



# **The End of the Soul: Scientific Modernity, Atheism, and Anthropology in France**

*Jennifer Hecht*

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On October 19, 1876 a group of leading French citizens, both men and women included, joined together to form an unusual group, The Society of Mutual Autopsy, with the aim of proving that souls do not exist. The idea was that, after death, they would dissect one another and (hopefully) show a direct relationship between brain shapes and sizes and the character, abilities and intelligence of individuals. This strange scientific pact, and indeed what we have come to think of as anthropology, which the group's members helped to develop, had its genesis in aggressive, evangelical atheism.

With this group as its focus, *The End of the Soul* is a study of science and atheism in France in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It shows that anthropology grew in the context of an impassioned struggle between the forces of tradition, especially the Catholic faith, and those of a more freethinking modernism, and moreover that it became for many a secular religion. Among the adherents of this new faith discussed here are the novelist Emile Zola, the great statesman Leon Gambetta, the American birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose Sherlock Holmes embodied the triumph of ratiocination over credulity.

Boldly argued, full of colorful characters and often bizarre battles over science and faith, this book represents a major contribution to the history of science and European intellectual history.

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