UPPER CLASS ASCETICISM: SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ASCETIC MOVEMENTS AND MEDIEVAL SAINTS

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Most social scientists still agree with Marx that religion is rooted in the suffering of the poor, despite the fact that dozens of studies have found that class is, at most, barely related to religious belief and that the middle and upper classes dominate religious participation. These facts are eluded by the claim that it is intense religion, such as asceticism, that is the real "opium of the people." This essay presents data on a variety of ascetic movements, beginning as far back as the first Buddhist monks, which indicate that they were primarily vehicles for upper class piety. Then, the biographies of 483 ascetic, medieval Catholic saints (500-1500) are examined. These data reveal that they came primarily from the nobility. Appropriate conclusions are drawn.

In 1073 Everard II, Viscount of Breteuil, deeded all of his lands to relatives, gave all of his gold and silver to the poor, and then went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land—as did thousands of Europeans every year. Upon his return he entered the abbey of Marmoutier where he spent the rest of his life (Riley-Smith 1997:47). Everard's peers and family did not see anything particularly odd about his choices: Many members of the medieval upper classes, including kings and queens, opted for the ascetic life—often within the framework of the Catholic Church, but often too by joining the ranks of an austere sectarian movement.

The usual basis for these actions was to ensure salvation. Some became ascetics as penance for what they believed to have been their mortal sins—many who journeyed to the Holy Land had committed murders or other heinous crimes and had been advised by their confessors that only by praying in the holiest sites could they escape endless centuries in purgatory (Payne 1984; Riley-Smith 1997; Runciman 1951). But, most embraced austerity and "holy poverty" because they believed that wealth and worldly pleasures were intrinsically sinful—the New Testament says as much when it suggests that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to squeeze into heaven.

Unfortunately, the prevalence of upper class asceticism has been ignored by social scientists. When Karl Marx ([1844] 1964:42) wrote that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . the opium of the people" he merely gave poetic expression to the sociological axiom that faith is rooted in want and misery and that piety is most prevalent among the poor. Until recently, this view has enjoyed virtually unanimous assent among social scientists. Georg Simmel ([1905] 1959:32) pronounced religion "a sedative" and Kingsley Davis (1949:532) explained that the "greater his disappointment in this life, the greater [a person's] faith in the next." This view came to be known as the "deprivation thesis" when Charles Y. Glock (1964) constructed a typology of deprivations and connected a modal religious response to each type.

The fundamental mechanism said to account for the piety of the poor is referred to as the transvaluation of values—the capacity of religion to turn "worldly" values upside down. Hence, the have-nots redefine poverty as a virtue and wealth as sinful, concluding that what they cannot have, they should not have, and that through these means "the last shall be first, and the first last."

The claim that religiousness is rooted in deprivation dominates the textbooks even though in recent decades it has suffered from an acute lack of consistent empirical support. With the advent of survey research, a long series of investigators has reported the lower classes to be conspicuously absent from the pews on Sunday mornings and from church membership rolls (Bultina 1949; Burchinal 1959; Cantril 1943; Demerath 1965; Dynes 1955; Lenski 1953; Stark 1964, 1971). This is true even among "evangelical" and "fundamentalist" Protestants—members of these groups are as likely to have gone to college and to earn high incomes as are members of more liberal denominations as well as Roman Catholics, while the unchurched are the least educated and have the lowest incomes (Smith 1998; Roof and McKinney 1987). Even very strict sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses include many people of privilege and enrol far fewer low status people than their percentage in population (Stark and Iannaccone 1997). This led me to suggest in an early paper that "if the poor are drawing compensation from religion, they are obviously doing so without benefit of clergy" (1971:484).

In a celebrated attempt to repair this shortcoming of the deprivation thesis, N.J. Demerath, III (1965) found that *within* denominations (among those who are official church members), lower status persons were a bit more likely to hold a "sectlike orientation," that is, to hold more literal beliefs and to be more expressive in their religious actions. I subsequently confirmed and extended these results (Stark 1964; 1971). Even so, the demonstrated class effects on religiousness are very small within the churches and quite unreliable in general populations (Stark and Finke 2000). The most that can be said is that the empirical basis for the deprivation thesis is meager, and amounts to little more than a very modest tendency for less educated people to be less "sophisticated" in their religious outlook.

