

# An Interview with Professor Richard L. Rubenstein in *The World & I*, 1991

The following interview appeared in *The World & I* in February 1991, twenty four years ago.

**W&I:** Could you speak on the Jewish Islamic issue from the point of view of a Jewish scholar?

**RUBENSTEIN:** I don't think there is a specific Jewish-Islamic issue. First, I believe that Islam regards itself as the original true religion, whose fundamental meaning was revealed by the Prophet Mohammad, and that Islam regards both Judaism and Christianity as distorted views of the original true religion, so that inevitably Islam has an interpretation of both Judaism and Christianity that neither can accept. Second, I believe that in the history of Christendom there have been three possible and two actual challenges to Christendom. One was Judaism. The second was Islam, and the third was atheistic communism. Judaism was not a real challenge to Christendom for the simple reason that the Jews simply were not that culturally influential or numerous for Judaism to be a challenge after Christianity became the religion of the Roman world.

Islam, on the other hand, was the most powerful of all challenges to Christendom. In 711, Islamic forces occupied almost the entire Iberian peninsula. At one time or another, large parts of Christian Europe were occupied by Islamic forces, including Bulgaria, Romania, the Balkans, southern Italy, and large parts of southern Russia, namely, the Ukraine. Historically, going almost right back to the beginning, there has been this challenge to Christendom which Islam constituted.

Now, in the last two centuries, Islam has had a series of cultural shocks. For one thing, Islam was unable to do what the Japanese have done, namely, to meet the challenge of Western modernization. When Islam first entered Europe in the eighth century, it was the superior culture. It had a level of sophistication and culture that was far higher than that of northern Europe. For several centuries, the victories of Islam were such that the victories themselves were taken as signs of the superiority and the truth of the Islamic faith. Therefore, the shock was all the greater when, starting in the eighteenth century, European countries turned out to be quite different. The way the European countries turned out to be quite different was that they had effectively modernized. They had effectively gone through the Renaissance and

the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and they had the capacity to develop skills and to advance learning in a way that left the Islamic world behind, at least in the area of power.

What the Islamic world did have, what they have to this day, is the Shari'a, that is, the Islamic way of life as found in the laws that derive from the Koran. To this day, undoubtedly, the Islamic world looks down on the world that came from the European Enlightenment as a world that lacks real morals and lack real dicipline of the kind that a traditional Muslim would have.

**W&I:** In the Middle Ages the Islamic world was ahead scientifically and culturally, but then they fell behind. Why?

**RUBENSTEIN:** The Islamic world fell behind scientifically and culturally because they were so convinced of the superiority of their way that they saw no reason to adapt to modernization, whereas the European Christian nations were able to adapt to modernization in way that Islam was not.

For two centuries, the Islamic world experienced a kind of inner dislocation because they were supposed to be the true religion and the superior civilization, yet here they saw the infidels as victorious all over. In Asia, the British took over the Islamic domination of the Indian subcontinent. The Dutch took over Indonesia. The British took over Egypt; the French took over Syria. This was not the world that Islam had been used to. Then Islam tried to overcome this world, the new situation in which they found themselves being at least inferior in power to Europe. They tried secularization, modernization, and Westernization. Unlike the Japanese, who also tried modernization and Westernization but were able to do this in a way that allowed them to preserve their cultural integrity, the Islamic world was unable to create this same kind of a synthesis. It is not enough to modernize. If you ruin your culture while modernizing, then modernization has done you no good whatsoever.

I think one of the worst shocks to the Islamic world came in 1967 when the el Kuds, which is what they call Jerusalem, fell to the Israelis. But remember how that '67 war started: The Egyptians made it perfectly clear that they were going to blockade the Israelis and the UN troops summarily got out of the way. The Israelis pleaded with the Jordanians to stay out of the war, in which case there wouldn't have been any problem with the West Bank. When the Jordanians came into the war, the I sraelis, in one fell swoop, in order to defend themselves, took the whole territory of Palestine for the first time in almost two thousand years. Jerusalem, the third most holy city in the Islamic world, fell to th Jews. Of course, Jerusalem is the holy city of the Jews.

