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Serge Brunet

# “Mountain Priests”? Clergy Recruitment, Families, and Mountain Communities in 17th- and 18th-century Europe

*Does the history of religion in mountains yield insights specific to this environment? The present article offers an introduction to the issues at stake in relation to this question, on the basis of an exploration in different European*

*contexts, conducted over several years by an interdisciplinary team. Concrete answers to this question focus mainly on the case of the recruitment of Roman Catholic clergy in the Central Pyrenees, with additional examples from the rest of southern Europe. Some historians have argued that priests came particularly often from mountain regions between the Middle Ages and modern times. Observations of migration flows should not, however, lead us to adopt a simplistic form of geographical determinism. For a better understanding of the question, it is necessary to investigate local forms of church organization and the social and economic status of priests. It is also important to examine the relations between priests, their families, and the different layers of the surrounding society. Examples given here indicate that what seems particular to mountains is historical delay. Upland communities often resisted centralistic Church reforms and tried to maintain as much control over their ecclesiastical resources as possible. This form of resistance to change in certain European mountain regions during the early modern period might be the most adequate explanation for the particularity of mountain priests' activities and migratory behavior.*

**Keywords:** Church organization; clergy recruitment; family structure; mountain communities; history; France; Europe.

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## Introduction

Recent research on the possible specificities of religious phenomena in European mountains has shown that Catholic clergy in European mountain societies from the Middle Ages to the early modern period did not remain stationary (Brunet 2001; Jimenez-Sanchez et al 2003; Brunet et al 2005; Brunet and Lemaitre 2005). Various patterns of change and migration can be observed: they depended on transformations and the desire for reform in both the Church and mountain communities. Most important were the rhythms of change and the interconnections between various domains.

This paper first presents the state of historical knowledge on this issue. It then analyzes recent investigations of 17th and 18th century Roman Catholic clergy, with a focus on priests as members both of the clergy and of families with various circles of acquaintances, various forms of relationships, and various socioeconomic arrangements. Mountain communities, which generally face harsh lives in a secluded environment, are a privileged area for such investigations; but this commonplace has also led both contemporary observers and modern scholars to discuss their historical evolution from a point of view heavily loaded with stereotypes. Thus it is important to look critically at prevailing accounts and to deconstruct those which do not withstand a serious comparative and historical test.

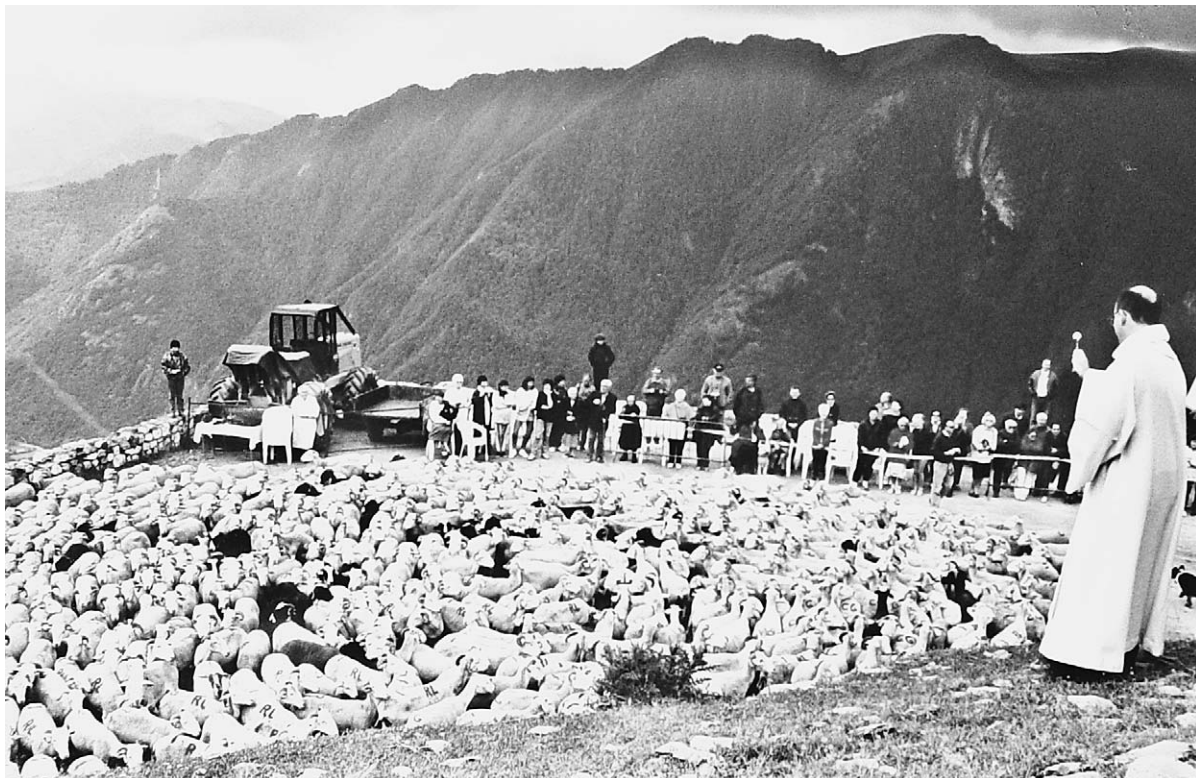
## Religious activities: specific to mountains?