Of course, it can be argued that surveys are blunt instruments that fail to reveal the religious intensity that is fundamental to the deprivation thesis. What are mere attitudes and verbal agreement with conventional statements of faith compared with the stuff of *real* religious life? Hence, to discover the effects of deprivation it may be necessary to examine the eruption of sect movements and the appeal of asceticism.

As to the eruption of sects, Friedrich Engels claimed that Christianity began as "the religion of slaves, of poor people . . . of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome" (1894-95:4) and Ernst Troeltsch ([1912] 1931) expanded that claim to assert that *all sect movements* are the product of the lower classes. Subsequently, Richard Niebuhr (1929) made the proletarian origins of sects the primary pivot in his famous "church-sect" theory. Nevertheless, it's not so. For example, early Christianity was based primarily on the privileged, not the poor (Grant 1977; Judge 1960; Stark 1996). Nor was early Christianity unusual in this respect. With the exception of some Anabaptist groups (who were led by the privileged, but who appear to have been sustained mainly by the urban middle and lower classes), over the course of European history the major sect movements were very obviously based on persons of considerable wealth and power: the nobility, the clergy, and well-to-do urbanites (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992, 1998; Russell 1965; Stark 2003). For example, at the outbreak of the first French War of Religion in 1562, it is estimated that 50 percent of the

French nobility had embraced Calvinism (Tracy 1999), but very few peasants or urban poor rallied to the Huguenots (Ladurie 1974). Indeed, because of Jonathan Riley-Smith's (1997) careful assembly of rosters of participants in the first crusades (1095-1131), we now know that it was not, as has long been claimed, mainly landless second sons and knights without property who sustained the crusades, but that it was the heads of great households—kings, counts, earls, and barons—who led the way at enormous personal cost (Stark 2001, 2003).

Thus, the case that religiousness is rooted in deprivation is not supported by statistics on church attendance or membership and is not confirmed by participation in major sect movements or the crusades. But, what about *asceticism*? What about those who embrace lives of pious sacrifice and privation? Surely ascetics are not over-recruited from among the privileged. But, that is precisely what I mean to demonstrate in this essay, drawing on an array of historical materials and concluding with an analysis of a data set consisting of medieval Catholic Saints.

ASCETICISM: CHOICE OR NECESSITY

While social scientists have sneered at asceticism as a transparent effort to make a virtue of necessity, historians often discus asceticism in terms of choice (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992, 1998; Russell 1965). This may reflect the tendency of historians to be very attuned to actual cases and, as will be seen, these tend to reveal that the emphasis placed on poverty by ascetics is not a rationalization for being poor, but a call to actively embrace "holy poverty" and to reject worldly comforts. Indeed, it is the opportunity to *choose* poverty—a choice not given to the poor—that seems central to the appeal of asceticism. Fasting seems not appeal to people who have often been hungry and privation in general fails to attract the poor. In contrast, it is frequently observed that wealth fails to satisfy many of those born into privilege and therefore they turn to various religious or even radical political alternatives. I shall leave it to others to probe more deeply into the psychology involved in this phenomenon, restricting my efforts to demonstrating that it is such a common response to privilege that asceticism may well be primarily an upper class involvement.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

In this section I examine historical cases of ascetic movements for which reasonably reliable data are available on their class basis.

Buddhism

The oldest reliable data available on recruitment to the ascetic life comes from the founding of Buddhism in the fifth century B.C.E. Buddha himself was, of course, a prince prior to his "enlightenment," whereupon he embraced the life of a wandering ascetic. Of far greater importance is that, of his first sixty devotees, fifty-five were "of prominent families" and the other five may well have been from privileged backgrounds too (Lester 1993:867). Moreover, the primary appeal of early Buddhism was to brahman priests (*brahmanas*) who were necessarily of upper caste origins (Lester 1993:867). As Buddhism spread to China, a similar pattern of upper class recruitment to the ascetic life continued. Eric Zj19 rcher ([1959] 1972:4-6) referred to this as "gentry Buddhism," because it involved "the formation of a wholly new type of Chinese intellectual *élite*, consisting of cultured monks."

