

THOMAS A. KSELMAN

Death and Afterlife in Modern France



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Thomas A. Kselman

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For Daniel, Joseph, and Julie

Si quelque chose doit rester sacré, aussi bien pour le
croyant que pour l'incrédule, ce sont les derniers
moments, le testament, les adieux solennels,
les funérailles, la tombe.

If something must remain sacred, for the
believer as well as for the unbeliever, it is the last
moments, the will, the solemn farewells,
the funeral, the tomb.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
*Du Principe de l'art et de
sa destination sociale*

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PREFACE

I BEGAN WORKING on this book about ten years ago, just after having completed a study of miracles and prophecies in nineteenth-century France. I was drawn to my current topic in part because recent work by Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle had shown how a study of the history of death could illuminate and deepen our understanding of cultural change. My training prepared me for research in this field, and I wanted to contribute something of value to the historical literature on death. Also, I hoped my research and writing would help me to sharpen my own thoughts about death and the afterlife. As other people who have worked in the field have noted, death is not a topic that can be viewed impersonally. In this work I have not undertaken any explicit comparisons, but I hope that readers will be able to use some of what I say to reflect on the discourse and culture surrounding death in the contemporary world.

A number of institutions have generously supported my research over the past several years. A travel grant from the Jesse Jones travel fund of the University of Notre Dame allowed me to begin work in the archives of Paris and Angers in 1982. With the help of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities I was able to spend a year in France working on this project in 1984–1985. An appointment as codirector (with my wife, Claudia) of Notre Dame's International Study Program in Angers allowed us to spend an additional year in France; by making it possible for us to split the appointment, Isabel Charles, the director of International Study at Notre Dame, ensured that I would have the time I needed to complete my research. The illustrations and index for this book were subsidized by a grant from the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts. A fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation gave me the chance to return to France for one final visit and to spend the academic year 1989–1990 completing a draft of this book.

I am grateful also to a number of friends and colleagues, Ellen Badone, Raymond Grew, Chris Hamlin, David Hess, Jim Johnson, Robert Locke, Walter Nugent, Marvin O'Connell, Bob Orsi, Lawrence Taylor, David Troyansky, and Bob Wegs, who read and commented on earlier versions of several chapters. I have profited from the comments of Clarke Garrett and Virginia Reinburg, who re-

sponded to an early version of chapter 4 at a meeting of the American Historical Association in 1988. Louise Tilly also provided a useful response to a version of chapter 5 presented at the AHA meeting of 1990.

In the fall of 1990, I enjoyed a stimulating afternoon at the Center for Historical Analysis at Rutgers University, where John Gillis led a fruitful discussion of a paper that I presented on cemeteries and funerals. Graduate students Claire Bardenheier, Michael Clinton, Kelly Hamilton, and Ron Lee also provided some shrewd comments. A section of chapter 3 appeared in somewhat different form in an article published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in 1988; and an essay in a book that I edited, *Belief in History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), has now been incorporated into chapter 4. All the archivists with whom I worked in Paris and Angers were helpful, but I owe a special word of thanks to Canon Pouplard, the archivist of the diocese of Angers, who was particularly generous with his knowledge and time.

Thanks are due to several friends who helped in various ways. Charles and Simone Parnell welcomed me into their home in Angers in 1982; I will never forget their hospitality, their patience with my French, and their good humor as we drove through Anjou hunting for cemeteries. The faculty and staff of the Université Catholique de l'Ouest provided a friendly milieu during our stay in 1984–1986, and I am particularly grateful to Renée Cochin, Marc Melin, and Pierre Jamet for their kindness to me and my family. Père Ouvrard, the rector of the University and a Zola scholar, provided me with a valuable bibliographical suggestion and hosted some of the best meals I've ever enjoyed. During my last visit to Angers, Mike and Martine Palo offered me their hospitality and their car for one last look at a number of sites that I needed to examine. Jim Johnson allowed me to share his apartment on the rue des Belles Feuilles in Paris in the fall of 1989. I benefited from his hospitality and erudition. John Van Engen and Kathleen Biddick tore apart and then helped me put back together a grant application at a crucial moment in this project and, in the process, enabled me to think more clearly about what it was that I was trying to accomplish.

For several years I have been promising Daniel, Joseph, and Julie that I would dedicate this book to them. I am happy to do so and thus demonstrate to my children that I do, indeed, keep *some* promises. I wrote much of this book at home, surrounded by them. This may not have been the most efficient choice of workplace, but I would do the same again with no regrets. My wife, Claudia, encouraged me

throughout the ten years that I have been working on this book. She has varied her tactics as needed, sometimes praising my efforts, sometimes making judicious comments on drafts, and on a few memorable occasions telling me to "write!" in a tone of voice that I would describe as commanding, but still good-humored. I cannot imagine having completed this book without her. For that matter, I cannot imagine doing anything without her.

Death and the Afterlife in Modern France

INTRODUCTION

DEATH AND DYING have become fashionable topics in recent years. Although most people may not be inclined to discuss their mortal condition in casual conversation, medical and religious professionals, philosophers, and social scientists have dealt at length with the problems of defining death, treating the terminally ill, and understanding grief and mourning.¹ Concern about these issues, however, extends far beyond an audience of professionals and scholars. When the editors of *Time* chose "The Right to Die" as a cover story in 1990, they understood the popular interest in a feature on families and doctors who agonized over how to deal with patients in comas.² Current debates have centered on what *Time* refers to as "untamed medical technology" and on the need for doctors and hospitals to take into account the desires of individuals and families as they make decisions about the treatment of the terminally ill. The focus of the debate on the medicalization of death owes a great deal to the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross.³ Drawing on her clinical experience, Kübler-Ross emphasized the importance of maintaining human relationships with the dying—a point of view that may seem self-evident to us partly because of the influence that her ideas have had over the past twenty years.

