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Georges Minois. *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. x + 387 pp. $35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5919-9.

Reviewed by Chandak Sengoopta (Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine and University College, London, UK)

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"[Suicide] is an affront," argues the French historian Georges Minois in this excellent work, "to all political and religious systems. Anyone who chooses death and its unknowns displays a total lack of confidence in the theories, ideologies, beliefs, plans, and promises of all leaders... Even the most liberal system is reluctant to permit suicide and tolerate free expression where suicide is concerned. It is one of humanity's last great taboos" (p. 115)–but unlike other taboos, this one, as Minois shows with a wealth of examples, has fascinated thinkers for centuries. One cannot easily think of too many taboos that have stimulated quite as much analysis, discussion, and soul-searching over quite as long a period as has the issue of suicide. One major reason for this, no doubt, has been the fact that–although from the literalist Christian perspective, suicide is unquestionably a grievous sin–the act of self-murder reveals some rather ambiguous aspects when examined from less dogmatic perspectives. Is it, for instance, virtuous of a woman to kill herself when faced with rape? Were the ancient Stoics right to prefer death in cases of incurable illness? Was it contemptible for a warrior to commit suicide rather than surrender to the enemy? Moral questions such as these have kept the issue of suicide alive over the centuries, in spite of vast changes in historical contexts and in spite of unequivocal religious condemnation of the act.

By the seventeenth century, the "world" and even "eternity" had been totally codified by religious and moral authorities, whether Catholic or Protestant. "The individual was boxed in, guided, and under surveillance, Minois writes, and "there was no longer any call either for questions or for anxiety ... the proper operation of the whole depended on every individual remaining in his or her preordained place. The worst offence was to want to change one's condition; this was equivalent to contesting monarchical and divine order by rejecting one's assigned role and displaying dissatisfaction with Providence. And was not life itself the first benefit of Providence? To refuse such a gift was thus to commit the supreme offense against God. It was also to desert one's post in family society and human society, thus offending both morality and the state" (p. 117). In spite of virtually universal allegiance to such religious principles, however, legal thinkers, especially those influenced by Roman law, tended to waver before condemning all instances of suicide. One, for example, proposed that suicides due to serious illnesses or "troubles" should be spared the ritual mutilation of the corpse and confiscation of property that was customary in cases of self-murder. That same jurist, however, thought that such actions were perfectly appropriate in cases of suicide committed to avoid punishment for a crime or due to weariness with life! Suicide, in other words, was wrong as a matter of principle, but real-life contexts of individual self-murderers could (and did) sometimes modify one's attitude on the matter. Minois provides numerous examples of this phenomenon from diverse periods, locales, and sources, and his constant emphasis on this ambivalence is arguably the most instructive element of his study.

All this, of course, applied only to people considered sane: the madman was not culpable for self-murder. This proviso was often applied in order to exculpate aristocrats and clergymen from the suicide charge–often on the basis of the flimsiest evidence. It was also possible to argue that only a madman would be crazy enough to kill himself and, therefore, no suicide was culpable, but this does not seem to have been a very common argument. Medical concepts of melancholy, in which early modern thinkers were often greatly interested, were not disregarded by writers on suicide. All writers on that topic or on melancholy acknowledged that a person could be driven to suicide by the fear and sadness induced by the condition. Such perspectives were not exclusively medical and could have strong religious dimensions. Robert

Burton, the Anglican clergyman and celebrated author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, argued, for instance, that cases of melancholy terminating in suicide were induced by the Devil.

Suicide became a prominent issue in England from the turn of the seventeenth century. The number of suicides, it was reported, had risen alarmingly and in the preface to his 1733 work, *The English Malady*, physician George Cheyne declared that he had been spurred to write it "by the late Frequency and daily Encrease of wanton and uncommon self-murders" (p. 181). According to Cheyne, the spread of atheism as well as the gloomy, melancholy-inducing climate of England were responsible for the rise in suicides; while his explanations were not always accepted, virtually nobody seems to have doubted that England had become the world capital of suicides. As Minois explains, there undoubtedly was a rise in the rates of reported suicides but, as far as one can tell from the available data, it was a European rather than an exclusively English phenomenon. What was special about England was the contemporary growth of the popular press, which reported such deaths avidly and in detail. But not censoriously. The reporting did not take any unequivocal moral stance and "slowly but surely," Minois suggests, "public opinion came to see suicide as less culpable than before and to categorize it among ordinary social scourges afflicting people who were more victims than criminals" (p. 184). The food scarcities, bad weather, and epidemics of the time helped in raising suicide rates as well as in creating the kind of atmosphere in which fears proliferated quite luxuriantly. The usual, more human reasons for suicide such as unrequited love, of course, continued to be important.

In the eighteenth century, legal verdicts of insanity in cases of suicide became more common in France and England. So, although the law did not change, the draconian punishments for suicide (confiscation of property, burial in unconsecrated ground, desecration of the corpse) were applied less and less. The eighteenth century ended, of course, with poet Thomas Chatterton's suicide (1770) and the sensation over Goethe's novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774), creating a veritable cult of suicide, though it, as Minois emphasizes, it "was committed more in words than in acts" (p. 248). These complicated shifts have already been dealt with in exemplary detail in Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy's *Sleepless Souls* and those familiar with that work might find some of Minois's analysis a shade superficial.[1] Still, the material on France is most useful as is the section on Goethe and *Werther*. Also valuable is Minois's emphasis that while the elite talked and wrote endlessly on suicide, most common people still killed themselves for traditional reasons associated with suffering, debility, or fear. "Nothing," as he puts it, "had changed since the Middle Ages" (p. 280).

As the book moves beyond the Enlightenment, it becomes less and less detailed, and the section on the twentieth century is no more than the merest sketch. Even the work of Durkheim is barely mentioned. Nevertheless, there is no other work in English that provides a fraction of the information on early modern aspects of suicide, and the book is so lucidly written (and translated) that one would not hesitate to use it in undergraduate courses. These are no mean virtues.

Note

[1]. Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

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