In Europe, the idea that mountain societies exhibit religious behavior specific to their environment is not new. This was already a convention in the writings of intra-continental missionaries in the 17th century. Mountains were seen as an inspiring, spiritual space. During the 18th century, the “horrid mounts” (Briffaud 1994) became romantic peaks and valleys, and the same tendentious descriptions characterized both mountain peoples and their environment (Figure 1). Early mountaineering, instead of desacralizing conquered peaks, invented a new discourse about man facing the quasi-spiritual challenges of the sublime mountain. It was a highly religious issue (Joutard 1986; Briffaud 1994; Roux 1999). The task of the historian is to analyze these commonplaces and to unravel the clichés. Is it possible to isolate behavior or belief systems specific to mountain areas (Lemaitre 1998)?

To answer this question we need specialists in complementary disciplines: general historians; archaeologists; historians who specialize in law, art, and the family; anthropologists and ethnologists; and theologians. Such specialists rarely meet and talk to each other. Moreover, the entire issue should be studied over a long period of time in order to enable us to assess continuities and breaks from antiquity to our own times. We should also take care to distinguish between, define, and compare the concepts of the lowlands and the mountains in Europe with respect to their different religions and cultures, while avoiding mere geographical determinism (Brunet and Lemaitre 2005). For practical and methodological reasons, the present comparative examination is limited to Roman Catholic mountain regions, which, in Europe, represent the great majority of the continent's overall mountainous area.

Rather than trying to understand the sacredness of some places, it is particularly important to examine the

**FIGURE 1** “Glaciers of the Valley of Astau” (Valley of Larboust, Central Pyrenees, France). A mid-19th century representation of a church in the mountains that combines romantic elements (a sense of the sublime) and realism (women, children, and 2 beggars on the church doorstep). This would have made the picture meaningful to both wealthy summer tourists and local inhabitants. (Lithograph by Victor Petit)



**FIGURE 2** Present-day blessing of herds before they leave the village of Artigue (Valley of Luchon, Central Pyrenees). This ritual has endured despite past attempts by the Roman Catholic Church to forbid it. The priest is standing in front of an old calvary, between the village and the path to the high pastures. This sacred place has known 2 other protective rites: King Carnival and St John's Bonfire on Midsummer Night, both guaranteeing fertility and a good harvest. (Photo by Sophie Aubert, 1995)

relations between priests, as well as between priests, simple believers, their families, and the different layers of the surrounding society (Brunet 2004). Alain Cabantous has shown to what extent people living on the seashore, and influenced by the constraints of their environment, developed specific practices and beliefs that depended on fears linked to the sea. The task of evangelizing communities had to take into account

those beliefs as well as the rhythm of fishing trips (Cabantous and Hildesheimer 1989; Cabantous 1990).

Similarly, priests who officiated in mountain communities had to consider highland rhythms. Every spring, in the Pyrenees as well as in the Alps, when the snow melted away, cattle and men ascended to the mountain pastures. Rituals of benediction accompanied this ascent (Figure 2). Later, in autumn, they had to



**FIGURE 3** "A family in Barèges" (Vallée de Barèges, Central Pyrenees, France). Mid-19th century representation of a very conventional scene with unconventional costumes: Pyrenean society is imagined as Arcadia. This saint-sulpicienne picture (like the pious imagery and statuary selling in the shops around the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris) represents a pretty young woman who drops her spindle to teach her child—barefoot in the snow—how to pray. A shepherd, with his crook and sheepdog, is more meditative than pious. Thus it is the mother who transmits belief in God. Why was the cross erected—to commemorate a dramatic event or remind passers-by of God? (Lithograph by Alfred Dartiguenave)



