in this article. You have to read this article. It is really kind of a tickling.

He said—well, he is in the philosophy department; I guess I have to go that far—that we have more important things to think about than religion, and if we did want to think about it, then we might have a view on how it relates to philosophy. That attitude could have been transplanted from 30 years ago, without any change, just put in there. This is one of my colleagues at Columbia who is kind of in a time warp. He's sort of thinking the world is still—whereas people who are aggressively writing to defend atheism against religion recognize that this bird ain't dead yet.

JAMES TRAUB: I do want to ask a little about your experience, because talking about this makes me realize that there you were, you were the dean of the Harvard Divinity School.

GEORGE RUPP: That was some time ago.

JAMES TRAUB: Right. That's my point. I wonder if at that time you felt a kind of second-class citizenship within the academy, that you were a divine as opposed to an academic?

GEORGE RUPP: I actually have a fairly hard time thinking of myself as a second-class citizen. [Laughter]

JAMES TRAUB: I am not saying you internalized that derisory—

GEORGE RUPP: But I think there is no doubt that the quote I just had of a faculty member now in philosophy at Columbia—I think there was a way in which religion was considered sort of an odd pursuit.

When I went to Rice as president, Rice had never had a president who wasn't either a scientist or a mathematician, and even engineering was a bit too applied.

JAMES TRAUB: You were beyond soft.

GEORGE RUPP: I think the search committee was genuinely open to the possibility of having a person from the humanities or the social sciences, by which they meant certainly a hard-nosed quantitative guy.

JAMES TRAUB: A data guy.

GEORGE RUPP: Yes, a data guy.

As Derek Bok, who was the president, told the search committee when they went to talk to him about me, he said, "I thought we had hidden him pretty well over there in the Divinity School." When this was announced at Rice, it was—bless Rice, they figured "Well, let's see what happens"—but it was just a little beyond belief. Not having a scientist or a mathematician is one thing, but having a dean of a divinity school is something else.

JAMES TRAUB: You were like a diversity hire. [Laughter]

GEORGE RUPP: So I think it is fair to say there was a kind of—and I don't think it's over. I think for many academics, religion is just kind of a weird inquiry and, therefore, doesn't have the kind of stringency or standards that even the humanities have.

JAMES TRAUB: But as you say, now maybe your side is winning this battle.

GEORGE RUPP: My side—my problem is I don't like all of my compatriots on my side. [Laughter]

JAMES TRAUB: Thank you so much. I want to make sure we have time for questions.

GEORGE RUPP: As we are getting the questions, let me thank you, Jim. I enjoyed the conversation, although I must say I am taken aback. I have not talked about religion this much in a public space in as long as I can remember.

JAMES TRAUB: I thought it would be good for everybody to hear a little bit of that.

GEORGE RUPP: I thought we might talk about international relief and development.

JAMES TRAUB: I'm sorry. This is a hint to all of you. Will you please now remedy my single-minded preoccupation and ask George about stuff that he actually knows an enormous amount about?

Questions

QUESTION: Thank you. That's just what I want to inquire about. My name is Susan Gitelson from Columbia University and many other areas that you have been so outstanding in.

You haven't had a chance to address your work at the International Rescue Committee. This has been so practical in dealing with refugees, in dealing with the victims of religious and ethnic conflict. You used Syria as an example. It could be Rwanda, the Central African Republic. There are so many that you have been actively involved in. How can this desire for communitarianism, or whatever, help to overcome the horrible destruction of human beings?

GEORGE RUPP: Susan, thank you for the question. But I would not claim that the kind of theoretical construct of communitarianism that we have been discussing here is going to be likely to seriously

engage in the immediate term the suffering of human beings in the Central African Republic or in Congo or in Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan.

But I think in the long run we can get traction on those conflicts only if we respect global communities with quite sharply different viewpoints and work at getting them to be able to live in the same polity. I realize that is still at a high level of abstraction, but I think it is possible to step-by-step work at that.

International relief and development organizations begin with just meeting desperate needs that people have. But in the long run, dealing with even with the victims of these sorts of conflicts in ways that respect their own particular identity and recognize that it has to be reintegrated into a society is the only way in which to make progress on these issues. And again, it doesn't really matter how much is invested in dealing with this unless that sort of core respect is inculcated into whatever the solution is.