This made matters even worse. Not only had the Islamic world experienced defeats at the hand of the Christian world, whose power was obvious, but this small group of Jews also inflicted military defeat on them, and for the very same reason, which is that the Jews had learned from the Christians how to adapt to modernization in a way that the Islamic world has not. Basically, had the Islamic world adapted to modernization, then there is no way that the Jews could have won those wars.

**W&I:** Islamic scholars and religious leaders claim that there is no impediment in Islam to rapprochement between Islam and Judaism, that this is purely a political problem.

**RUBENSTEIN:** It is not true that, as Islamic leaders and scholars claim, there is no religious impediment or no religious tension between Islam and Judaism, that this is purely a political problem. I respect Islam as a culture highly, but there is a real religious difference between both Judaism and Christianity and Islam. That is, Islam claims that it alone is the original true religion of God, and both Judaism and Christianity are distortions. Islam divides the world into the Dar al-Islam and the Dar al-Harb. That is, the Dar al-Islam is that part of the world that is in Islamic hands and is governed by traditional Islamic law. The Dar al-Harb is in the hands of infidels. From the Islamic point of view, since Islam is the true religion, its aim is to make sure that ultimately the whole world falls under the Dar al-Islam. Now, for that which has already become part of the world of the true religion, namely Islam, from their point of view, to fall back into infidel hands is a real defeat. So this conflict is not just political; it is religious as well.

Another very important point: I don't think most Americans realize just how important and how much of a religious significance the oil boom of 1973 had for the Islamic world. The oil boom of 1973 convinced the Islamic world that a tremendous power reversal was taking place. If you look at where the oil is located, the greatest amount of oil is to be found in those countries that are completely loyal to the most traditional reading of Islam, namely Libya and Saudi Arabia and also some of the emirates. So it was not hard for Islamic thinkers to see this as God's confirmation of the standing and status of Islam. They also saw a direct correlation between faithfulness and fidelity to traditional Islam and the new prosperity.

I think this was very important to them. At the same time, they saw the 1973 war between Israel, Egypt, and Syria as resulting in a victory for the Islamic world, although in reality it was a stalemate.

They then saw their former colonial masters coming to them and treating them deferentially, as people they were dependent upon for their economic well being.

The Saudis, for example, were able to tell the English, you can't show the film *The Death of A Princess* on your television, and the English gave way. The Saudis, the American government, the French – all of them saw this tremendous increase of Islamic wealth and they began to behave towards Islam in a way that they had never behaved before. The oil wealth gave Islam huge amounts of money, which were spent for Islamic causes, for the strengthening of Islam. At the same time, there was a disenchantment with Western ways, not only by Iran but throughout the Islamic world, a tum back to the fundamentals of Islam.

In 1973, after the oil boycott had been instituted and OPEC had quadrupled its prices, one of the Arab ministers said, "This is our revenge for Poitiers." Poitiers (or Tours) was the battle in 732 at which the Christian forces, under Charles Martel, finally stopped the Moslems who had come all the way into Spain and were succeeding in getting into France in the eighth century. These people have very long memories. They now see that, with the oil, they have the possibility of again becoming dominant in a way.

As far as the Jews are concerned, I am absolutely convinced that the Muslims are not going to rest content simply with a Palestinian state. That will be the prelude to the next move, which will be to make the whole area once again part of the Dar al-Islam, that is, an Islamic precinct, which it had been for centuries. That entails either expelling all the Israelis or killing them off.

I also am frankly very scared about the new situation that we find ourselves in with Iraq. If you listen to Saddam Hussein's speech of August 9th, here you have a man who is calling for jihad, for holy war. He was appealing to all of Islam to expel the infidels from being near and polluting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The oil boom of the 1970s was seen as confirmation of God's grace toward Islam. Now the next step is to see whether there is some way in which a revived Islam, led ironically by a secular leader, Saddam Hussein, can dominate the Christian West with oil and the high-tech weapons oil can buy.