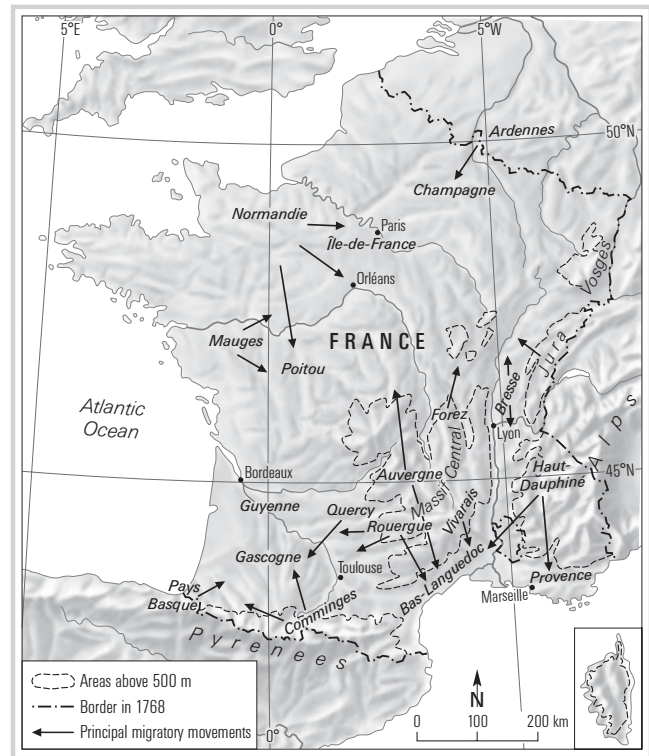
leave these places before they were once again snow-bound. The uplands remained lifeless, a world inhabited by malevolent ghosts. Pilgrimage prayers attended the movements of cattle and men from the mountain parishes, whose limits expanded and contracted according to the seasons (Brunet 2001).

The official and “universal” religion is not the only social reality. In addition, as judiciously stated by William Christian, there is the phenomenon of “local religion” (Christian 1981). Pursuing the work of other scholars, Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard has reached the same conclusion in the Provence. She distinguishes between saints “from outside”—from the first Christianization, whose cult and rites were popular—and saints “from inside,” that is the saints worshiped inside the parish sanctuary, the saints of the Catholic Reformation, of intimacy with God (Froeschlé-Chopard 1994). Several studies have recently emphasized religious signs such as chapels and crosses (Figure 3). This is the study of religion in everyday life, which reveals the sacredness of some places—a geography of processions and pilgrimages often questioned by the Catholic Reformation in the second half of the 16th century. These subtle “games” gave a form to the faith of our forefathers (Martin 1997; Provost 1998).

Living in mountains was experienced as full of constraints and hardships, not only in relation to the moving of cattle, the seasonal inaccessibility of places, the sense of danger, or the repulsion inspired by some places considered to attract death. A great number of mountain inhabitants migrated to the lowlands (Blache 1933). In winter, an excess of mouths to feed forced people to emigrate temporarily; in summer people migrated to seek seasonal work. The number of households, as well as the number of houses and properties in each community, did not increase enough over time to prevent deterioration in the standard of living and economic conditions in the communities. Thus the owners of small amounts of property, and in the Pyrenees the younger sons, were disinherited according to Pyrenean family organization (originating in local ancestral family institutions and traditions founded on primogeniture and the survival of the family line and its full transmission to one heir at each generation); these landless sons preferred to emigrate. Thus the flow of priests to the lowlands (Tackett 1979) is only one of the many aspects of migration in mountain areas (Poitrineau 1983).

But this is not as simple as it looks. Some of the regions from which the clergy emigrated were not mountainous, and clergy migration did not concern all mountains in Europe (Figure 4). It is, therefore, necessary to appreciate local realities, the specific forms of organization among families and mountain communities, and the local management of property and of Church income. All these elements changed over time.

**FIGURE 4** Clergy migration patterns in France, in the 17th and 18th centuries. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck, based on information from Serge Brunet)



### “Mountain priests”?

A basic focus of research relating to the complex set of issues explored here is the historical and regional forms of recruitment of priests. We can conceive of various types of religious organization and management that maintained specific kinds of relation with the sacredness of mountain areas and even with general perceptions and images of these areas.