If there is any rival to Kübler-Ross in the shaping recent ideas about death and dying, however, it would probably be the French historian Philippe Ariès. For Kübler-Ross, death in the contemporary world has become an alienating experience during which the individual is too often deprived of the support of his or her family and is subjected to intrusive medical technology that sustains life only as it is defined in narrow medical terms. Although Ariès shares this critical perspective on the dangers of medicalization, his analysis of contemporary death is situated in a historical framework going back to the early Middle Ages.⁴ According to Ariès, the "tame death" of the first millennium of the Christian era was a public event controlled by the dying, who saw their lives end with regret and resignation, but not with any great fear. During the Middle Ages the dying became increasingly concerned with their fate in the afterlife, a concentration on the self and its salvation that Ariès sees as enduring, although in different modes, through the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the focus shifted from self to other; the separation from loved ones, especially from spouses and children, preoccupied

the living, and only the expectation of a heavenly reunion made such losses bearable. In Ariès's scheme the shift from self to other is accompanied by a new aesthetic response in which the dying person and then the corpse are perceived as physically beautiful, a contrast with the baroque and classical perception that emphasized physical corruption and anonymous bones. This shift suggests that in the nineteenth century there was already a move toward the denial of death and of its consequences—a development that became manifest in the twentieth century, when death has been hidden in hospitals and stripped of the moral significance that it bore in earlier times.

Historians have criticized Ariès's evidence and methods (or lack thereof), and it is true that reading his work can be a frustrating experience.⁵ A single memoir of the La Ferronnays family, for example, bears much of the weight for his interpretation of the nineteenth century, and evidence from one period is sometimes used to demonstrate a pattern ostensibly characteristic of another era. Ariès's synthesis is nonetheless of great importance, for it provides a much-needed historical context for the current debates about death and dying. Kübler-Ross and other critics are certainly correct in arguing for more humane treatment of the dying and for greater sensitivity on the part of families and doctors. These prescriptions, however, may focus too narrowly on the act of dying and on the power of the medical profession. As important as these issues are, they are informed by more general cultural patterns that shape the ways in which people think about their lives and deaths. For example, changes in religious belief and religious pluralism are clearly relevant for any understanding of how death is interpreted in the modern world. Ariès's achievement has been to call attention to the importance of considering the historical and cultural context as we seek to deepen our understanding of the current choices that we face when approaching death.

For Ariès the nineteenth century represents a crucial transition, a time when anxieties about death were transferred from a concern about the self to a fear of separation from the other. This central insight is compelling, and no one who reads Ariès can remain unaffected by the sensitivity with which he treats the emotions of those who struggled with their sense of loss. The relationship between family affection and the new sensibility both dominates Ariès's account and links it to his own earlier work on childhood.⁶ But his focus on family feeling is at times so exclusive that it is easy to lose sight of what was happening outside the domestic circle, beyond the shades drawn to protect the dying and their families from scrutiny. Families did play a central role in mediating death, but Ariès neglects for the

most part the poor who died alone in hospitals even before the full impact of medicalization was felt in the twentieth century. Even for middle-class families that tried to insulate themselves from the outside world, death was more an intruder than a welcome guest, bringing with it into the home a number of problems that forced the family to look outside as well as to themselves for solutions. Death was a civil and religious as well as a family affair, and both the State and the Church influenced and even controlled what people could and could not do as they separated themselves from their dead. Death could also be expensive, as new professionals emerged to provide an expanding quantity of decorations and services to families concerned that their dead be buried with the solemnity appropriate to their social station. Anyone who thinks and writes about death must be grateful to Ariès for calling our attention to the importance of broad cultural changes. However, by operating so consistently on a high level of generalization he made death into a domestic drama, isolated from other developments in the nineteenth century.

In the chapters that follow, my intention is to show how the attitudes toward death that emerged in nineteenth-century France were rooted in a specific social, religious, and political context. In a society marked by urbanization, declining levels of religious practice, the development of capitalist modes of production and consumption, increasing class stratification, and intense political and intellectual debate about all these issues, decisions about death inevitably bore public as well as private meanings. Montaigne knew in the sixteenth century that a man's character would be read once and for all in the way he died. In the nineteenth century death still provided a final occasion for the expression of personal character, but this was now a more complex composite of religious and political loyalties, family and social position. Trying to determine these in the fluid and contentious atmosphere of the nineteenth century could impose painful choices on individuals and families. When should the priest be called, if at all? How much should be spent on the funeral? Where should the burial take place, and what kind of monument should be raised on the grave? As Lawrence Taylor has noted, in answering such questions "we should examine changing forms in the discourse and material culture of death not simply as evidence of changing 'attitudes,' but as cultural forms which sought to reframe death, to assert new structures of experience and the moral authority of those who stood behind these forms."⁷ The conditions that shaped these cultural forms and the meanings that they bore are the subject matter for my study.

Although death is a topic that extends too far and in too many directions to be dealt with comprehensively in a single book, the areas I have chosen to cover bear directly on the cult of the dead as it was experienced and understood in the nineteenth century. I begin by looking at the experience of death based on research in the discipline of demography. The shifts in mortality rates that accompanied the population growth and urbanization of the nineteenth century did not lead simply and inevitably to changes in the ways that death was dealt with and interpreted. But as Michel Vovelle and Lawrence Stone have pointed out, a knowledge of demographic change must inform any treatment of the cultural history of death.⁸ I do not, however, approach demography simply as a convenient data bank for the historian. Demography emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century, and the timing of its appearance and the questions it raised illustrate how contemporary anxieties about death were linked to social change. During the last century, studies of mortality became a principal index for measuring social problems—a technique that had ambiguous consequences. Although demographers were able to demonstrate an overall decline in mortality, their studies focused on particular problems such as suicide and tuberculosis that grew more severe, thus undercutting the optimism implicit in the general trend.

