

# Richard L. Rubenstein

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**Richard Lowell Rubenstein** (born January 8, 1924 in New York City) is an educator in religion and a writer in the American Jewish community, noted particularly for his contributions to Holocaust theology. A Connecticut resident, he was married to art historian Betty Rogers Rubenstein (deceased 2013).

## Contents

- 1 Education
- 2 Career
- 3 Holocaust and Death of God
- 4 Unification Church
- 5 Other writings
- 6 See also
- 7 References
- 8 Autobiography
- 9 Bibliography
- 10 Assessments
- 11 External links

## Education

Rubenstein began his tertiary education at Hebrew Union College, an institution within the Reform Judaism tradition. He graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a B.A. degree. He then was awarded the Master of Hebrew Literature from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative tradition) and was also ordained as a rabbi by that institution. He then studied at Harvard Divinity School and was awarded a Master of Sacred Theology degree. Finally, he pursued doctoral studies and received a Ph.D. from Harvard University, in 1960.<sup>[1]</sup>

In addition to his earned degrees, Rubenstein has been honored with two honorary doctorates: Doctor of Hebrew Letters (Jewish Theological Seminary) and Doctor of Humane Letters (Grand Valley State University).

## Career

Following his ordination in 1952, Rubenstein was the rabbi of two Massachusetts congregations in succession, and then in 1956 became Assistant Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and chaplain to the Jewish students at Harvard University, Radcliffe and Wellesley, where he served until 1958. From 1958 to 1970 he was the Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and chaplain to the Jewish students at the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie-Mellon University and Duquesne University.<sup>[1]</sup> At the University of Pittsburgh he also taught an upper division course on French Existentialism to famously packed lecture halls. Rubenstein taught in religious studies at Florida State University from 1970 to 1995 and held the professorial chair. He then became President and Professor of Religion at the University of Bridgeport, where he served from 1995 to 1999.<sup>[2]</sup>

In addition to his role as an educator, Rubenstein has been a newspaper columnist for a Japanese newspaper

and has written many books concerned with the Holocaust, theology, Jewish-Christian relations, ethics, and politics.

## Holocaust and Death of God

Rubenstein emerged in the 1960s as a significant writer on the meaning and impact of the Holocaust for Judaism. His first book, *After Auschwitz*, explored radical theological frontiers in Jewish thought. In Rubenstein's argument, the experience of the Holocaust totally shattered the traditional Judaic concept of God, especially as the God of the covenant with Abraham. In the covenant, the God of Israel is the God of history. Rubenstein argued that Jews could no longer advocate the notion of an omnipotent God at work in history or espouse the election of Israel as the chosen people. In the wake of the Holocaust, he believed Jews have lost hope and there is no ultimate meaning to life.

"[A]s children of the Earth, we are undeceived concerning our destiny. We have lost all hope, consolation and illusion."<sup>[3]</sup>

In *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein spoke of the "death of God" and that the covenant had died. He did not mean he was now an atheist, nor that religion had to be discarded as irrelevant. However, he did not believe in a transcendent God, rather he believed in God as the Ground of Being. An excerpt from *After Auschwitz* to this point:

" Terms like "ground" and "source" stand in contrast to the terms used for the transcendent biblical God of history who is known as a supreme king, a father, a creator, a judge, a maker. When he creates the world, he does so as do males, producing something external to himself. He remains essentially outside of and judges the creative processes he has initiated. As ground and source, God creates as does a mother, in and through her own very substance. As ground of being, God participates in all the joys and sorrows of the drama of creation which is, at the same time, the deepest expression of the divine life. God's unchanging unitary life and that of the cosmos' ever-changing, dynamic multiplicity ultimately reflect a single unitary reality."<sup>[4]</sup>

He tried to explore what the nature and form of religious existence could possibly comprise after Auschwitz (i.e., after the experience of the Holocaust). Rubenstein suggested that perhaps the way forward was to choose some form of paganism.

When his work was released in 1966, it appeared at a time when a "death of God" movement was emerging in radical theological discussions among Protestant theologians such as Gabriel Vahanian, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J. J. Altizer. Among those Protestants, the discussions centred on modern secular unbelief, the collapse of the belief in any transcendent order to the universe, and their implications for Christianity. Theologians such as Altizer felt at the time that "as 'Death of God' theologians we have now been joined by a distinguished Jewish theologian, Dr Richard Rubenstein."<sup>[5]</sup>

During the 1960s, the "Death of God" movement achieved considerable notoriety and was featured as the cover story of the April 8, 1966, edition of *Time* magazine. However, as a movement of thought among theologians in Protestant circles, it had dissipated from its novelty by the turn of the 1970s.

## Unification Church

Rubenstein was a defender of the Unification Church and served on its Advisory Council,<sup>[1]</sup> as well as on the board of directors of the church-owned *Washington Times* newspaper.<sup>[6]</sup> In the 1990s he served as

president of the University of Bridgeport which was then affiliated with the church.<sup>[7]</sup> Rubenstein said about the church's founder Sun Myung Moon:

"I especially appreciated Rev. Moon's commitment to the fight against Communism. From his own first-hand, personal experience and out of his religious convictions, he understood how tragic a political and social blight that movement had been. I had been in East and West Berlin the week the Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961 and had visited communist Poland in 1965. Unfortunately, many of my liberal academic colleagues did not understand the full nature of the threat as did Rev. Moon. I was impressed with the sophistication of Rev. Moon's anti-communism. He understood communism's evil, but he also stood ready to meet with communist leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Kim Il Sung in the hope of changing or moderating their views."<sup>[8]</sup>

## Other writings

Rubenstein has undertaken a psychoanalytic study of Paul the Apostle in his book *My Brother Paul*. He has also continued with Holocaust themes in later writings and has adjusted some of his earlier views about God in light of the Kabbalah.

## See also

- God is dead
- Holocaust theology
- Unification Church and Judaism

## References

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2. "A Brief Biographical Note", University of Bridgeport website, June 2003 (<http://www1bpt.bridgeport.edu/~rlr/CVNOT2003-June.htm>) Accessed 2008-09-14
3. After Auschwitz, p. 70
4. After Auschwitz, ch. 16 [http://www.newenglishreview.org/Richard\\_L.\\_Rubenstein/God\\_after\\_the\\_Death\\_of\\_God/](http://www.newenglishreview.org/Richard_L._Rubenstein/God_after_the_Death_of_God/)
5. John Warwick Montgomery and Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Altizer-Montgomery Dialogue: A Chapter in the God is Dead Controversy* (InterVarsity Press, Chicago, 1967), p.7
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## Assessments

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- Michael Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Betty Rogers Rubenstein and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995).

## External links

- Richard L. Rubenstein Papers at the American Jewish Archives (includes a biographical sketch) (<http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/FindingAids/RichardRubenstein.htm>)
- Short biography ([https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0017\\_0\\_17125.html](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0017_0_17125.html))

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