



HUMSAM PRISEN

Miracle Men and Mediators of Modernity: Abdu'l-Baha and Menachem Schneerson

Abstract by Margit Warburg

Abdu'l-Baha was the leader of the Baha'i religion from 1892 until his death in 1921. During his leadership, the Baha'i religion evolved from a largely Iranian Shi'ite setting to become a new religion with an increasing number of followers in the West. He also moved the centre of the religion to its present location in Haifa, Israel. Menachem Schneerson was the leader of Chabad from 1951 until his death in 1994. Chabad is one of the many orthodox Jewish groups, which left East Europe before World War II, and Chabad's present centre is in New York. Baha'i and Chabad are comparable but also contrasting examples of new religions that have successfully expanded from their original traditional setting to a global presence.

Abdu'l-Baha stood for a liberal and Menachem Schneerson stood for a conservative response to the challenges from modernity – challenges which have threatened many religious traditions to become obsolete. The two leaders had the religious authority to make the necessary adaptations of doctrines and practices in a dynamic interchange between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Both were strong personalities, and their followers ascribed them much charisma and roles as miracle makers. Religious movements under charismatic leadership will often experience a crisis at the leader's death, in particular if there is no obvious successor to take control. The challenge is to ensure an effective routinisation of charisma to fill out the void left by the leader's death. In this context, the Baha'is and Chabad have chosen different strategies: The Baha'is established a formal organization with elected bodies where individual charisma and miracles are downplayed. Chabad has yet no successor to the deceased rebbe who is venerated as a still active mediator of miracles and contact to God.