Orphics and Pythagoreans

Even within the permissive Greek religious culture, asceticism found a substantial following. Two of the better known Greek ascetic movements were the followers of Orpheus and of Pythagoras. Both groups appeared in the sixth century B.C.E. and both taught that one must observe stringent ascetic demands in this life in order to avoid terrible punishments in the life to come (Burkert 1985; James 1960). Thus, "as one rises or goes to bed, puts on shoes or cuts one's nails, rakes the fire, puts on a pot or eats, there is always a rule to be observed, something wrong to be avoided" (Burkert 1985:303). Orphics ate no meat, eggs, or beans and they drank no wine. Suicide was prohibited and so were various forms of sexual expression—indeed most embraced celibacy. Some even became wandering beggars. Pythagorean asceticism was quite similar. They too observed extensive dietary laws, wore only white garments, obeyed elaborate rules concerning ordinary daily activities (including an absolute prohibition on speaking in the dark), and accepted many restrictions on sexual activities.

As with the early Buddhists, the Orphics and Pythagoreans were not poor folks making a virtue of necessity, but rich folks choosing to be virtuous. Thus Plato wrote in the *Republic* that priests of these religions "come to the doors of the rich and . . . offer them a bundle of books" which persuade them to sacrifice in order to escape "from evil in the afterlife." Euripides also linked Orphics and books. As Burkert (1985:297) noted, this "characteristic appeal to books" reveals these to have been movements of the literate in an era when only a very small number of the most privileged Greeks could read (Harris 1989).

Essenes

The Essenes were an ascetic Jewish group, active during the period of the Second Temple. Members lived communally in accord with a very strict interpretation of Jewish law. It may have been Essenes who lived at Qumran and whose hidden library became the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Many scholars have assumed that the Essenes embodied proletarian protest and alienation (Cohen 1987; Niebuhr 1929; Saldarini 1988). Not so! As Albert Baumgarten (1997:51) has convincingly demonstrated, the Essenes "were not lower class dissidents, shunned by the ruling powers," but were recruited from among the privileged. For one thing, the terms of admission to the group "make it clear that new members were expected to have some property which they would commingle with that of the community" (Baumgarten 1997:47). For another, the Essenes produced unusually sophisticated and complex scriptures and commentaries, obviously written by and for an intellectual elite. Thus, Baumgarten (1997:47) concluded that the Essenes were firmly rooted in the "economic, social and educational elite . . . who could afford the 'luxury' of indulgence in affairs of the spirit."

Cathars

The Cathars were the first mass heretical movement of the Middle Ages. They appeared in various places in Europe but were concentrated in the Languedoc area of Southern France where they came to be known as Albigensians because they were headquartered in Albi. The Cathars embraced a nearly symmetrical dualism, dividing the universe into realms of Good and Evil. Since the world is tragic, brutal and wicked, it could not have been created by the Good God, but is entirely evil having been created by the Evil God. Hence the world is to be rejected. Although rank-and-file Cathars were not ascetics, the movement sustained an advanced degree of membership called the *perfecti* (perfects). The *perfecti* attempted heroic levels of asceticism. They lived in cloisters, abstained from sex, refused to fight or kill (even animals). ate no meat, eggs, or dairy products, swore no oaths, and devoted most of their day to prayer.

Who were the *perfecti*? A complete list has survived of all 1,190 persons who advanced to become *perfecti* in the Languedoc during a sixty-year period ending in 1250. Of these, 15 percent were members of the nobility (Costen 1997), at least six times the percentage of nobles in the population (Lenski 1966). Most of the others probably were from affluent families, since it was often noted at the time that there was "widespread support for Catharism . . . among people in authority" (Costen 1997:70).

Waldensians

The Waldensians began as an heretical ascetic movement and also had their center in southern France (Brooke 1971; Cameron 1984; Lambert 1992; Moore 1994; Russell 1965; Tourn 1989). They were named for their founder, a very rich merchant named Waldo (or Valdes), who lived in Lyons, a city just north of the Languedoc. In 1176, inspired by hearing the life story of St. Alexius (an heir to riches who chose poverty), Waldo gave away all his property—he actually threw substantial sums of money away in the streets—and began to preach a message of apostolic poverty. Waldo rapidly attracted followers who called themselves the Poor Men of Lyons and adopted his ascetic lifestyle. Those who joined "are described as giving up their goods and bestowing them on the poor, a fact which shows they were of some substance" (Lambert 1992:69). Indeed, as the movement spread North, a significant number of members of the lesser nobility were among the Waldensians in Metz and "Waldensians in Germany gained the support of the comparatively wealthy" (ibid:149, also see 170).