To me one of the terrific tragedies right now is what is happening in Iraq. I did not favor the invasion of Iraq. But given all of what was invested in that conflict, to wind up undermining it all over again by simply not having learned the lesson that it is not possible to have a country as complex as that dominated totally by one of the groups within it, that seems to me a huge tragedy. We are in danger of having a repeat of it, if we are not careful, in Syria as well.

But in Iraq we can see it very clearly. There was an enormous investment of both money and lives—many more Iraqis than Americans, but still also lots of Americans—and it is being squandered by a failure to recognize that a community has to include the kind of diversity within it that Iraq—

JAMES TRAUB: In the blame for that—obviously, a big piece goes to the Bush administration for launching this war in the first place—would you include the Obama administration for too single-mindedly supporting Maliki and not doing whatever it is you feel they could have done in order to give more authority to Sunni leaders?

GEORGE RUPP: It seems to me most of the damage was already done by the time the Obama administration came in. Paul Bremer's de-Ba'athification basically annihilated the kind of public infrastructure that there might have been there.

But I do think that there was insufficient attention, even from the Obama administration, on the need to assure a multi-confessional polity in ways that could still have been done even at the beginning of the Obama administration.

JAMES TRAUB: Joe Biden would say, "That's what I did. It just didn't work."

QUESTION: My name is Chris Durante.

I am a comparative religious ethicist and I also work on religion and sociopolitical theory. I teach up the block at Marymount Manhattan College and at St. John's University.

I did my Ph.D. at McGill. Multiculturalism is the official policy of Canada, and there were a lot of debates concerning this.

GEORGE RUPP: Are you open to being cloned? [Laughter]

QUESTIONER: I have many questions to ask you, which hopefully I can do later. The two I would really like to ask you now are: You speak of multiple multiculturalisms, so to speak, or plural pluralisms. Is there room for a community of individualists, so to speak, in this kind of paradigm, to

allow those individualists or those secular individualists room to be secular individualists in this sort of new ethos that you are creating, or urging us to move towards?

The second question is more on the academic level: Given that we are in this post-secular era, that the secularization thesis from sociology has kind of withered away, what is the role of religious studies in this, and to what extent should "secular religious studies" scholars be collaborating with theologians, and what would the nature of that collaboration be in terms of public education and such? What impact do you see the field as having?

GEORGE RUPP: On the first, I think it would be terrific to have a kind of society of individualists who perhaps even develop rituals and who met together regularly and all the rest of it. I guess I am not going to hold my breath waiting for it to happen. But there are societies that play that role. I don't mean to be dismissive of it.

JAMES TRAUB: Things like secular humanist covens?

GEORGE RUPP: Secular humanist associations of various kinds. I think it's fair to say that the very best of the professional associations play something like that role in bringing together lawyers and doctors and others. It is strictly a secular purpose, rather than a religious purpose, but nonetheless brings people together so that they aren't just isolated individuals.

So I think there are many forms of community that are not just religious and that also have not been nurtured as much as I think would be desirable in this country, or in many other countries, also in Western Europe, where the whole conception of voluntary associations is not nearly as developed as it is in the UK and in the United States. But voluntary associations certainly could extend to the kinds of individuals that you are describing.

On the question of the relationship of the study of religion to really all other disciplines, it seems to me one of the real avenues for interconnecting, for cross-cutting disciplines, certainly in the humanities and social sciences. So that is the first part of your question.

You then went to connections between religion and theology. I think I commented on that already. I do think that there is something both the study of religion and the kind of normative study of theology and ethics can learn from each other, and I would like to encourage ways for that to happen. I think it does in fact happen in the academy in significant ways. It sounds as if your own background has at least some of those cross-sections within it.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said "A constitution is made for people of fundamentally different views." I would be interested in your ideas about constitutionalism and the rule of law in terms of legitimizing governmental action and behavior and as an essential part of the social fabric of a society, and also as an essential protector of religious space.

