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Review

The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson by Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem M. Friedman

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in séances following the Civil War. It was not until the ravishing of World War I and the Spanish influenza that the problem of death came into clear and painful focus.

Anatomy of a Séance is ostensibly a history of Canadian Spiritualism but ineluctably it is rather a history of the Spiritualist interaction between the United States and Canada. Canadians were (and are) a considerable presence at Lily Dale, the famous Spiritualist community in Florida, and crossed frequently into the border states for trance lectures; others like Austin became permanent expatriates. And here the American reader encounters McMullin's most surprising claim: that the religious climate of Canada was significantly more conservative than that of the United States. The official transfer of British law to Canada in 1892 brought with it an anti-fraud section aimed at witchcraft and fortune-telling. The language of the law was strong enough that the conjuring of spirits could get one prosecuted for séances and indeed some Spiritualists were. According to McMullin, the press presented Spiritualists as hucksters and con men and the law occasionally charged mediums with fraud, thus driving the committed and the curious into domestic explorations rather than public ones.

Anatomy of a Séance does not contribute significantly to the theoretical apparatus for studying Spiritualism. McMullin gives an appropriate nod to Ann Braude's argument about the opportunities for women that Spiritualism presented and he covers the requisite influence of Mesmerism and the progressive embrace of science. He forwards the somewhat slender thesis that Spiritualist theology allowed for a reconciliation between a scientific worldview and a folk experience of religion. While this claim is undoubtedly correct, McMullin seems more interested in establishing a Canadian lineage of Spiritualism than in pursuing its intellectual repercussions. And this is precisely where the book shines—it is a clearly and cogently written work documenting a Canadian religious history that has been entirely underrepresented in the scholarship on Spiritualism. McMullin has meticulously researched his terrain and brings to light dozens of characters who would have remained undiscovered pioneers of Canadian religious innovation and tolerance. For the clarity and care that the author invests in his subjects and for the milestone of exploring the Canadian embrace of the spirit world, *Anatomy of a Séance* is a most welcome addition to the literature of Spiritualism.

Cathy Gutierrez, Sweet Briar College

The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson. By Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem M. Friedman. Princeton University Press, 2010. xix + 343 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

Students of new religious movements will greatly benefit from *The Rebbe*, a new biography which explores the life and career of the last leader of

Chabad, the most noted Hasidic group of our time. It is an amazing story, whether viewed as the biography of an individual or as an account of a community. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) was born into a rabbinical Hasidic family in czarist Russia but moved away from the Hasidic milieu as a young man. Accompanied by his wife, the daughter of Chabad's then reigning rebbe, Schneerson moved first to Berlin and then to Paris, where he obtained a secular education and was trained as an electric engineer. Fleeing the Nazis in 1941, the Schneersons reached New York City, where they were reunited with Chabad's leader in his new headquarters in Crown Heights. Schneerson assumed spiritual leadership of the group somewhat unexpectedly in 1950, following the death of his father-in-law. He soon began a program that transformed Chabad into a movement of outreach emissaries, spread out in hundreds of centers around the globe. Leading his group away from the separatist lifestyle of ultra-Orthodoxy, Schneerson inspired his followers to spread Hasidic thought and to urge fellow Jews to increase their observance of the commandments. His group has also called upon non-Jews to follow the seven Noachide laws. Chabad's initiatives have inspired outreach projects by other Jewish groups, thus creating an unprecedented movement in modern times of return to Jewish tradition.

The heart of the Chabad's new outreach ideology was a catastrophic millennial understanding of the events of the twentieth century. The rebbe was certain that the Messiah's arrival was near and that the duty of the Hasidim was to help bring that event about. In the process, Schneerson transformed himself into a revered prophet and ultimately a messianic figure in the eyes of his followers. With no heir to replace him as rebbe, Schneerson hoped that the Messiah would arrive before he died. Some of his followers speculated that he might never die but would reveal himself to be the redeemer. Similar expectations persisted even after Schneerson's death in the summer of 1994, causing tensions within the group between "Messianists" and more moderate elements. Critics outside the movement pointed out that claims about Schneerson's Messiahship and immortality resemble claims made by followers of another Jewish Messianic leader two millennia ago. Surprisingly, the group's outreach activities have continued without interruption, despite the lack of an authoritative leader.

The book reads at times as a detective story. Probing the missing links in the rebbe's life, Heilman and Friedman have produced amazing discoveries, notably the non-Hasidic life that Schneerson lived in the 1920s and 1930s. The authors use sociological and psychological insights and do not shy away from pointing to financial calculation as a motive in the rebbe's life—as when, for example, they explain Schneerson's decision to join his father-in-law's Hasidic establishment in New York in the 1940s. One of the book's important insights is the revelation that the rebbe himself struggled as a young man to accommodate faith and life in the larger world; he

therefore understood the inner world of modern educated Jews, who, he believed, were ready to re-embrace the supernatural and assume a more observant Jewish life.

The Rebbe is an outstanding achievement. It is not the first book about Chabad and its deceased leader, but it is the most even-handed and comprehensive. It is also the most sophisticated, using theories related to millennial movements to ask what we should expect to see in Chabad when to all appearances its prophecy failed. I highly recommend this book to all students of messianic and new religious movements as it offers a new perspective for the study of such groups, their ideas and leaders, in our time.

Yaakov Ariel, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America. By David F. Holland. Oxford University Press, 2011. 286 pages. \$65.00 cloth.

Students of religion in the United States have access to a variety of excellent books that chronicle the fascinating and sometimes turbulent developments in the history of American religion, a history that includes not only the evolution, development, and interaction of the so-called mainline denominations, but also the emergence of multiple new religious movements, some consigned to rather short lifetimes and some still with us. David Holland's *Sacred Borders* is unique in that it examines American religion through the lens of a specific theme, namely the open or closed nature of the Christian canon, or Bible. Given the self-perception of much of the American population during the time period examined by Holland, the rather widespread belief in the possibility of new revelations should not be surprising. This was a new, expanding nation, viewed by many of its citizens as a Christian "City on a Hill" providentially established by God, or a New Israel being settled by God's new Chosen People, all done under the confident justification of Manifest Destiny, which provided the sanction of Divine Providence for the settlement of the new land and the displacement of native peoples. With such an elevated sense of the spiritual mission of America and Americans, the belief that God might, after centuries of silence, again speak directly to his people in an immediate and authoritative manner, just as he had previously done to the Jews and early Christians, rather naturally follows from such a self-perception.

Holland explores a variety of traditions and key individuals from the period of the Puritans through the mid-nineteenth century, exploring the diverse perspectives on the question of whether or not the Bible, as a divine revelation, is a closed canon, in the sense that no further revelations will be received, or an open canon, in the sense that revelation is an on-going