Many scholars, perhaps possessed of excessive sociological imaginations, have claimed that the Cathars and the Waldensians were not really about doctrines or moral concerns. Instead, they argue, the religious aspects of these movements masked their real basis which was "class conflict." Friedrich Engels set the example followed by many others when he dismissed the religious aspects of these clashes as "the illusions of that epoch" and claimed that the "interests, requirements, and demands of the various classes were concealed behind a religious screen" ([1850] in Marx and Engels 1964:98). Getting down to cases, Engels classified the Cathars (Albigensians) as representing the interests of the town bourgeoisie against the feudal elites of Church and State, while dismissing the Waldensians as a purely "reactionary . . . attempt at stemming the tide of history" by "patriarchal Alpine shepherds against the feudalism advancing upon them" (Marx and Engels 1964:99-100).

Only the uninformed could conceive of Catharism as being a reaction by townspeople against the feudal elites of Church and State, for it was these elites who made up the backbone of the movement. It is equally absurd to reduce the Waldensians to Alpine shepherds, patriarchal or otherwise. They began as an urban movement, very obviously over-recruited from among people of rank and privilege, and so they continued.

Attributing the major medieval religious movements to poor peasants or proletarian townsfolk flies in the face of clear evidence of the substantial over-involvement of the wealthy and privileged in most, if not all, of them. Moreover, even *if* it could be shown that the majority of followers in these movements were poor peasants, that carries little force when we recognize that *nearly everyone* in medieval Europe was a poor peasant. It also is essential to see that the emphasis placed on the virtues of poverty by so many of these groups was not a rationalization for *being* poor, but was a call to *become* poor as the means of overcoming worldliness (Russell 1965).

Of course, many who chose poverty did not do so by joining the Cathars, Waldensians, or another sect movement. Large numbers found their ascetic opportunity within the Church. In fact, this was so common that the result was the existence of what amounted to two Catholic Churches.

TWO "CHURCHES"

From early times, there were two major religious elements or 'churches' in Christendom (Stark 2001). The first of these, which I have designated as the *Church of Power*, was by far the largest and consisted of most of the official Roman Catholic hierarchy, from parish clergy through popes, and the masses of nominal Catholics. The hierarchy of the Church of Power was dominated by the rich and powerful because throughout the medieval era men often became cardinals, bishops, or even popes, by paying huge sums for the office. Church offices were so highly valued because of the power and income that came from these positions. The result was a church dominated by worldly, ambitious, and sometimes flagrantly immoral incumbents (Cheetham 1983; Duffy 1992, 1997; Murray 1972). As for the laity, in many areas they were at best "slightly" Christianized. Most would have professed their belief in Jesus, but as part of a supernatural pantheon including all manner of spirits and godlings. Even in areas where Christianization had taken firmer root, the laity seldom attended Mass and treated religion primarily as a kind of magic (Duffy 1992; Murray 1972; Stark 1999a; Thomas 1971).

Of course, there also were devout Christians in medieval times and they constituted a second, if far smaller, element which I designate as the *Church of Piety* (Stark 2001). The power base of Church of Piety lay in the religious orders—the tens of thousands of monks and nuns whose monasteries and convents dotted the landscape of medieval Europe. Of course, many of those in religious orders failed to measure up to their vows, just as many of the "secular" hierarchy were quite devout. But the relative sacrifices involved tended to sort people into these two camps. Many historians believe that the Church of Piety also was recruited mainly from the upper classes (Hickey 1987; Johnson 1976; King 1999; Knowles 1969; Mayr-Harting 1993). Of course, the available evidence offered in support of this generalization is largely impressionistic. Therefore, it seems useful to have hard data on the social origins of members of the Church of Piety based on a large number of cases.