GEORGE RUPP: Well, I'm in favor of it. [Laughter] It does seem to me that the way in which institutions have evolved in the West has included the kind of constitutional structure and at its best included protections for religious space. I think that is salutary.

I don't think a formal constitutional structure is the only way of getting to the kinds of inclusive communities that I've talked about, but it is certainly the one that has demonstrated its capacity and been institutionalized successfully in the West. I would say most alternatives to that are still

struggling to deal with the kinds of tribalist and other mechanisms that need to be brought into some larger whole.

But on the basic question, it seems to me, I am all for constitutional protections and the rule of law, including a space for religious expression and the tolerance of multiple forms of religious expression.

I'm not sure whether you want to go further with that or want to pursue it.

QUESTION: My name is Frank Carling. I'm a lawyer who works as a mediator.

You referred to the strangeness of academics thinking that they had nothing to learn from religion, not even worth thinking about it. But what is a secular person to do? Let's forget for a second about our Judeo-Christian God, who may or may not have been successfully subjected to capital punishment.

Indians will tell you they are the most spiritual people in the world. Hinduism is a great and interesting religion. But there are many of us who simply cannot accept that Ganesha and Shiva and the other Indian gods and goddesses actually exist in the sense that they correspond to something real in the universe.

So for a person who has that attitude, how is he or she to approach India to learn about the richness of Hindu philosophy? In what sense is Hindu philosophy relevant to a secular person who just doesn't think that Hinduism represents a form of reality?

GEORGE RUPP: First of all, I think it is very important in order to be able to understand and live with and work with Hindus who happen to think that it is crucial to their lives. I would say if it doesn't matter to the Western person to be able to do that, then the payoff for taking the trouble to understand Hinduism is a lot less than if it is important to do that.

In this society we have substantial numbers of Hindus. They, in fact, take very seriously, not the kind of literalistic interpretation that you gave, but nonetheless the power of those traditions. If we want to have a society that includes those Hindus within our polity, then we have to be willing to allow them to express their views even if we don't agree with them. That is really, it seems to me, the kind of minimum required, and that goes back to the question of institutional practices.

Now, if Hindus were to take the position that everybody had to believe that Ātman is Brahman, or whatever belief they want to have, that would obviously counter our own constitutional provisions. But I don't think it is necessary to say, "I accept Hindu affirmations" in order to treat them seriously and with respect and want to see Hindus incorporated into our society, or for that matter Hindus incorporated into global society.

I want to insist that doesn't mean being uncritical about it. Certainly, just as I would be very critical of a great many, not only tenets, but also practices that have come out of Christianity and Judaism, I would be very critical of practices that have come out of Hindu traditions. I think that is entirely appropriate, as long as it is done on the same basis, it's not done that "all Hinduism is hopeless and all Christianity is fine."

JAMES TRAUB: George, if I could quote you to you, you make the very important point that the comparative study of religion, like the comparative study of everything, unseats your sense of certainty about whatever convictions you happen to have come along with. So the act of studying religions that you take to be fictional is going to make you question much more what you think is the

factual religion, which you have just always taken for granted. So that self-criticism is part of the benefit of comparative study.

GEORGE RUPP: I certainly believe that is the case. But I would also like to insist that it is not true that people who are willing very generously to study Hinduism—I'm just staying with Hinduism rather than shifting to others—may not still believe their own position is what is in fact true. In fact, most folks who study other positions retain allegiance to whatever position they had before the encounter started.

JAMES TRAUB: But the self-critical posture is part of what makes you a member of an intellectual community.

GEORGE RUPP: I think there is no way to have what I call inclusive communities unless there is also a feature of self-criticism that is involved, because it at least opens up the possibility that on this or that issue the other members who have different convictions are right and I have to rethink what I have as my position.

QUESTION: My name is Jim Kelly. In my former active life I used to teach a sociology of religion course.

I would like to go to your original opening, namely how we view ourselves as Americans is related to how we view "the others." Maybe I can segue from the last comment. The way we view ourselves as Americans, I think our biggest pride is our human rights, that above all. So the first, which would segue from the last comment: When we think about human rights, do we need some sort of universal ethic somewhere lurking behind it to make sure that it is not a secular ethnocentrism type of thing?