In the second part of my study I will analyze the models of death and the afterlife that were available in the folk, official, and alternative cultures of the nineteenth century. Ethnographic studies, which developed rapidly in the late nineteenth century, yield a rich vein of proverbial wisdom and domestic rituals that are invaluable for understanding how death was managed and interpreted in rural France. The fact that sayings and stories from the nineteenth century are still being published in France suggests their continuing importance. By the end of nineteenth century, and in our time as well, folk beliefs sometimes provide nostalgic relief from contemporary confusion about death.

Folk religious practices and beliefs existed alongside those of orthodox religion. Catholicism's map of the afterworld and its directions for reaching it were familiar to the vast majority of the French and are therefore central to my story. By examining both manuscript and published sermons, we can observe directly what the clergy were teaching about death and the afterlife. Hell was a dominant theme in preaching early in the century, but by its close a more reassuring message was being delivered to Catholics about their likely fate. Although Hell remained a threat, it was one increasingly restricted to those who placed themselves outside the Church. This shift in preaching was accompanied by changes in the way that the clergy

dealt with the dying and mediated between the living and the dead. More often than not, priests were still asked to administer sacraments to the dying and to pray over the dead at funerals. But the controversial political situation of the Church that tore at France throughout the century made such occasions subject at times to ideological exploitation, as both the clergy and their opponents struggled to win over the dying and their families. The Church's role in mediating between the living and the dead also generated controversy, because the money earned for masses and indulgences was both an important financial supplement for the clergy and a sensitive issue that made them vulnerable to anticlerical attack.

It was unavoidable that the Catholic cult of the dead be drawn into the full range of problems that the Church at large faced, but clerical teaching and practice should not be seen exclusively as political instruments serving an institutional agenda. Catholicism in general and death in particular were politicized in part because the clergy and many Catholics believed that only involvement in public policy could ensure the preservation of a decent moral code and the salvation of souls in eternity. From the Catholic perspective, political stakes in the nineteenth century extended beyond earthly existence to the next world. This mood may be surprising to anyone familiar with the religious indifference that is widespread in late-twentieth-century France, but it strikes more resonant chords if we think about recent American history. The Catholic clergy in the U.S. who use the threat of Hell to try to discipline American politicians who disagree with Church doctrine on abortion are invoking the afterlife in ways that the French clergy of the nineteenth century would understand.⁹

Anticlericals who appealed for support among the increasing number of enfranchised men in France could profit from the resentment against the Church and the clergy, but they also needed to provide doctrines that could replace the Catholic afterlife and define new and consoling relationships between the living and the dead. Although alternative afterlives had been developed by intellectuals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they became available to a general audience only when associated with the political and social ideologies that became increasingly powerful after the French Revolution. Liberals such as Victor Cousin and Charles Renouvier and socialists such as Charles Fourier and Pierre Leroux took great pains to integrate doctrines of personal immortality with their visions of human nature and social progress. Even the positivist tradition of Auguste Comte, which rejected personal survival after death, addressed the issue of immortality and imagined ways to think and talk about the dead that would allow for their survival in the collective

memory of future generations. All the alternative afterlives that were part of the new ideologies were seen to be a crucial support for the moral code because, like the orthodox Catholics they opposed, liberals, socialists, and positivists understood morality as being intimately linked to attitudes about the dead.

Alternative afterlives were linked to ideological development, but the example of French spiritism shows that they were not mere appendages of narrowly conceived political programs. Although French spiritism owed much to the speculation of early socialists, by the 1850s it had become an independent movement—a rival church whose doctrine and ritual centered on the possibility of communication between the living and the dead. As was true of similar movements in England and the United States, French spiritists believed that the methods of contemporary science could be used to demonstrate the existence of an immortal soul whose nature and fate were defined in ways strikingly different from Catholic orthodoxy. Led by Allan Kardec and Camille Flammarion, the most popular science writer of the second half of the century, spiritism described a universe in which reincarnated human souls continued their progress on other planets into an indefinite future. The séances and literature of the movement, including the famous sessions at Victor Hugo's house on the Isle of Jersey, suggest that deeply personal motives were fundamental to the appeal of spiritism. Hugo rejected the Catholic afterlife, but he could not accept the extinction of self at death and eternal separation from loved ones. Hugo and others like him (including the emperor Napoleon III and his wife) were comforted by mediums who brought the spirits of the dead back into their homes where they talked again with their families.

In a final section I explore the new institutional and material culture of death, focusing on the establishment of state-controlled cemeteries and a commercial funeral industry. During the French Revolution, the Catholic cult of the dead came under direct attack by militants who saw it as a superstitious fraud designed to frighten the laity and maintain clerical power. Although revolutionaries sought to create a new State-centered cult of the dead, by the late 1790s most of the French were appalled by the deritualization and disrespect that surrounded the death of ordinary citizens. In reforms that began under the Directory, which were put into clearer form in the Napoleonic decree of 23 prairial, year XII (1804), new structures were created to ensure decent funerals and burials for everyone.

The proposed arrangements under Napoleonic law required the cooperation of the central administration, local government, and the Church. In the political and social climate of the nineteenth cen-

tury, harmonizing these various interests proved extremely difficult. By examining the frequently contentious negotiations that accompanied the administration of cemeteries and funerals, we can see concretely how the spiritual and moral issues raised by death were inextricably bound up with the political and social environment. The cultural authority of the Church depended to a large extent on its ability to control the symbols and rituals that most people used to give death its meaning. At the same time the economic health of the Church, whose property was seized during the revolution, was in part dependent on income generated by the reformed cult of the dead. The law acknowledged the Church's cultural and economic involvement with the dead, but it also circumscribed ecclesiastical rights by allowing both local and national government substantial powers of regulation. This ambiguous division of authority was intended to protect citizens from a clergy that many feared was capable of exploiting their authority in the cult of the dead for the sake of political and economic profit.