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ASCETIC SAINTS, 500-1500

It is would be ideal to possess biographical rosters for the medieval religious orders, but nothing of the sort exists nor can be reconstructed. However, the "lives" of the many Roman Catholic Saints would seem to be a satisfactory substitute, with certain restrictions.

As far as I could determine, there have been two previous quantitative studies based on selections of Catholic saints. In 1950 Pitirim A. Sorokin analyzed a few variables based on all 3,090 cases included in Butler's *The Lives of Saints*, as edited by Thurston (1926). The earliest of these saints lived in the first century and the data set ended with one saint from the twentieth century.[1] As will be seen, when comparisons are possible my results correspond closely to Sorokin's. However, for reasons to be explained, I have greatly reduced the time span to be examined and have limited the cases to ascetics.

The second data set of saints was created by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell (1986). They selected 864 saints from the period 1000 through 1700 by taking a 50 percent sample from a list assembled by Pierre Delooz (1962). This list has some very odd properties, the most unusual being that groups of martyrs, such as the seven founders of the Servite order or the 205 martyrs of Japan, were grouped to constitute one case—how one meaningfully codes the gender, age or family background of 205 individuals to form a single case escapes me. But, here too, the possible comparisons support my results.

Whatever criteria one chooses to impose, it is a formidable task to assemble even a reliable roster of the saints. Since the practice of official canonization began in 1234, there have been fewer than 300 persons confirmed as saints. That list can be found in many places, including each year's *Catholic Almanac*. However, there are about 10,000 saints whose names and cults have been identified by Church historians (Woodward 1996) and thousands more who died as members of groups sainted for their martyrdom, most of whose names are lost. The published sources are quite incomplete, which means that assembling a roster is a lengthy and tedious task of comparing entries in many sources. In addition, some saints are remembered under five or six different names while many others have the same name. Worse yet, many saints are merely names—virtually nothing is known of their lives or even why they were thought to be saints. Indeed, some long-venerated saints probably never existed. Moreover, as noted, many are recognized as saints merely for having been among those martyred in various persecutions, some of them young children—"the Roman Martyrology contains some 4,500 names, and it is far from exhaustive" (Attwater and John 1995:5). Consequently, I excluded from the data set many of those included on various lists of saints, based on the following criteria.

First, I excluded all whose existence is doubtful or whose identity is so obscure that virtually nothing is known about them. Some are remembered merely for having been a bishop, abbot or abbess with no biographical information whatsoever having survived. Often they were made into saints because of the discovery centuries after their deaths that their remains were well-preserved, or their bones were discovered and utilized as "relics" whereupon several miracles were attributed to them. In many such cases, only their names are known.

Second, I did not include persons merely for having been martyred, which often amounted to nothing more than having been murdered, sometimes for being a Christian, but often for being in the wrong place, as when Viking raiders struck a convent. Third, I excluded all children (most of whom would also have been excluded for having merely been martyrs). Fourth, for arbitrary reasons of taste, I excluded all persons whose claim to sainthood rested entirely on scholarly achievements—a bias shared by the Church in recent centuries (Woodward 1996). Fifth, I excluded all popes.

After spending several months assembling materials, I decided to restrict the roster to those who lived between 500 and 1500. Earlier than 500 one is confronted with too much mythology and missing data. After 1500 there are few saints and besides, the medieval era was clearly over. Finally, I included only *ascetic* saints—those who expressed their piety through denial and sacrifice. Even among the saints there are many members of the Church of Power, especially bishops, and their sainthood sometimes seems to have been due to nothing more than the desire to assign a patron saint to a locality or cathedral, and others appear to have been honored solely for their contributions to Church politics and their roles as advisers to kings—their biographies make no mention of unusual piety, and many include serious moral shortcomings such as greed or illegitimate children. I excluded all who appear to have been members of the Church of Power (whether or not they were in orders) and selected only those who made serious lifestyle sacrifices, nearly all of them (including bishops) having belonged to religious orders. After these exclusions, the data set includes 483 individuals.