My second question is: As the others look at us, when they hear us talk about human rights, I think they see us as saying human rights is usually defined in a very negative way—"unless I'm not hurting anybody, leave me alone." And then, even when we go to court decisions, a lot of the basis is privacy, which would go against the enormous communitarianism you find in the rest of the world.

I guess to put the question in a more manageable way, in your book will you have a special chapter on human rights from a more communitarian point of view for the American reader?

GEORGE RUPP: This book is not finished, and I won't rule out having a discussion of human rights. But I doubt I will.

I think we need to recognize, all of us—and I consider myself a secular liberal, as do you; I'm just self-critical about it—I think it is crucial that we recognize the extent to which human rights language is itself fundamentally shaped by modern Western individualism, even when it is legally grounded and all the rest of it.

We need to be open to the possibility that human rights will look quite different if it grows up in a less individualistic society. I don't mean that there aren't overlaps and there can't be combinations and learnings from each other. But I think language of human rights is almost as corrosive of non-Western acceptance of Western ideas as one of secular individualism.

JAMES TRAUB: I'm a little surprised to hear you, the former director of the IRC, say that, because here is an organization that is founded on notions of human rights that are pretty embedded in the Western lexicon of human rights. So I am surprised to hear you have this sense of the extreme relativism of that, that there are a lot of people out there who might not actually accept the ethical

foundations of an organization like the IRC.

GEORGE RUPP: The ethical foundations of the IRC are not human rights. I think it is really critical to recognize that. I will try to resist getting into a rap about the IRC, but we in the field often have real tensions with human rights actors because of the fact that they are imposing a kind of Western set of orientations on societies that don't think of themselves that way. I don't mean by that that we would countenance the violation of what we call human rights, but it is just not the language that is appropriate for trying to make the point, it seems to me.

Ninety-eight percent of our 13,000 staff around the world are not Westerners; they are locals in the societies where we are. We have to work very hard to interpret what we are doing, including what we call human rights, in language that is accessible to people who didn't grow up and didn't take your sociology of religion course or didn't study human rights and don't have the kind of legal framework that we take for granted.

I think that it is doable. I am not at all suggesting that in this case then it's okay to, I don't know, rape women or to kill people—not at all. But we have to figure out how we can translate what we take as self-evident when we talk about human rights into the vernacular of people who don't think that way.

JAMES TRAUB: I'm glad we fleshed that out.

QUESTION: Ann Lee at New York University.

So it sounded to me from your conversation that you are critical of our individualism. As you were saying, it has some deficiencies because of the extreme wealth inequality, and you seemed to say we hit a dead-end. I'm just curious, how far do you think this will go and what kind of effect is it going to have on our nation if we continue the way we are?

And I'm just curious what you think of what the scientists at NASA had put out, because they were saying that they have done a lot of studies on past empires and those empires that had severe inequality also all ended. So I'm just curious if that's what you think would happen in our case, or what is your view on that?

GEORGE RUPP: I am a congenital optimist, so I have at least modest hopes that we will in fact undertake course corrections that will avoid the worst-case outcomes. But I think if we continue to accelerate the kind of dispersion between the top and the bottom in this society that we have really experienced since the 1980s, that we will not be a viable society or model for the rest of the world.

To take just a simple example, if we don't begin to correct the imbalance in our investment in what I would call social goods, we are not going to be a viable society for very much longer at all. The state of the shared infrastructure in this country is deplorably inadequate compared to other countries that are much less wealthy than we are.

I don't mean we won't make course corrections to address those issues, but the rhetoric we have in our current political climate is, if anything, even more extreme in the direction of what I think are the perverse trends of the last 30 years. If those trends continue, we are going to have a very hard time maintaining the kind of both affluence and global influence that we have.

There is a limit to how long, not the top 1 percent, but the top tenth of 1 percent can control more and more wealth and the bottom half have less and less wealth and still have a viable society. That's just a statement of fact. I would hate to have to watch to see it is proven true. But I think we really will

need to have some course corrections if we are going to avoid unhappy outcomes.

JAMES TRAUB: On that unhappy note, George, thank you so much. This has been such a rich conversation.

Audio

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