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Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. x + 306 pp. List of Illustrations, index, bibliography, \$99.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-87850-0.

Review essay by Thomas Kselman, University of Notre Dame.

The French Revolution, which produced so many thousands of corpses through civil insurrection, political repression, and international war, also generated thousands of speeches and ceremonies to explain to the living why so many had died. As Joseph Clarke shows in his work on revolutionary commemorations, those responsible for the cult of the dead during the decade of the revolution faced a daunting challenge, for the cultural conflict with the Church made the use of traditional Catholic ritual increasingly unavailable. In Clarke's view most French were left unconsolated by processions and speeches praising the sacrifices of those who died for the "patrie" in the latter part of the decade. But the failed rituals of the Directory were part of a longer trajectory that Clarke traces back into the eighteenth century, and then follows through the political and cultural upheavals of the 1790s.

Clarke seeks to avoid an anachronistic reading of revolutionary commemoration, which would emphasize its links to the cult of the modern nation-state as practiced during the Third Republic. Instead, he suggests that religious beliefs and practices inherited from the past provide a more appropriate starting point for the study of revolutionary ritual, since "religious practice remained the rule for the overwhelming majority, and ... the rites relating to death proved the most resistant to the onset of secularizing change"(p. 8). From this starting point one might have expected Clarke to explore the Catholic cult of the dead in the eighteenth century as the context for revolutionary developments. Instead, his first chapter looks at the tomb of Rousseau as it developed into a pilgrimage site at Ermenonville and at the "cult of great men" as celebrated in the "éloges" presented at the French Academy after 1758.

In his discussion of the cult of great men Clarke does not take up the recent argument of David Bell, who links it to the "cult of the nation" that he sees developing on many fronts during the eighteenth century.[1] Both Clarke and Bell see the cult of great men as able to serve royalist and republican agendas, and both emphasize its utilitarian ethos, subversive of a value system based on inherited status or religious fervor. Bell, however, includes the many collective biographies that appeared in the latter part of the century in his analysis, a genre which included doctors, jurists, bankers, merchants, and even some artisans, thus extending the cult of great men well beyond the kings, military figures, statesmen, and men of letters praised in the French Academy. With this more extended view of what memory encompassed during the Old Regime, Bell is able to link the cult of great men to that of the revolutionary martyrs more clearly than Clarke. Bell also avoids the harshly moralistic tone characteristic of Clarke in this section and in many others as well. For Clarke "the Enlightenment discourse of memory . . . was a sham: sentimental window-dressing to mask the claims of a new moral order"(p. 41).

Clarke's normative perspective can at times get in the way of his analysis, but his claim that most French in the eighteenth century turned to the familiar Catholic rituals in the face of death

is a plausible starting point for his study of revolutionary commemoration. In this area Clarke has several interesting things to say as he documents a ritual program for funerals in the early days of the Revolution that merged Jacobinism with Catholicism, a mix of “piety and patriotism” in his terms. Historians are familiar with this kind of syncretism, as in the famous Festival of the Federation on 14 July 1790, when hundreds of thousands gathered to hear a Catholic Mass celebrated on the altar of the fatherland in the Champ de Mars. Clarke’s evidence extends beyond such major events to include the masses and funeral sermons for the men who died in the storming of the Bastille. Catholic priests, with the Abbé Fauchet the most prominent example, celebrated the heroes of the Bastille “in the name of the crucified Christ that hung over their catafalque” (p. 55) but stopped short of sanctifying the violent act that brought an end to the absolute monarchy. Clarke points out shrewdly that their sermons invoked Divine Providence rather than angry artisans as the ultimate explanation for the fourteenth of July.

The death of Mirabeau and the establishment of the Panthéon in April 1791 offer Clarke another opportunity to explore the complex cultural interactions between Catholicism and the emerging civil religion of the Revolution. Clarke fits Mirabeau into the specific political context of the spring of 1791, just as the crisis of the oath demanded by the regime of the Catholic clergy was beginning to destroy the fragile unity of France, driving a wedge between many devout Catholics and the Revolution. The death of Mirabeau was the occasion for the National Assembly to pass a decree that transformed the church of Sainte-Geneviève into the Panthéon, a moment typically seen as a major step towards an all-out program of dechristianization. But Clarke emphasizes that on his way to the Panthéon Mirabeau’s body passed through the church of Saint-Eustache, where a High Mass was celebrated and a funeral sermon preached. In both Paris and the provinces Jacobins organized Catholic masses as the appropriate ritual for marking the death of the first great man of the Revolution. Just three months later, in July 1791, the transfer of Voltaire’s remains to the Panthéon struck a very different chord, with the clergy notable by their absence. In the interim, the news of Pope Pius VI’s condemnation of the Civil Constitution and the attempted flight of Louis XVI, worked to discredit the Church and the Monarchy, creating a new context for official commemorations of the dead, more highly politicized and more hostile to Catholicism.