The question of Saddam's being or not being a believer is like the question they asked the taxi driver in Beirut. The driver was going from one part of the city to the next and at a checkpoint he was asked, "Are you Christian or Moslem?" He said, "No, I am an atheist." Then they asked, "What kind of atheist, Christian or Moslem?" So it is quite clear that Saddam Hussein, whether he is atheist or secularist, is still a Moslem secularist and he is calling on all these age-old aspects of militant Islam in order to make the West dependent upon his control of the world's energy supply. This is a religious conflict. It is a continuation of a fight that goes back to Poitiers. If he succeeds, it would be a final reversal of the fortunes of Islam for the last two centuries of humiliation.

So I don't see the whole conflict as essentially a Jewish-Islamic conflict' I see it in much larger terms. One of the most fascinating aspects of the conflict is to consider those powers that have nuclear ballistic capabilities or will get them very soon. The long-range high-tech cannon invented by the American renegade weapons genius, Gerard Bull – the cannon that had been manufactured in separate parts and that the British finally discovered – had a range of three thousand miles as reported in *Scientific American*. This indicates to me that Saddam Hussein not only wants nuclear bombs – he obviously has been trying to get them for years – but he also wants intercontinental ballistic missiles. What does he want them for? He wants to be able to tell the United States, "We will control what prices oil goes for, and if we control the energy of the world and you cannot touch us because we have the nuclear weapons to defend ourselves, then we will become dominant in the world in a way that Allah intended us to do." I see here that his appeal is to a religious war, to a holy war. He puts the conservative Arabs, like President Mubarak and the Saudi royal family, in a terribly difficult bind. He speaks the language of traditional Islam. He is making these people into sellouts for the infidel in the eyes of the masses. He has called upon the masses in Egypt and the ordinary people in Saudi Arabia to disobey their rulers and to join in his fight in the name of the ancient rivalry, the Crusades, the Muslim entry into Europe, and all that.

What scares me is the possibility that no matter how much the Iranians hated the Iraqis in their war, the call of fundamental Islam, which Saddam is making now, is one that they are going to hear. So we may have a very, very nasty kind of conflict on our hands.

**W&I:** Islamic scholars and religious leaders say that Islamic fundamentalism is a distortion of real Islam and that it is being used for political purposes. That's one point. Second point: All of the Muslims we have spoken to express a certain bitterness at what they see as the lack of evenhandedness in the West. They claim that America, for example, supposedly stands up for the principle of human rights and the rule of law, but that it applies them selectively. It is not applied for example, to Israeli behavior in Palestine, whereas it is applied to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

**RUBENSTEIN:** Here again I just think they are not seeing things straight. First of all, forgetting about whether the Israeli behavior is justified or not, the fact of the matter is that Israeli behavior will not result in a hostile country controlling half of the world's oil supply. Where as Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait and his ability by virtue of his incredible strength vis a vis the rest of the Arabs, if America had not stepped in, to control the oil supply of Saudi Arabia, to dictate its prices, would have created a world wide menace. The issue is: Is America going to allow a power which is entirely hostile to control its economic destiny? The Israelis were never in a position to do this.

As far as the Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned, I personally don't think the Israelis owe the Palestinians anything. If the Palestinians had the power to do so, they would drive the Israelis out to the sea. It is that simple. And if you know that people are out to drive you into the sea and – after the Nazi Holocaust – that they are in alliance with people who promised to gas Jews, then you have a situation where the Israelis look at every single Palestinian as an enemy.

**W&I:** Is it fair to invoke the Nazi Holocaust in this dispute?

**RUBENSTEIN:** You invoke the Nazi Holocaust if you get a man who says, "I am going to gas half of Israel out of existence." That is when you invoke the Nazi Holocaust. Hitler killed millions of Jews with gas, and then Saddam Hussein comes along and says, "Look, I've got the weapons and I can gas half of Israel out of existence." That is very, very provocative language, and it is using precisely the method that is bound to create the greatest possible anger and distrust on the part of the Jews.

**W&I:** And you interpret his language as deliberately chosen?

**RUBENSTEIN:** Absolutely. This is a man who has proven that every weapon that he has had, he has been willing to use. If he is ever in a position to use this weapon, he will. The one thing that gives the Israelis any kind of security is that the cost of doing this would be so great in terms of the damage the Israelis could do to his country that he has second and third thoughts about it. You don't make threats of this kind lightly. There is a saying at the end of one of Elie Wiesel's books that Hitler was the only one who kept his promises to the Jews. He promised to kill them and he did. Now, after Hitler, anybody who promises to kill Jews is going to be taken seriously by Jews. Anybody who promises to gas half the Jews of Israel is going to be taken very, very seriously.