The tension and conflicts between Church and State over the administration of cemeteries and funerals were generally initiated by families that insisted that their dead be celebrated and remembered with services, decorations, and monuments. During the nineteenth century, the pomp and ceremony that had been restricted to a narrow elite in the old regime and eliminated during the revolution were made available to an expanding middle class. Not everyone, however, could afford to pay for a funeral and a tomb, and those who could were not always happy with the restrictions that both the clergy and public officials introduced into the cult of the dead. For most of the century space in the communal cemetery was allocated on the basis of religious affiliation and social class, an arrangement that could lead to bitter disputes as people came to view their graves as final statements about their religious beliefs and social position. The resentment of Protestants and unbelievers who had been segregated in shamed corners of the cemetery led a Republican majority in 1881 to pass a law declaring cemeteries to be religiously neutral. This act contributed to the pacification of cemeteries, to their removal from the profane world of conflict and commerce, a process also reflected in the displacement of cemeteries out of urban centers that occurred throughout the century. The visit to the cemetery, so important a French family ritual, required a setting that was separate, quiet, and harmonious—traits that visitors can verify as present in contemporary France. A substantial physical and political effort was required to create such a space, which was an ideal in the nineteenth century before it became a reality in the twentieth.

Funerals, like cemeteries, provided a terrain where Church, State, and family had to negotiate carefully in order to protect what they considered to be crucial moral and economic interests. The provision of funerals was complicated, too, by the inclusion of an additional element: the capitalist entrepreneur eager to provide a service and make a profit. Businessmen moved quickly to provide funeral decorations (*pompes funèbres*) and services in Paris during the late 1790s, but the restoration of Catholicism following the Concordat of 1801 created a competing structure, as parish councils (*fabriques*) claimed the right to sell candles, decorations, and transportation for funerals. The Napoleonic reform of 1804 attempted to reconcile these interests, but the complex relationship that it envisioned among parish councils, funeral entrepreneurs, and city governments was difficult to administer. Bureaucratic bickering in Paris was intense in the early part of the century largely because of the rapidly growing demand for elaborate funerals.

The expanding funeral market created more than administrative problems; the commercialization of death pulled mourning families into a social world where money and class were carefully observed. Complaints about aggressive salesmanship that compromised the respect for the dead and their families began early in the century, aggravating the already strained relationships among Church, State, and the new profession of undertakers. All the parties involved claimed that they were interested in keeping death out of the marketplace. Complaints continued, however, and the funeral profession expanded throughout the century. *Pompes Funèbres Générales*, the enterprise that dominates the contemporary funeral market, was founded in Paris in 1848 and spread to other cities anxious to provide funerals that were both dignified and fashionable. Politicians debated the status of the funeral industry throughout the Third Republic but had difficulty reaching a consensus that could reconcile freedom of conscience, freedom of commerce, and respect for the dead. The law finally passed in 1904 completed the reworking of the Napoleonic legislation of 1804 undertaken by the Republicans. City governments were given the right to establish their own funeral service or to grant a single entrepreneur monopoly rights over the trade. Complaints that the law unfairly limits competition and consumer choice, while driving up prices, are still common and echo some of the arguments made during the nineteenth century. Governments of both right and left, anxious to keep the play of the market at a respectful distance from the dead, have nonetheless resisted further changes. The 1904 reform of *pompes funèbres* continues to regulate the funeral trade

and to establish the enduring influence of the nineteenth-century cult of the dead.

The evidence for this study has been drawn from a wide range of sources. As every English-speaking historian of France knows, writing about the country as a whole is a risky enterprise because cities and regions have their own historians eager to explain the ways in which their distinctive cultures break from any pattern that generalists might wish to establish. I have dealt with this problem by combining research in the department of Maine-et-Loire with work in Paris. Particularly in the chapters on cemeteries and pompes funèbres, I have tried to compare developments in the capital with those in the provincial city of Angers and its surrounding countryside. Although studies concentrating on other regions would certainly yield interesting results, Maine-et-Loire offers several advantages for the historian of death in France. François Lebrun's monumental work on death and the cult of the dead during the *ancien régime* included the territory now part of Maine-et-Loire and thus provides a useful background for this study.¹⁰ As Lebrun and others have demonstrated, the region is culturally diverse; the eastern half lies in the Paris basin, whereas the west borders on the Vendée and Brittany. The area around Cholet in the southwest has long been identified with the counterrevolutionary movement of the Vendée, and the people there remained highly devout throughout the nineteenth century. In the east around Saumur, the revolution was well received, and the clergy generally noted lower levels of religious practice. Angers itself falls into a middle range of cities that grew steadily throughout the century but never reached the preeminence of Lyons, Marseille, Toulouse, or Bordeaux. In addition to combining typicality and diversity, Angers possesses well-organized archives with rich materials on the cult of the dead. I have tried to balance the regional bias of my study by referring both to Paris and to other regions on the basis of research done in the National Archives, the Departmental Archives of the Seine, and in secondary literature. In addition to research in local and national archives I have used legislative records, pamphlets and devotional literature, philosophical essays, imaginative literature, and images from both popular art and the salons. I can imagine having made other choices and followed other leads, but I hope that what follows will provide an introduction to the cult of the dead as it was practiced in the nineteenth century.

I close with a brief epilogue on Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*. This painting has generated numerous interpretations and much controversy; and the tensions latent in it still puzzle and attract viewers.

I believe that a consideration of some of the concrete problems that the French faced in dealing with death and the dead provides a useful context for appreciating Courbet's achievement. Looking once more at the *Burial at Ornans* will also remind us of how difficult it is to decipher the meaning that the French attributed to death, for the cult they created to surround it was as contested and equivocal as is his masterpiece. It is by probing their struggles and doubts that we can see how the French defined new meanings for their lives and deaths in an age of social change and shifting values.