The revolutionary legislators may not have initially intended the Panthéon to serve as dechristianized site for honoring France’s great men, but that was certainly the goal of Quatremère de Quincy, who oversaw its remodeling between 1791 and 1794. Clarke detests the work of Quatremère, who “robbed the majority of French men and women of their principal ritual means of remembering the dead” and created “a glacial pile perched on a windswept hill in a cramped city centre” (pp. 142, 144). Even in 1792, however, the provinces still resisted the dechristianizing impulse, with most cities celebrating the death of Guillaume Simonneau with the same combination of masses and sermons that marked the passing of Mirabeau. Only in 1793 do the clergy finally disappear from the scene, excluded by politicians and bureaucrats who “paid lip service to the widows sorrow and the orphan’s loss, [but] offered them no real hope and little consolation” (p. 164).

By the time he reaches 1793, a year when the Convention organized a number of political funerals, most famously for Marat, Clarke’s categories have been well established. An out-of-touch revolutionary elite, formed by a commitment to Enlightenment ideals, moves further and further away from the Christian references that people expect and want at the moment of death. Clarke has trouble fitting Marat into his scheme, for he acknowledges the fervor of the Parisians in celebrating his death, even while they generally did so without the clergy, masses, and sermons on which they had previously relied. He insists that the funeral of Marat was “religious,” citing the vocabulary – martyr, saint, sacrilege, immortal – invoked at the civic rites. Clarke may be right to claim that these services merit the adjective “religious,” but he struggles

to make sense of this new religious sensibility. He argues first of all that, following Richard Cobb, we need to take this language seriously: “in the forthright world of the *révolutionnaire* . . . words were neither metaphors nor similes, but simple signs, possessed of ‘un sens littéral, une puissance maléfique’ that defied ambiguity or equivocation”(pp. 190-191). It is hard to reconcile this literalist position with Clarke’s comment just two pages later that [c]ulturally speaking, the *révolutionnaire* was in limbo,” which suggests, more plausibly, confusion and ambiguity about the meaning of the words and rituals surrounding death (p. 193).

In his discussion of the provincial celebrations of Marat, and of subsequent ceremonies organized by the post-Thermidorian Convention and the Directory, Clarke’s distaste for those who lead the Revolution is palpable. He points to the militarization of the cult of the dead under the Directory and contrasts this rhetorical and ritual concern with the failure of the regime to support the families of the dead soldiers it celebrated. Clarke notes the “sobs that punctuated La Revellière-Lépeaux’s eulogy of Hoche” in year VI but concludes that “it is difficult not to be skeptical of such outpourings when the Directory never saw fit to extend them to the vast majority of the Republic’s dead” (p. 254). In general the military funerals of the Directory were a “façade, there was no concern for the dead and precious little for the bereaved, just a desperate attempt to shore up the authority of an unloved Republic with the corpses of fallen heroes.” (p. 265) Clarke’s description of a manipulative and hypocritical revolutionary elite recalls the kind of comments made by anti-clericals about the Catholic clergy, concerned only with their power, which they defended by a cynical deployment of religious ritual. This view of the revolutionary elite seems to violate Clarke’s own methodological bias in favor of taking what people say and do at face value. But more importantly it runs the risk of seeing these men as caricatures rather than as individuals struggling with the same kinds of dilemmas faced by their constituents – how to make sense of death without recourse to traditional Christianity. We may disapprove of the religious and political policies of the leaders of the Directory, but that does not necessarily make the tears shed by La Revellière-Lépeaux insincere.

Clarke’s book confirms much of what we know about the religious history of the Revolution, as it moved from accommodation to confrontation with Catholicism. Like Suzanne Desan, whose work is not cited, Clarke demonstrates that this trajectory, while broadly true, needs to be qualified by a sense of the complex interchanges and appropriations that occurred throughout the revolutionary decade.<sup>[2]</sup> He might have added as well some reference to the world of occult belief and practice that was emerging in the late eighteenth century.<sup>[3]</sup> From my perspective Clarke’s most significant contribution is his demonstration of how far into the Revolution Jacobins and Catholics were able to collaborate, especially in the provinces, reinforcing a view of the dechristianizing campaign as a contingent development.

But dechristianization did occur, and while much of the revolutionary cult of the dead may have failed to evoke deep reactions, Clarke shows us that it could succeed at times, in the Parisian celebration of Marat’s funeral and in the pantheonization of Rousseau. Clarke does not speculate at length on the historical consequences of the revolutionary interlude, though he does point to the religious revival that followed the Terror, and suggests that for many the Revolution represented “an unforgivable intrusion into that relationship [between the living and the dead]” (p. 287). The history of the cult of the dead in the nineteenth century provides much evidence for such a conclusion, but it also reveals the appeal of alternatives, including some that look back to the civil religious experiments of the Revolution. Christianity survived the Revolution, and I agree with Clarke that for most French it remained (and remains) the most appropriate setting for dealing with the dead.<sup>[4]</sup> But the “stripping of the altars” that occurred during the Revolution also had consequences, leading to complex and curious rituals, such as those surrounding the death of Mitterrand in 1996.<sup>[5]</sup> Clarke’s book, although overly tendentious at times, provides us with an opportunity to observe and ponder the tensions

between traditional Christianity and the modern nation-state as they struggled to shape the thoughts and feelings of people about death at a particularly dramatic moment in modern history.

#### NOTES

[1] David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 107-139. Bell appears in Clarke's bibliography, but not in the notes for his section on the cult of great men.

[2] Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[3] Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France, 1785-1914* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

[4] Thomas Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Thomas Kselman, "The dechristianization of death in modern France," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145-162.

[5] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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