I was in Israel a year ago. I was also in Israel three weeks after the end of the Six Day War of 1967. When I was there in 1967, all the hotels on the Jewish side were filled. Somebody said "Well, why don't you try East Jerusalem and go to an Arab hotel." We went over there. They treated us with exquisite courtesy. They were ambivalent because until the Six Day War there were no Jews in East Jerusalem and all of a sudden they either had to have Jewish guests or the hotels were going to be empty. They were courteous to us, the food was good. We liked it sufficiently that for several years we came back to the hotels in East Jerusalem. But there was no way in the world that I could go to a hotel in East Jerusalem last year. One person I know, Menachem Stem on the faculty of the Hebrew University, was walking from his office at Hebrew University to his home and he was stabbed to death by Palestinians.

I was not going to take that chance. That does not mean that every Palestinian was going to stab me to death, but I could not take the chance. I had to assume that there was a potential enemy in every Palestinian because there had been enough stabbings and things like that so that I could not possibly stay at that East Jerusalem hotel.

When people are that divided, where there is absolutely no trust between them, and where one side perceives the other side as dominating and the other side perceives the other side as, in: "They will stab us to death if they can, in any back alley, et cetera," then you have got a witches' brew.

**W&I:** When we speak to the two sides, each blames the other wholly for the conflict.

**RUBENSTEIN:** I don't blame the Arabs. If I were a Palestinian, I would see the Israelis as occupiers. I would see the Israelis as foreigners who have come back to a country that they had left centuries ago. But I am not a Palestinian. I liken this thing to the conflict of Antigone and Creon. Antigone must be loyal to the law of the family, which says she has got to bury her brother. Creon is the king. He has got to be loyal to the law of the polis, which says that the rebel against the polis must not have an honorable burial. So they end up – both of them having some right on their side – in a clash that neither can avoid. That is the way I see the situation.

**W&I:** You used the term *witches' brew* a minute ago and now again you come back to language that suggests a hopeless view?

**RUBENSTEIN:** That's my view. I have said for twenty years that the Israelis will survive as long as they have the weapons that make any attempt to wipe them out unacceptably costly. And basically what this means is that you have got in the Middle East now what used to exist between the United States and the Soviet Union. As long as the Israelis have a credible second-strike nuclear capability, they have a chance to survive. The Israelis have got to convince the Arabs that even after they are overwhelmed, the Israelis can unleash so many nuclear bombs that it is not worth the Arabs' trying. And that's, I think, what the situation comes down to. There's simply no way to adjudicate this thing. From this point of view I would therefore not give in an inch.

I have no problem coming to a conference like this and having very cordial conversations with Islamic scholars; I enjoy talking to them. The problem is that you have got to find some way that each side cannot see the situation as a zero-sum game, but right now they both see it as a zero-sum game. It may be want of imagination on my part, but I don't see any alternatives, and I have tried to explore all of the alternatives. I am not saying that this is the way I

want things to be, obviously. I do what I can in the name of world peace. I have done credible work in this field, but I have never found a credible way of mediating the Israeli-Arab conflict.

**W&I:** Is there any metalevel context that the two sides can go to?

**RUBENSTEIN:** If I live in the United States and I meet an Islamic scholar who also lives in the United States, we have the metalevel context of American democracy. We are both free to pursue our religious life and we can enter into dialogue with each other. But he is not going to impose his religion on me and I am not going to impose my religion on him. Over in Israel, you don't have that metalevel context. So the fact that, for example a Moslem makes supercessionary claims vis-a-vis Judaism or a Christian makes them doesn't bother me in the least, as long as there is a context in which we can share our ideas, share our insights. But when you get in a situation where the supercessionary claims and political conflict mesh together and there is no trustworthy metalevel, then you're stuck. Certainly the United Nations is no place for the metalevel. By virtue of the Arab power and also the number of Arab states, the United Nations has been consistently pro Arab from the very, very beginning. No Israeli trusts the United Nations.