I did all of the coding myself.[2] As will be clear, the variables I coded do not require subtle judgments. Nevertheless, to minimize error I coded all of the cases and entered the data in a computer file and then repeated the entire process after a lapse of three months. Using a rekey verification function during the entry of the recoded data, I was able to note any discrepancy and then check to see whether it was due to a coding or an entry error. I found only eleven coding discrepancies out of 4,347 entries. However, many readers will be more concerned about the reliability of the sources than about the accuracy of my coding. With the exception of Alvan Butler's extraordinary, 12-volume classic, published from 1756 to 1759, I have used modern sources (Attwater and Cumming 1994; Attwater and John 1995; Baring-Gould 1914; Bunson, Bunson and Bunson 1998; Charles 1887; Coulson 1958; Cross and Livingston 1974: Delehaye 1998; Farmer 1997; Herbermann, et al. 1913; McBrien 2001). I also made use of the *Saints Index*, maintained by *Catholic Online*. However, each of these is largely dependent on biographical accounts written many centuries ago, often immediately following the saint's death. These "hagiographies" are sometimes dismissed as "fiction" because they include "implausible" claims as to miracles or endurance. Although some similar claims concerning quite recent saints have stood the test of careful enquiry, it is not necessary for me to enter into such a debate. The variables I coded are relatively mundane matters of fact:

Sex

Century: in what century did the saint live the majority of her or his adult life?

Family background: royalty, nobility, wealthy, lower, unknown.

Saintly kin: was an immediate family member (first cousin or closer) also reported to be a saint?

Church office: cardinal/bishop, abbott/abbess, monk/nun, priest, lay person.

Order: member of a religious order?

Extreme ascetic: displayed an unusually high level of asceticism?

Hermit or recluse: spent some period of time as a hermit or recluse?

Mystic: was reported to have visions, revelations, prophesies, stigmata, etc.

These are nine characteristics that seem likely to have been reported quite accurately (Kieckhefer 1984). Further evidence of the reliability of the data can be found in the stability and credibility of the statistical results.

Table 1 shows the frequency of four aspects of asceticism. First of all, nearly nine out of ten of these saints were members of religious orders—including 71.1 percent of the bishops (not shown). Second, although everyone included in the data set was a legitimate ascetic, more than a third (37.9%) of these saints were coded as *extremely* ascetic. These were people who made heroic efforts to overcome temptation and mortify their flesh (Kieckhefer 1984). Some wore hair shirts. Others lived on bread and water. Still others devoted most of their waking hours to prayer. But, one of the most common forms of extreme asceticism was to limit human contact by becoming hermits or recluses. To gain solitude, hermits typ-

TABLE 1: ASPECTS OF SAINTLY ASCETICISM

In a Religious Order	87.8%
Extremely Ascetic	37.9%
Hermit or Recluse	25.1%
Mystic	11.4%

n = 483

ically withdrew into the forest or the desert. Recluses, on the other hand, achieved solitude by confining themselves in huts or cells (usually in or near a monastery or convent). In many instances, recluses actually had their cells walled-off and received food through a small opening.

As can be seen, one of four of these ascetic saints spent a considerable period as a hermit or recluse. Lest it be thought that hermits and recluses were drawn mainly from among the ranks of socially maladjusted misanthropes or even the mentally ill, as is often claimed (see James [1902] 1958), nearly 20 percent of those coded as hermits or recluses subsequently were called from their forests and cells to serve quite successfully as bishops, abbots, and abbesses. For example, St. Aigulf lived for many years as a hermit near Bourges, France before being called upon to serve as bishop of that city. He subsequently played a leading part in several Church councils. Many other hermits and recluses were asked to take such administrative posts, but managed to beg off. Still others wrote lucid works of scholarship or fine poetry. Clearly, then, in this era choosing solitude mainly reflected religious motives, not maladjustment: Solitude was regarded not only as a way to avoid worldly distractions, but was adopted as a *sacrifice*.

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly given that these are ascetic, medieval saints, they were not often given to mysticism—11.4 percent. Indeed, from my reading I gained the impression that mysticism became more common among saints in more recent times, even though the Church always was, and is, ambivalent about mystics in general (Stark 1999b; Woodward 1996).

These aspects of asceticism are related to gender in rather interesting ways, as can be seen in Table 2. Nearly a third (30.2%) of these saints were women. The fact that nearly all of the women belonged to orders merely reflects that there was no other religious role available to them within the Church (those female saints not in orders remained lay persons), whereas many bishops and most priests did not belong to an order. This explains why Sorokin (1950) found that only 17 percent of saints were women.[3] He included non-ascetic saints and they were overwhelmingly members of the clergy and thus male. The same applies to Weinstein and Bell's (1986) finding that only 18 percent of their list of saints were women.