Timothy Tackett has tried to assess the important regional diversity of clergy recruitment in France during the late 18th century (Tackett 1979). Traditional flows of clergymen linked various regions. The priests of the Ardennes went down to the lowlands of the Champagne, those of Normandy to the Ile-de-France, Orléanais, and Poitou, those of the Haut-Dauphiné, the Auvergne, and the Vivarais to the Bas-Languedoc and the Basse-Provence, and so on (Tackett 1977, 1979). In the regions of departure, breeding animals was an important element of community life. These regions were relatively poor, and rapid demographic growth led to an excess of population, whose sustenance was precarious; this led to outmigration. The exodus of priests thus constituted one of the multiple instances of migration of mountain people. The clergymen followed some of the migration routes of the laity. Moreover, in the valley of Vallouise (Haut-Dauphiné, French Alps), the churchman was an organizer of seasonal or definitive



migratory movements (Prost 2004). But many mountain regions that are known as emigration areas did not have migrant clergymen. Different explanations must therefore be found.

Another criterion, the alphabetization ratio, does not seem to be decisive, either. In the Rouergue and the Comminges regions, for example, both an extensively illiterate population and an important outmigration of clergymen can be observed (Brunet 2001). On the other hand, some highland regions whose people were especially literate had no emigration of clergymen. Such was the case of the Briançonnais studied by Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset (2005).

A more broadly relevant explanation can be found in the particular regional setup of the “benefice” system. Traditionally, a benefice was an income enjoyed by a priest, often stemming from landholdings and linked to the provision of specific spiritual duties. Benefices for the service of a chapel (generally without care of souls, consisting of prayers for the soul of the founder of the chapel) and obituary fraternities (specifically intended for prayers in favor of the dead) would attract numerous clergymen. But it is difficult to distinguish between the cause and the consequence. Should we believe that these various occasions attracted priestly candidates or, on the contrary, that the large numbers of clergymen incited the laity to create such employments?

### Regional frameworks of religious culture

A more useful approach, according to Timothy Tackett, would consist of linking clergy recruitment and regional frameworks of religious culture. This implies looking for correlations between sacerdotal vocations and different forms of organization among families and mountain communities, customs, and uses concerned with farming and inheritance. For example, the bishops of the Catholic Reformation required that applicants have a clergy title in the form of a life annuity. Called “patrimonial title,” this document was certified by a notary and warranted by real estate owned by the clergyman’s family. The situation differed according to the value of the life annuity and to the law of the region: regions with written law, inheritance based on strict equality, or optional inheritance in the regions of common law (Cabanel 1997). Recently, new investigations have shed light on the relationships between the ecclesiastical establishment and rural communities, particularly in Italy and Spain (Russo 1984; Torre 1995; Puigvert 2001).

We should not consider the Church a homogeneous institution that christianizes the rural masses in the long term. Here, the contribution of anthropology of religion is decisive. Gabriel Le Bras, Alphonse Dupront, and, for another culture, Nathan Wachtel

have broken new ground. They have enabled us to think in a different way about religion. Its subtle manifestations on the local level and in specific cultures have been described, with a historical approach, by William Christian for Castile and by Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard for the Provence. Following the lead of other historians, Nathan Wachtel, in a study about an Andean mountain region, has advocated a “regressive history” which makes it possible to track and stem the tide of those manifestations (Le Bras 1955–1956; Dupront 1987; Wachtel 1990). Thus, anthropology of religion has introduced innovative methods stressing popular agency and deconstructing the traditional view of a church as the single relevant actor in this field.

### A sacerdotal typology

At the end of the Middle Ages, the population density of clergymen seemed to be relatively uniform and high in the whole of France. Marc Venard rightly observed that it would be a mistake to frame the question of sacerdotal recruiting in the same way for the 16th century as for the 17th and 18th centuries. They were not the same priests, and it was not the same Church (Venard 1968; Tabbagh 1993).

During the second part of the 16th century, in France, we find a “sacerdotal superabundance” in the southwest. This contrast with other regions certainly originated from the cohesion of the parish communities, their concept of salvation, their representation of priesthood, and from family organization and the policy of some bishops, which was submitted to frequent change.

Everything, then, seems to be a question of the speed of change. In the general development of the clergy and its relation to the rest of society, mountain areas such as the Central Pyrenees often lagged behind. The phenomenon of boundaries delayed Church reforms during the *Ancien Régime* in the 17th and 18th centuries, thus preserving and even reinforcing a certain degree of “ecclesiastical autonomy” in close contact with this mountain society. The historical development of the rural clergy was not simply one of a progressive erosion, caused by the Catholic Reformation, of a presumed original status. We must uncover the local dynamics, transformations, and adjustments that took place. This is possible on the basis of long-term studies with a limited spatial focus (Tackett 1977).