PART ONE

Mortality and Mortal Knowledge

PROGRESS AND ANXIETY IN FRENCH DEMOGRAPHY

IN 1855 ACHILLE GUILLARD, a French educator and engineer, invented the term *démographie* to describe the “mathematical knowledge of populations, their general movements, their physical, civil, intellectual, and moral condition.”¹ Guillard was not the first person to interest himself in this field; during the eighteenth century a number of Frenchmen made important contributions to the quantitative study of population.² But it was only during the nineteenth century that accurate national statistics about birth, marriage, and death began to be collected and that demography established itself as a distinct intellectual discipline. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, France was a leader in demographic research; it is not coincidental that the term used to describe the scientific study of population was taken from the work of a French scholar and that demography is, as Pierre Chaunu has written, the last science “to write and speak French.”³

The study of demography, and particularly of human mortality, provides a crucial background for the cult of the dead that emerged in the nineteenth century. In acknowledging the importance of demography, however, I do not mean to imply a reductionist account in which cultural changes arise exclusively or even primarily from shifting patterns of mortality. Demography is interesting in part because it throws objective light on the emotionally charged subject of death. The questions and conclusions of Guillard and his colleagues, along with the invention of a term to describe a new and specialized discipline, also suggest that in the middle of the nineteenth century changes were occurring in the perception as well as the experience of death.

Demographic research placed death in a rationalistic and quantitative framework that reflected the professional concerns of civil servants and medical professionals who used mortality rates as an index to measure social problems and public health. Their work reveals anxieties about the deadly consequences of urbanization, poverty, crowded housing, changed working conditions, and new family patterns. These concerns were not restricted to a small professional

elite. Growing numbers of literate French men and women were eager to learn about the changing patterns of mortality; about how often death struck; which places, professions, and age groups were most at risk; and how these changed over time. Demographic data trained people to think in terms of averages and encouraged them, as well, to adopt an abstract and secular perspective on the self and mortality. We will see in later chapters that folk traditions, ecclesiastical practices, state institutions, and private enterprise provided an increasingly wide range of choices through which families and communities could express their sense of loss and their desire to remember the dead. Although these cultural forms evolved from past practices and contemporary quarrels, perhaps some of the attention focused on the dead was an attempt to preserve a sense of the individual, who needed to be distinguished from the anonymity of demographic statistics.

The following section briefly summarizes the general trends in mortality that prevailed in the nineteenth century. For most of this chapter, however, I will focus on demography as a cultural form that people used to approach and understand death.⁴ In the nineteenth century, demography provided not only data but also a new discourse for interpreting mortality.

THE DECLINE OF MORTALITY

Mortality in France during the *ancien régime* followed the grim patterns of the rest of Europe. The principal features as summarized recently by Michael Flinn were "dramatic short-run fluctuations, low expectation of life, high infant and child mortality, and a high endemic and epidemic incidence of disease."⁵ Sometime during the eighteenth century, for reasons that are not yet clear, a decline in mortality began.⁶ Survival rates as shown in table 1.1, based on the number of people per thousand still alive according to age group, show that starting around 1750 increasing numbers of people were reaching adulthood (see table 1.1). These figures apply to the countryside; the evidence from urban areas is less clear. Despite all the qualifications that might be introduced, however, John McManners's judgment that "death was being defeated" in the eighteenth century seems a fair one.⁷

Mortality rates continued to decline gradually throughout the nineteenth century. From an average of 29.8 deaths per thousand for the period 1801 to 1805, the rate dropped to 21.6 during the last five years of the nineteenth century. In the period just before World War I, the mortality rate dropped and stayed below 20.⁸ Despite the clear

TABLE 1.1
Survival Rates per Thousand Births, Eighteenth-Century France

	Number of Survivors at Age:			
	1	5	10	15
Before 1750	729	569	516	502
1740-1790	780	632	574	542
1780-1820	806	691	652	636

Source: Flinn, *European Demographic System*, 94.

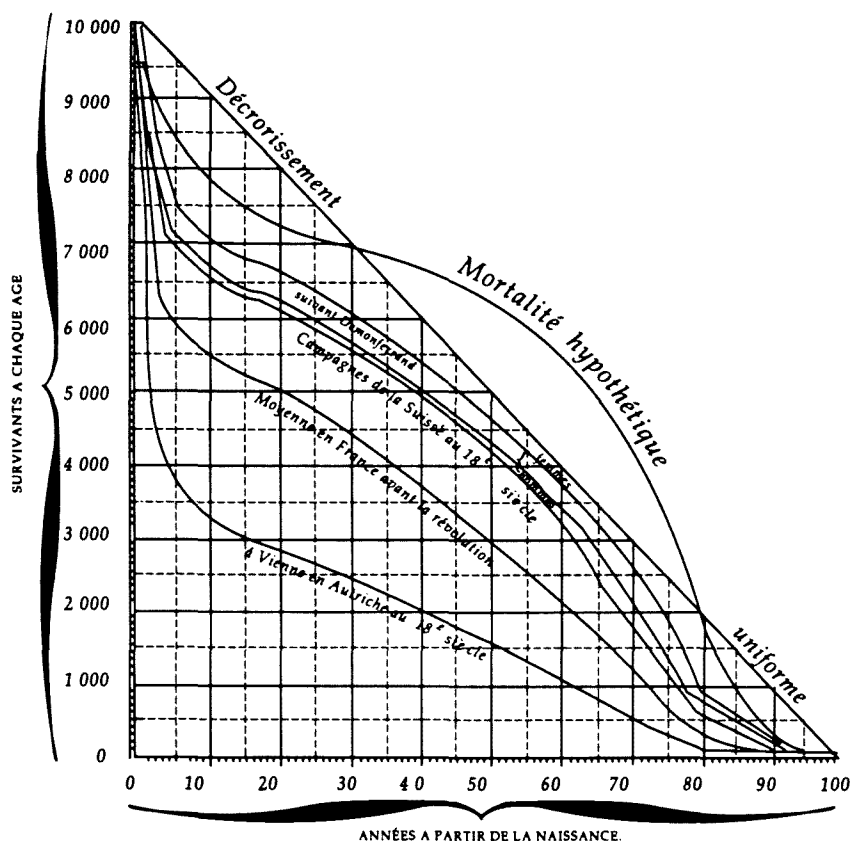
progress indicated by these figures, demographers now tend to emphasize the relatively slow pace of change for most of the century. About ten years were added to life expectancy during the nineteenth century, which went from thirty-five to forty-five for males, and from thirty-eight to forty-eight for females. But this performance was no better than that of the eighteenth century, which also added ten years to the life expectancy of the average Frenchperson. By comparison, the twentieth century shows much more dramatic progress. The mortality rate dropped from 21.6 per thousand in 1900 to 12.5 in 1950, and during the same period life expectancy increased from forty-five to sixty-two for men and from forty-eight to sixty-eight for women. This amounts to an increase in the first fifty years of the twentieth century virtually equivalent to that of the previous two hundred years.⁹