Overall, men and women were about equally likely to have been classified as extreme ascetics—the modest difference is not statistically significant. However, men were quite significantly more likely to have been hermits or recluses, while women were more than twice as likely as men to have been mystics.

Table 3 demonstrates that ascetic medieval saints were overwhelmingly from the upper classes Overall, one in five (two of five among women)[4] came from a royal family: they

TABLE 2: GENDER AND ASPECTS OF ASCETICISM

	Males (337)	Females (146)
In a Religious Order	84.9%	94.5% *
Extremely Ascetic	39.8%	33.6%
Hermit or Recluse	28.2%	17.8% *
Mystic	8.3%	18.5% *

* Prob.< .01

TABLE 3: GENDER AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

Family:	Males	Females	Total
Royalty	13.1%	42.5%	21.9%
Nobility	55.2%	47.9%	53.0%
Wealthy	17.2%	5.5%	13.7%
Lower	5.3%	3.4%	4.8%
Unknown	9.2%	0.7%	6.6%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Prob.< .000

were kings, queens, princes and princesses. An additional half (53 percent) were of the nobility: dukes, counts, barons, and earls, their spouses, or their children. Hence, three-fourths of these ascetics were from the ranks of the extremely privileged. Of the remainder, the majority were from untitled families of wealth. Only one of twenty came from the lower classes, about the same number as those whose family background is unknown. These findings correspond rather closely to those reported by Sorokin, if one omits the 1,280 cases in his set whose family background was unknown. He reported that 62 percent were from royal or noble backgrounds and most of the rest were from well-to-do families. Weinstein and Bell reported that 51 percent of their saints were from the nobility, 37 percent from well-to-do families and 12 percent were from peasant backgrounds. The modest difference between their findings and mine can be attributed to the fact that their saints are from a later era (1000-1700) wherein the nobility (especially royalty) made up a smaller percentage of the population of Europe while the proportion of untitled, wealthy families had expanded substantially.

TABLE 4: FAMILY BACKGROUND AND ASCETICISM

	Royal	Nobility	Wealthy	Lower
(N)	(106)	(256)	(66)	(23)
In a Religious Order	96.2%	85.2%	87.9%	78.3% *
Extremely Ascetic	35.8%	34.0%	53.0%	34.8%
Hermit or Recluse	20.8%	23.0%	33.3%	21.7%
Mystic	6.6%	10.2%	10.6%	39.1% *
Another saint in the immediate family	30.2%	18.0%	4.5%	0.0 **

* Prob. < .01
** Prob. < .001

Table 4 shows that family background is significantly related to being a member of a religious order—96.2 percent of the royalty compared with 78.3 percent of those from the lower classes. However, family background is not significantly related to being either an extreme ascetic or a hermit. The nobility were as apt to be so classified as those of lower origins—the slightly higher percentages for the wealthy are statistically meaningless. However, mysticism is significantly correlated with family background—saints from lower class homes being more likely to have been mystics. This held for both males and females. I suspect that this correlation was the result of differential selection factors rather than reflecting a greater affinity for mysticism among the poor. That is, people of lower class origins probably had a somewhat lower probability of being noticed simply for their asceticism—it took something as dramatic as visions and prophesies to gain them sufficient notice to become a saint. This interpretation is encouraged by the fact that saints of lower class backgrounds were less than half as likely as those born into privilege to have held higher religious office—52 percent of lower class saints were simple monks or nuns, and nearly one of five was a lay person (not shown).

The last line in Table 4 shows that sainthood tended to run in families. Nearly one in five (18.0 percent) had an immediate family member who also was a saint—sibling saints were especially common. However, saintly kinship was highly concentrated among the privileged, no one from the lower classes had another saint in the family.

In summary, medieval ascetic saints were overwhelmingly of upper class origins. This does not mean, of course, that the lower classes did not produce ascetics too, nor does it even demonstrate that the upper classes were more given to asceticism—although I think they were. But, what is fully demonstrated by these data on saints is that asceticism had a substantial appeal to the medieval upper classes.