Before the Catholic Reformation became manifest in this area, the influence and power of families and local communities were conspicuous. They expressed themselves in the control of the patronage of vicarships by a few families or sometimes by the assembly of the leading families, in the collection by laymen of part of the benefices, and in the role of rural clergymen in the

**FIGURE 5** The village of Montcorbau (Valley of Aran, Central Pyrenees, Spain). In 1278, the villagers built a fortified bell-tower to protect themselves from feudal lords and the French bishop of Comminges. They kept all tithes to maintain the church and provide their priests with an income. (Photo by Serge Brunet)



local credit systems and as notaries. All these phenomena testify to the embeddedness of the priests in the surrounding society before the Catholic Reformation promoted their separation from the laity (Gomis 2000, 2006). Despite more rigorous diocesan control and the decreasing number of clergymen, family strategies continued to play a role, though proceeding in other ways, during the 17th and 18th centuries. New seminaries (priest schools) and new educational obligations for practicing priests made the training of priests more expensive. The families, however, created ingenious modes of transmitting patrimonial titles within households (Cabanel 1997).

Similar close attention should be paid to the procedure of the *resignatio in favorem* (resignation in favor of somebody). The holder of a benefice could resign in favor of another person, who might be a relative. Generally, the new minister renounced a third of the value of the benefice—in the form of a life annuity—in favor of the previous holder of the title. Thus, the patron of the benefice was not able to choose a clergyman to appoint to the office, and some clergy dynasties were reinforced. These practices were not particular to one specific region. The so-called *chiese ricettizie* in the king-

dom of Naples—local ecclesiastical bodies organized in a relatively autonomous manner—are another example of family control of real estate and Church income. They represented only a third of the parishes, but they possessed 55% of the income in the first half of the 19th century, and probably 70 to 75% in the previous century (Lerra 1996). Both the highlands and the *Mezzogiorno* of southern Italy were characterized by societies with strong communitarian constraints and with the corresponding resistance to change imposed by the Roman Catholic Church.

These constraints had less impact on the regular clergy (monks and nuns). Rural families, for example, were not able to control ecclesiastical dowries. They were forced to give up a part of their real estate. The inhabitants of the Aran valley in the kingdom of Spain (but organized in the French diocese of Comminges during the *Ancien Régime*) rejected this sort of transfer. That seems to be the deeper reason why they resisted the Gregorian reformation during the Middle Ages. Central Pyreneans took no interest in the Franciscan or Dominican orders. As a matter of fact, at the end of the Middle Ages, the Aranais succeeded in rejecting the benefice system, which would have been dangerous for

their common management of Church income in the valley. This is also why, later, they remained indifferent to the Reformation. The household heads kept all the tithes for their churches and clergy, and the nomination of their priest (Figure 5; Brunet 2001).

It is also necessary to reflect on the localization of monasteries in these highlands. Charles Higounet observed the difficulty of their establishment in the Central Pyrenees. Even on passes, the order of the Hospitaliers was sparsely represented compared to other mountains where the monks of Saint Bruno, the founder of the Carthusian order, were very present. Various explanations can be proposed for the Pyrenees: the comparatively low income in comparison with the population, and the strength of the local powers such as the lordships, who were mainly rural communities, ie parishes and valleys (Bonnassie 1974; Higounet 1975).

## Conclusion

To a large extent, studies in European religious history have been conducted in single diocesan settings, thus

not making it possible to reach a sufficiently complex level of analysis. By taking into consideration the results of historical inquiry into family systems and transfer of inheritance in rural societies, our understanding of patterns of clergy migration and activities in mountain areas is enhanced. The anthropological method applied to religious history and, above all, the comparative method are essential, especially to account for the specificities of mountain regions, which tend to be a blank space for projections and stereotypes. It is therefore possible to envisage specific research on sacerdotal organization in the European highlands, whose rural communities have sought to conserve and make the most of the control of their churches and clergy income. Very often, mountain people have opposed the power of Church authorities. This testifies to their resistance, but also to their capacity to adapt to the challenges of Church reformation and state modernization. The relative delay of these changes in some upland regions in France and Europe is the single most important reason for the distinct behavior of the clergy that can sometimes be found in these areas.

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