From a contemporary perspective it is easy to understand André Armengaud's judgment that the demographic balance sheet for the nineteenth century was far from brilliant.¹⁰ Those who studied population trends in the nineteenth century were also frequently ambivalent about their findings. The overall decline in mortality confirmed by recent research was already evident in the early part of the century, but despite this good news demographers anxiously observed countertrends as well. Studies of mortality focused on the growth of cities and the expansion of industry, on infant mortality, and on the spread of cholera and tuberculosis—all of which were observed to be major threats to health, and to life, and which seemed to be growing more severe. The research that analyzed these problems tells us much about the incidence of death in the nineteenth century but is equally valuable because it illuminates the mortal fear provoked by social change. The beliefs and rituals that people turned to for consolation, which will take up most of my attention in the following chapters, assumed their meaning in part as responses to an experience of death in a world whose dangers were known with ever-greater precision.

THE MORTAL DANGERS OF AN URBAN SOCIETY

During the first half of the nineteenth century, demographers were preoccupied by the mortality rates in urban areas. J. P. Graffenauer suggested that the level of anxiety accompanying urban growth equaled that during the plague.¹¹ The evidence from Paris analyzed by the influential investigator Louis-René Villermé revealed shockingly high mortality rates, especially in the poorer neighborhoods, where they reached 41.7 per thousand.¹² As Louis Chevalier has demonstrated, the work of early demographers reinforced the fears provoked by the novels of Balzac, Hugo, and Eugène Sue—Paris was threatened by violence and disease carried by the laboring and dangerous classes.¹³

In this golden age of statistics, readers sought in figures, including mortality rates, a way of grasping the changes in their society. Even *Le Magasin pittoresque*, a middle-class journal normally devoted to edifying images and texts, published population tables and charts that would allow readers "to calculate the life expectancy in France according to age (see fig. 1)."¹⁴ But despite some of their gloomy findings, demographers frequently made a special point of indicating that mortality rates for all classes had declined over the past several centuries. In his study of Parisian mortality, Villermé concluded with a consoling message that progress had occurred for all social classes by comparison with the fourteenth century. This long-term decline in mortality led him to an encomium to modern civilization that seems at odds with the grim evidence that makes up most of his essay: "The development of civilization, which has purified the air, and reduced the ignorance and misery of the people, has resulted in the considerable decline in their mortality."¹⁵ According to the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet, whose influential essay *Sur l'homme* summarized a vast amount of demographic research from all the states of Europe, "it appears clearly established that in countries where civilisation makes the greatest progress, we may also observe the greatest diminution of mortality." Quetelet's statement exemplifies the indecisive judgments of the early nineteenth century, in that he follows this assertion with a series of twists and turns that reveal his confusion. Quetelet pulls back from his optimistic view about civilization to note the inaccuracy of many mortality statistics but nonetheless reaffirms that progress has occurred in major cities. Quetelet's conclusion is perfectly equivocal: "I repeat that I am far from giving my belief to the prosperous state which these figures seem to point out. However, we cannot but be inclined to admit that deaths have diminished with the development of civilisation and affluence."¹⁶



1. *The Law of Mortality*. Demographic studies appealed to a general audience in the nineteenth century. This graph, showing variations in mortality over space and time, appeared in "Lois de la population et de la mortalité," *Le Magasin pittoresque* 15 (1847): 149-152.

Quetelet, like Villermé, was both appalled by the high mortality among the poor revealed by contemporary research and conscious that in the past conditions had been even worse. A positive judgment about the present would seem insensitive, but a negative one would be ahistorical. The liberal principles shared by Villermé and Quetelet led them to argue that individual effort rather than state intervention was the key to progress, but their research pulled them in the opposite direction. The ambivalence of these early demographers was commented on by socialists such as Eugène Buret, who noted in 1840 that "M. Villermé . . . drifts indecisively between optimism and those ideas that have inspired our own work," by which he meant a commitment to dramatic social reforms as the way to correct the problems of inequality.¹⁷ Villermé's capacity to resist such a program testifies to

the strength of his conviction that modern society was progressing despite the obvious misery that resulted from the growth of cities and the beginnings of industrialization.

