

April 2011

## **Book Review: Richard L. Rubenstein, Jihad and Genocide**

Steven Leonard Jacobs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Jacobs, Steven Leonard (2011) "Book Review: Richard L. Rubenstein, Jihad and Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1: Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol6/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

# Book Review

**Richard L. Rubenstein, *Jihad and Genocide*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010. Pp. 258, cloth. \$59.95 US.**

Reviewed by Steven Leonard Jacobs, Aaron Aronov Endowed Chair of Judaic Studies, University of Alabama

---

Richard L. Rubenstein, President Emeritus of the University of Bridgeport, CT, and Distinguished Professor of Religion has long been at the forefront of the nexus between religion and history, especially the Holocaust/Shoah, and over time has authored such important and provocative works as *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (1966), *Morality and Eros* (1970), *Power Struggle: An Autobiographical Confession* (1974), *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (1975), *The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World* (1983), and (with John K. Roth), *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (1987). *Jihad and Genocide* is no exception.

Mincing no words, Rubenstein informs us that he has written this relatively slender volume as “an inquiry into the genocidal possibilities of *jihad*” (vii) by examining the domain of Islam, *dar al-Islam*, and the domain of war, *dar al-Harb* (chapter 1), the case of the Armenian Genocide at the hands of the Turks (chapter 2), the Nazi-Muslim connection of which “there is more than a little affinity” (p. 2, chapter 3), the relationship between oil and anti-Semitism (chapter 4), the case of Iran and the possibilities of nuclear genocide (chapter 5), and the fruits of what he contends is Muslim/Islamic long-standing rage toward the West (chapter 6).

Rubenstein argues that today’s radical Islamist reading of the concept of *jihad* is that of a “defensive *jihad* against the infidels who raid the abode of Islam” (5). Thus, his reading of their reading of the Qur’an and other texts, most importantly the works of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) among others, leads him to three conclusions when examining the religious traditions of Islam: (1) Muslims are under an unconditional obligation to undertake *jihad* against the inhabitants resident in their lands (particularly Turkey historically and Israel today), (2) “no matter how terrible the acts perpetrated by Islamic extremists, they have been without exception associated with appeals to Islam” (39), and (3) those engaged in such practices are continuing such acts begun more than 1,400 years ago with the birth of Islam itself. In so doing, as a scholar of religion, Rubenstein forcefully argues for a seat at the table of conversation partners about genocide with historians, political scientists, lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists, and he concludes that “a fundamental flaw in all such efforts [to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and applicable to the wider arena] is the failing of both Western and Israeli policy makers to take into account the religious dimension of the conflict” (165; emphasis in original).

Turning to the first major genocide of the twentieth century, that of the Armenian Christians at the hands of both secular and Muslim Turks, he posits that the ongoing denial of this genocide “has been due, at least in part, to the Turkish belief that they did no wrong in exterminating the Armenians, a belief that rests ultimately on the tradition of *jihad* and the *dhimma*” (54). By implication, therefore,

“today’s radical Islamists regard genocide as a legitimate weapon against those whom they regard as enemies of Islam. Holding that Islam is now under attack, they see unremitting jihad as both defensive in character and the single most important Muslim religious obligation” (57).

Turning his attention next to the ongoing Israeli—Palestinian conflict, he first examines the career of Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem (1921–1948), a virulent anti-Semite who attempted to partner with the Nazi regime, broadcasting his calls for *jihad* against the Zionists and the Jews of Palestine from a Berlin radio during the Second World War, and who provided the foundational underpinnings for today’s radical Islamists who “consider all of Palestine to be an inalienable part of *dar al-Islam* and are therefore ‘obliged,’ at least in theory, to wage defensive *jihad* against the Zionists whom they regard as having forcibly ‘invaded’ the land. According to a strict interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, the obligation to expel the Jews was and remains a non-negotiable religious imperative” (97). Rubenstein further rejects any notion that Nazism itself died with the death of Hitler in 1945 and the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–1946:

If anything, the mutual feeling of affinity between radical Islam and contemporary Nazism is stronger than ever, for contemporary Islam is the one movement that has the numbers and the power seriously to offer an alternative to Western civilization that both the extreme right and left despise. (102)

Indeed, in the face of growing Islamic radicalism in Britain, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and so forth, which is directed primarily toward both the Jews on the continent and in the State of Israel as the twin sources of all that imperils the planet today, Europe and the West’s thirst for oil and seeming willingness to continue to act submissively is a holdover, he argues, from “a reading of Christian theology that remains deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of many clergy and laity, namely that the Jews have been punitively exiled from their land for rejecting Christ” (113). While many in the secular academy today would reject *heilsgeschichte* (German, “holy history,” that is, reading the past through the lens of one’s own religious tradition) as an understanding of either historical or contemporary events, for Rubenstein and other scholars of religion such perspectives *must* be taken into consideration when analyzing these events.

With regard to Iran and its nuclear agenda, at least according to its President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his stated goal of “wiping Israel off the map,”<sup>1</sup> he further insists that “Iran’s hostility to Israel is very largely grounded in religion” (124), largely because “the Ayatollahs dwell in an entirely different moral universe than any we in the West have had to deal with” (145). If Rubenstein is correct, then such a culture and religious climate which fosters death as a viable option for its citizens rather than life will, for the foreseeable future, see itself on a cataclysmic confrontational course with the West. Rubenstein is not saying that such, indeed, is the very essence of either the Qur’an or Islamic religion; rather he is arguing that today’s radical Islamists and their ilk are loudly presenting to the uninitiated and unknowing, the disaffected and the disenfranchised—particularly the young in many Arab countries (and even, to some degree, in the West itself) where access to a positive economic future and social services are severely limited—a terribly viable alternative to their present existence. And the fact is that the present state of disillusionment on the part of many throughout the Arab world continues to fuel the increasing rage toward the West, toward Jews, and toward Israel, leading to frustration and manifesting itself in increasing jihadist violence.

Rubenstein has written an important and significant book regardless of how depressing and negative his conclusions are. His reading of the past, the present, and the future is such that we ignore his insights to our detriment. As a scholar of religion, his voice deserves to be taken seriously not only by those in other academic disciplines but by the general public as well.

### **Note**

1. Spoken to 4,000 students in Tehran at a program called “The World without Zionism” in 2005. Nazila Fathi, “Iran’s New President Says Israel ‘Must Be Wiped Off the Map,’” *New York Times*, 27 October 2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/10/26.world/africa/26iht-iran.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/26/world/africa/26iht-iran.html) (accessed 18 May 2010).