

BOOK REVIEW

The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and Around the World edited by C. M. Moreman. 3 volumes. Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013. 236 + 299 + 270 pp. \$163 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-313-39947-3.

Christopher M. Moreman, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of East Bay, edited this three-volume anthology comprising 43 chapters contributed by as many authors. Each of the three volumes is divided into three or four sections, with two to eight thematically grouped chapters. Each volume is separately indexed. Photographs, tables, and other relevant illustrations are provided in limited numbers.

The initial impetus for this project came from the work of the “Death, Dying, and Beyond program unit” at the American Academy of Religion, established in 2004 by Moreman. He tried to focus on Spiritualism as a specific religious movement, “not to be confused with general spirituality or with mediumship in a broader global and historical context” (Volume 1:x). Defined as such, Spiritualism is a relatively young movement that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in America and rapidly developed worldwide.

There has not been such a large analysis of the worldwide Spiritualist movement since Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s two-volume *The History of Spiritualism*, first published in 1926, and recently reedited in French (Doyle 2014). But Moreman’s anthology affords a scholarly approach to this topic without any attempt to persuade of the correctness or wrongness of spiritualist doctrines. Even as Spiritualism has remained popular, it received relatively little academic attention: Such an anthology recognizes the lacuna and tries to rectify it. By doing so, it also contributes to a better understanding of all related areas, including scientific approaches to spiritualistic phenomena.

Rather than summarizing all 43 contributions (done very well by Walter Meyer zu Erpen 2014), I will attempt to extract the essence of the book, as my reading allows me, by quoting from a selection of chapters. I must clarify that I am not a specialist on this topic and have never been an adept of spiritualist practices or doctrines. This book thus forced me out of my habits, and asked of me a fair curiosity: I began each chapter with the naïve question of what it was going to teach me, and I was often surprised.

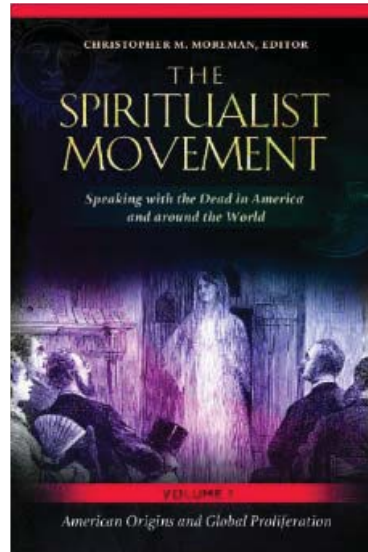
My first reaction was to face the lack of unity in what was called “the spiritualist movement.” I find it better to speak in the plural: They

are “spiritualist movements” with, as a possible common ground, the “interactions with the dead.” This feature is marginally present in many monotheist religions and other religious movements, but here it is a core principle around which are articulated *the creed* and *the community practices*. Besides, it may have been interesting to separate these two aspects as some spiritualist practices (like “turning tables”) were adopted without accepting the spiritualist interpretation. An example of that is the Protestant theologian and politician Agénor de Gasparin, for whom “turning tables” was a scientific anomaly which was not well understood through the doctrines of the “necromancers”

(Gasparin 1854). I do not think it is scientifically adequate to reduce this heterogeneity of the Spiritualist movements to local or personal “coloring” of a genuine American-born movement. Instead, works on the “plasticity of the psyche” in comparative history of religions showed that these singular appropriations are fundamental for the vitality and the effectiveness of these “orthopractices” (Mancini 2006, Mancini & Faivre 2011).

The first volume (14 chapters) examines Spiritualism’s “American Origins and Global Proliferation.” It contains excellent chapters by well-known historians of parapsychology (Massimo Biondi, Andreas Sommer, Trevor Hamilton). The plurality of spiritualist movements can also be seen in the fact that this anthology never succeeds in a unifying synthesis. All of the contributions are cases studies. Some are made about local arrangements (old cases in Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Iceland, and contemporary cases in United States, Canada, Ireland, and Brazil in Volume 1, Chapters 3 to 6 and 11 to 14), others are about some important figures’ interactions with several aspects of Spiritualism (Myers, James, Doyle, Jung, in Volume 1, Chapters 7 to 10), and still others about a transversal aspect as a point of doctrine or the use of a technology (in the other volumes). The work was divided among all the contributors, but there is a lack of integration of their contributions. I don’t say that such a synthesis is easy given the scope of the book, examining Spiritualism in all times and cultures!

The second volume (15 chapters) discusses “Belief, Practice, and Evidence for Life after Death.” The final section of this volume is the most



interesting for those interested in the scientific debate about evidence of survival, remembering that Spiritualism claims to be an evidence-based religion. Gary E. Schwartz summarized the contemporary experimental approach of mediumship (Volume 2, Chapter 10), Walter Meyer zu Erpen described experiments in séance-room phenomena (Volume 2, Chapter 12), Trevor Hamilton analyzed the Cross-Correspondence Automatic Writings (Volume 2, Chapter 15), Carlos Alavarado and Philip K. Wilson presented the development and reception of psychical research with mediums (Volume 2, Chapters 8 and 9). There is an excellent overview of “Cold Reading Strategies” by Chris A. Roe and Elizabeth C. Roxburgh which describes a complete model that still required some additional empirical validation (Volume 2, Chapter 11; see also their contribution on the subjective perspective of mediums, Volume 2, Chapter 4). All these contributions come from experts in the field. This final section also includes a biographical study of Konstantin Raudive and his instrumental trans-communication (Anita Stasulane, Chapter 14) and a sexualized account of the production of ectoplasm by well-known female mediums (L. Anne Delgado, Chapter 13). This last chapter disappointed me because Delgado used the erotic side of these researches as an argument against their empirical validity, multiplying over-interpretative assumptions and making some historical mistakes (for example, by not checking Lambert’s claims, see Evrard 2014).

The third volume (14 chapters) examines the “Social and Cultural Responses” to Spiritualism both during the heyday of the American spiritualist movement and today. Contributions are again diverse: interactions between Spiritualism and other religious traditions (Catholicism, Christian Science, Swedenborgism, Occultism, Golden Dawn), gender studies (Leah Fox’s rhetoric; male medium in Poe’s mesmeric fiction), race studies (African American; American Indian); and other cultural issues (wars, visual technologies, show business, art).

Meyer zu Erpen (2014:191–192) pointed out some topics that could have been further elaborated, but, from my point of view, this anthology addresses Spiritualism in a fairly comprehensive way and with a consistent quality. It will now be a must for any researcher who claims to work on this issue. It’s a big step toward a transdisciplinary scholarly approach that does not give precedence to one or the other perspective. Even those who are only interested in the scientific aspects of so-called spiritualistic phenomena will learn something—but this anthology gives clues as well about the past and present context in which these phenomena occur and are studied.

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