French concern with urban mortality continued in the second half of the nineteenth century, but at this point the evidence of the dangers of city living began to be challenged more aggressively. In 1869 officials of the Second Empire, proud of Georges-Eugène Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris, claimed that mortality in the capital was no longer higher than in the countryside.¹⁸ By the 1870s, the article "Mortalité" published in the *Grand Dictionnaire* of Larousse argued that it was difficult to determine whether or not mortality was higher in urban areas: "Although the air is purer in the countryside, and agricultural labor more favorable to health, the superior quality of food and the greater availability of medical help when ill reestablish an equilibrium to the advantage of cities."¹⁹ In an article published in 1893 that reviewed the debate of the previous twenty-five years Gustave Lagneau argued that Paris remained relatively dangerous, but his work acknowledged that measures of public hygiene had provided the opposition with evidence of progress in urban health.²⁰

Although cities themselves may have appeared less deadly in the later part of the century, a number of changes associated with urban and economic development continued to trouble demographers. Influenced by the work of Villermé early in the century, investigators began measuring social health through a study of mortality rates. Accidental deaths and suicides were among the indexes used, for example, by Alfred Legoyt, director of the *Statistique Générale de France* during the Second Empire, to judge the consequences of modern industrial civilization.²¹

In an essay on accidental deaths Legoyt shows that these rose from fifteen per one thousand inhabitants in the period 1827–1830 to twenty-eight for the period 1836–1860. In his analysis Legoyt showed that whereas "natural" sudden deaths and drownings were declining, accidental deaths due to industrial accidents, commercial transportation, and construction were increasing. Legoyt's purpose, stated in his introduction, was not only to measure the changes that were occurring but also to suggest areas where reforms could be introduced: "If the frequency of accidental deaths is the result of a particular situation, this situation can be modified by the combined efforts of individuals and governments." Legoyt's list of potential reforms includes regulating industrial and mining establishments, requiring cities to take measures to prevent drownings, and inspecting both new and aging housing to ensure its solidity. The urban and industrial environment that had preoccupied demographers in the

first half of the century was still seen as a mortal hazard, but with Legoyt the key to the problem is no longer the misery of the laboring classes but the unwillingness of private employers and the state to take effective action.²²

Official statistics on suicide, like those on accidental deaths, began to be collected in 1826, and as with accidents suicides were understood to be the result of social changes introduced by the modern world. As Lisa Lieberman has written, "Depending upon the perspective of the observer, suicide was explained as a consequence of industrialization and the growth of cities, of poverty and the exploitation of the working class, of decadent art and sacrilegious thought, of the erosion of the family or the rise of an overly ambitious class of citizens, the bourgeoisie."²³ Interest in suicide seems to have intensified in the second half of the century, when it became a leading index for observing and judging a broad range of social problems.²⁴

The work of Legoyt, who contributed both an essay in his collected studies and a full-length monograph to the debate, typifies the combination of sociological and moral analysis that prevailed in discussions of suicide. Legoyt began by characterizing suicides as "*déclassés*" and "*misérables*," but his analysis went beyond this simple correlation of poverty and suicide. He noted that workers and members of the liberal professions were more likely to take their own lives than peasants, whose lives were "calmer, more regular, less vulnerable to accidents, and more influenced by religious sentiments." Legoyt proposed that the elimination of hierarchy, the increased emphasis on the individual, progress in public education, and the frequency of political and financial crises all help explain why the suicide rate was increasing more rapidly than the growth in population. Legoyt's argument can be placed within the context of the general fear of social dissolution in the nineteenth century—a position that links him to Emile Durkheim, who also used suicide rates as an indication of social malaise.²⁵

Ten years before the publication of his classic study of suicide, Durkheim had already begun to explore the links between demographic trends and social health. In "Suicide and the Birth Rate: A Study of Moral Statistics," published in the *Revue philosophique* of 1888, Durkheim argued that the lower birth rate that was a preoccupation during this period and the increase in suicides both resulted from the decay of "domestic sentiments" and the "cold wind of egoism" that accompanied the urbanization of modern France.²⁶ In *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, which first appeared in 1897, Durkheim extended his argument in a brilliant analysis that has become one of the seminal works of modern social science. Durkheim believed that

the suicide rate increased as a result of social disintegration, which resulted from the loosening of the bonds of religion, family, and polity observed in France and Europe. This is not the place to submit Durkheim's analysis to extensive scrutiny, and at any rate there is no shortage of critical responses to his work.²⁷ For my purposes, Durkheim's significance resides in the clarity and power with which he expressed an idea that was characteristic of nineteenth-century French demography—that statistical studies of mortality were both an instrument of social analysis and a measure of current anxieties. The fault lines that Durkheim followed in his study of suicide will appear repeatedly in my account, for changes in religious and family feeling and in the role of the state helped determine how people responded to the dead. But whereas Durkheim used suicide to indicate the dissolution of social ties, the cult of the dead can show how people worked to construct new rituals and new meanings that reflected their experiences in an increasingly urban society.

INFANT MORTALITY AND DEPOPULATION

Starting in the 1850s another set of concerns began to preoccupy demographers and affect the public perception of mortality. Although mortality rates as a whole were falling, the growth of French population nevertheless slowed, as fertility also declined. Influenced by Malthus, the reaction of many economists to this development was at first positive. A decline in fertility among the poorer classes showed that they were making more prudent judgments; smaller families would lead to greater affluence and therefore to lower mortality as well.²⁸ But occasional expressions of concern about the problem of depopulation became more frequent in the 1850s, and a major public debate began in the 1860s following the Seven Weeks' War. The loss to Prussia in 1870–1871 contributed to a climate in which depopulation became a central issue of French social policy. Political concern about the nation's ability to compete with its neighbors led to a series of reforms designed to encourage population growth during the Third Republic. Demographers were instrumental in setting the agenda for this discussion, which included extensive consideration of the problem of infant mortality.²⁹

The fact that infants and young children were more at risk than others was not, of course, a discovery of the second half of the nineteenth century. Villermé's famous essay of 1830 included tables showing rates of age-specific mortality, and eighteenth-century demographers had already demonstrated that the possibility of death was highest for the very young and the very old.³⁰ Quetelet argued

that children were at great risk until the age of five, when the "chances of life are the greatest, whatever be the sex or place of abode."³¹ The explanations of infant and child mortality offered by Villermé, Quetelet, and their colleagues emphasized the difference between cities and countryside, rich and poor; sensitivity to infant mortality was thus closely related to the concerns that were so apparent during the first half of the century.³²