CONCLUSION

The list of recent saints includes none of royal origins and few from the nobility. That probably reflects nothing more than the virtual disappearance of monarchies and the rapid decline in the number of titled families in Christendom. However, the fact that many recent saints have come from the lower classes is only partly due to more open stratification systems in Christian nations. It is mainly the result of special efforts by the Church to canonize persons who rose from poverty, particularly if they remained among the laity, and especially if they lived in less developed nations (Woodward 1996). During this same period there also has been a marked decline in asceticism, not only among saints, but in Western religious circles more generally. Whether these shifts are related is uncertain. What is certain is that despite these shifts, a substantial number of nineteenth and twentieth century saints (all of them women) still came from privileged backgrounds, including Jane-Elizabeth Bichier des Ages, Katherine Drexel, Juaquina de Vedruna de Mas, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emily de Vialar, Vicenta Maria Lopez y Vicuna, and "saint-in-the-making" Mother Teresa.

As noted, to refute the deprivation thesis it is not necessary that asceticism, or other forms of religiousness, be an especially upper class phenomenon—it is sufficient that class be of little or no significance. However, I incline to the view that the ascetic impulse *is* more prevalent among persons of privilege, sometimes reflecting guilt about having wealth, but more often stemming from the "discovery" that wealth is not fulfilling. Andrew Greeley pointed out to me that "it was only the nobility who had the time and opportunity to become saints" as the peasants were too busy trying to scratch out a living. Exactly! Hungry peasants are starving, not fasting. Deprivation is asceticism only when it is voluntary and that does tend to limit it to those with the privilege, even the burden, of choice. As Robert William Fogel (2000:2) explained, "throughout history . . . freed of the need to work in order to satisfy their material needs, [the rich] have sought self-realization."

Today, of course, upper class self-realization rarely takes the form of true asceticism since organized asceticism has largely disappeared as has, indeed, a true upper class—wealth and celebrity being only pale analogues of aristocracy. Nevertheless, the search for self-realization remains. One current analogue to upper class medieval asceticism can be found in leftist politics, hence the extreme over-representation of the sons and daughters of wealth in the ranks of American radical activists, especially during the 1960s (McAdam 1988; Sherkat and Blocker 1994). This same interpretation is supported by the remarkable proportion of these same activists who subsequently joined high-intensity religious movements (Kent 2001). In similar fashion, the membership of the British Fabian Society during the late nineteenth century was made up of privileged intellectuals who, in an earlier era, might well have taken holy vows and many of whom eventually became deeply involved in Spiritualism (Barrow 1980; MacKenzie and MacKenzie 1977; Nelson 1969). Another analogue is participation in what might be called therapeutic spirituality centers such as Esalen and Naropa, which have been funded and patronized by the rich (by Laurance Rockefeller, for one), and by their sons and daughters (Fuller 2001; Roof 1999; Taylor 1999). Indeed, the "monks" at San Francisco's celebrated Zen Center, which flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, were overwhelmingly from wealthy families who supported them with regular checks or trust funds. As one of the leaders explained, "Naturally, the link [by which Zen came] into America was through through the aristocracy and the nouveau riche" (Downing 2001:108).

Thus, Marx might better have said that "religion often is the opium of the dissatisfied upper classes, the sigh of wealthy creatures depressed by materialism." But, of course, given his preoccupation with money, Marx couldn't conceive of such a thing.

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NOTES

[1] The data were transfered to punch cards and analyzed on an early IBM counter-sorter. Of course, the actual data disappeared long ago

[2] I mention this because I have grown very impatient with those who assure one other that I owe much of my productivity to "crews" of graduate assistants. I have rarely had a graduate assistant and only once did I allow a graduate student to do *any* coding for me Having had to recode those data, I have never done so again.

[3] It may be unfair to report that Sorokin attributed the lack of female saints to the "fact" that men are superior to women in all areas requiring creativity, including religious creativity (1950:94-95).

[4] Some will object that many daughters of royalty were "forced" into convents No doubt But they were not forced to become saints once they got there. Indeed, the immense literature on immorality in medieval convents and monasteries demonstrates the more typical outcome of compulsory vows.

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