Nor are the great powers, even the United States, able to offer a metalevel context. The very simple reason is that each of them has its own interest and will act not in some impartial way in mediating between conflicting views but ultimately in terms of the state's own interests. Now it may very well be that some metalevel religious force can do it. I know there are people that you and I know who hope for and are working toward this, but with regard to this particular conflict, I think this is going to be one of the hardest nuts they are going to have to crack.

**W&I:** You speak like an advocate for the Israeli-Jewish side.

**RUBENSTEIN:** I haven't closed the door. I don't advocate this as a way of being. But I don't see any way out. There is a difference between not seeing a way out and wanting things to be the way they are. I feel these things very strongly, not because I am an advocate for one side, but because I have spent a good deal of my life studying Jewish history and the place of Judaism in the modern world. If you ask me about this particular conflict – especially at this time, when I see the real possibility of a revival of a very old holy war that could really endanger the United States, especially if we get sucked into something where thousands of Americans die and go back in plastic bags and then we are still dependent on the Arabs for our oil – I am very scared by this scenario. Saddam Hussein is convinced that he can do it.



Right after the Six Day War, I went to this Arab hotel in Jerusalem. We had never been to the old city because before the Six Day War, Jews couldn't go into the old city. So we started to walk over the old city. A young thin Palestinian, maybe about twenty, twenty-two, comes up to me and says, "Would you like a guide?" I thought, well, this would be a prudent thing to do, let him tell us and show us, et cetera. And for the next two hours, I heard the most bitter rage and resentment against Israel I have ever heard in my life. He assumed that we were Christian. My wife's hair was blonde, she has blue eyes, and since we came from East Jerusalem he made that assumption. My feeling in the matter was that it was much more important for me to hear what he had to say rather than argue with him. So for two hours I let him talk and it was clear that they were going to drive them (Jews) out to the sea and they would wipe them out one of these days – it was just a question of time.

Finally, after two hours, I paid the guide. I said, "There is one thing I think you ought to know: We're not Christian. We're Jewish." He said, "Oh, you're Jewish. You Jews have long memories." I said 'Yes.'" He said, "You remember the destruction of the Temple by the Romans." I said, "Yes, we do. And now we have Jerusalem back again." He said, 'Well, we are your cousins. What makes you think that we have shorter memories? We remember the Crusades.'" I said, "I know you have long memories. That's why there can't be peace between us."

**W&I:** Maybe you should learn to forget.

**RUBENSTEIN:** The point is that you are able to forget only if the danger isn't there: If it is a fantasy danger, then you forget. But if the danger is real, and it is, you don't forget. You don't think Saddam Hussein isn't thinking of the Crusades now? You don't think he isn't trying to get the masses to think in terms of the Crusades? Listen to his rhetoric. Read his speeches. I have been following this thing very closely.

Well, that is probably about as bleak an analysis of the situation as you are going to get, isn't it? Remember Elie Wiesel's comment, "Hitler kept his promises to the Jews." These are people who have promised to drive the Israelis out to the sea, and then they still talk like that when they are broadcasting in Arabic. These are promises that I simply take seriously.

**W&I:** The Islamic religious leaders and scholars tend to say that this is a kind of popular hysteria whipped up for political reasons by unscrupulous politicians and that it is not the real voice of Islam that you are bearing.

**RUBENSTEIN:** If you are talking about people like Sheikh Zaki Badawi, who lives in London and is a very cultivated man, I would say, undoubtedly, he is quite sincere about this. But I

think you are going to find that there are a lot of Islamic scholars in places like Iraq and Iran who are quite sincere in their particular union of politics and religion, that this is not just manipulation. It is too deeply rooted in history, in their history. They did not conquer as far as they did simply for the sake of material advantage. They conquered on an idea that they have the true faith, that they were giving people the true faith. And very few people whom they conquered and converted ever apostasized from their religion. Their political moves always had a religious foundation, and I believe that is still true today.

I believe that they interpret the oil in religious terms. I will also tell you that there is an Achilles heel to this event, and that is that if you are earning your income from oil, you are not producing any thing. The Japanese are earning their income on value-added production. Once the oil gives out, what do they have? The Japanese, who are producing things, will find something instead of oil. But what will the Arabs have after the oil is gone?

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