Among the major sources of high infant and child mortality identified by demographers during the first half of the century were the prevalence of wet nursing and the high percentage of abandoned children who were cared for in hospices or placed with state-subsidized wet nurses. Government officials were conscious of the problems, and there were some modest attempts at establishing greater control over the practice of wet nursing, including the reorganization of the Paris bureau charged with placing children. But in 1869 the practice was still common; of the 54,937 Parisian babies born that year 22,529 were sent to wet nurses by their parents, and another 2,756 abandoned children were being nursed at state expense. Figures kept by the Paris bureau show that mortality rates remained high for these children into the 1870s. The percentage of those who died ranged from 22 percent in 1841 to 45 percent in 1873. It is likely that figures for those children placed privately rather than through the Paris bureau were even higher.³³ The mortality of children abandoned in hospices, where they stayed for just a few days before being sent to their nurses, was even more severe. Rachel Fuchs's study of the *Hospice des Enfants Assistés* in Paris shows a mortality rate consistently over 20 percent for the period 1815–1845. Considering that the children were generally there for only three days, it is easy to understand her judgment that this figure is "spectacularly high."³⁴

The consistently high rate of infant mortality, especially when compared with the progress of other age groups, led to a number of reforms during the Third Republic. The control of wet nursing, established through the Roussel law of 1874, the reform of hospices that also began in the 1870s, the creation of a network of dispensaries and medical advice in the 1880s, the availability of sterilized milk in the last decade of the century, and the introduction of subsidies for needy mothers at the time of their delivery all helped produce a decline in infant mortality that became apparent around the turn of the century (see table 1.2).³⁵ The demographers who studied infant mortality concentrated on the social consequences of slow population growth, which weakened France in its competition with neighboring states. Historians who take a broader view of this issue have sug-

TABLE 1.2
Infant Mortality—France

<i>Deaths per 100 Live Births</i>	
1890–94	17.0
1895–99	16.2
1900–04	14.4
1905–09	13.1
1910–14	11.9

Source: B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics*, abridged ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 41–42.

gested that concern about the deaths of infants and young children reflected their increased importance in the emotional life of families, an argument supported by the evidence of the photographs and sculptures of dead children presented by Philippe Ariès.³⁶ But it is important to note that the attention paid to the deaths of children can be seen by the middle of the century, before the steep decline in infant mortality at the end of the century. Although demographic data can be understood as a useful context for the study of changes in the cult of the dead, culture can also become a context that informs demographic changes.

DISEASE, DEATH, AND MEDICALIZATION

By the end of the nineteenth century demographers were able to present to the government and the public increasingly detailed and sophisticated analyses of mortality rates, which were frequently accompanied by policy recommendations designed to reduce the incidence of death. Unsurprisingly, demographic studies were a principal instrument for studying the incidence and diffusion of deadly disease and of the remedies to prevent it. During the Napoleonic Empire officials used statistical studies to demonstrate that the technique of inoculation with the cowpox germ discovered by William Jenner in the 1790s could protect humans from smallpox. A report from the department of Oise in 1813 revealed that the mortality of those under twelve had declined by 25 percent after the introduction of the vaccine.³⁷ William McNeill’s argument that “the extraordinary population growth that set the nineteenth century apart from all its predecessors in Europe’s history was in substantial part a consequence of the effective containment of this long-standing scourge of civilized human communities” may be exaggerated; but his mood reflects the hopes of nineteenth-century doctors and officials that they could fight success-

fully at least one important source of mortality that especially threatened children.³⁸

The introduction of smallpox vaccine was accompanied by clear evidence of its ability to lower mortality rates. In the cases of cholera and tuberculosis, statistical studies were less encouraging. The doctors and demographers who dealt with these diseases were able to trace their impact with increasing precision, but for most of the century they were unable to offer any certain help to those government officials and citizens who sought guidance from them.

The cholera epidemic of 1832 had a profound impact on French society. Government officials, medical experts, and ordinary citizens were shocked by the extent of the mortality and by the horror of the symptoms; diarrhea, vomiting, and fever produced dehydration, so that a victim "shrank into a wizened caricature of his former self within a few hours, while ruptured capillaries discolored the skin, turning it black and blue."³⁹ In Paris the epidemic of 1832 aggravated social and political tensions. The middle classes feared the poor as a source of infection, while rumors spread among the laboring classes that the wealthy were poisoning them to reduce their numbers. Five men suspected of being poisoners were killed by angry crowds in April, and other riots in April and June were also in part a response to anxieties generated by the epidemic.⁴⁰

The government responded to the crisis by creating special local commissions charged with ministering to the sick.⁴¹ But the proposed remedies, including the traditional purgatives, were of no value, and the medical profession suffered a blow to its prestige as a result of its helplessness. Some people believed that they were being exploited as experimental subjects by callous doctors, an attitude clearly displayed in the character of Dr. Griffon in the popular serial of Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris*. Hospitals were especially feared, and rumors spread that at the Hôtel Dieu in central Paris doctors were testing remedies for their wealthy clients on the poor.⁴²

Cholera was disturbing in part because it ran counter to the hope that catastrophic epidemics had disappeared from Europe following the last occurrence of the plague, which struck Marseille in 1720–1721.⁴³ The success of smallpox vaccination may also have encouraged doctors and their patients about the capacity of modern medicine to master disease. Of course, infectious diseases remained a chronic problem, but the malaria, dysentery, and pneumonia that continued to ravage France through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries never provoked the panic inspired by cholera, which returned in 1834–1835, 1849, 1854–1855, with smaller outbreaks in 1865, 1873, and 1884. In part this fear was due to the novelty of the symp-