SECTION I

THE ORIGINS AND FOUNDATION OF MENDICANCY
CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS MENDICANCY IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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In popular and scholarly writing about the middle ages the common wisdom is that, among the religious events of the thirteenth century, the most important and long lasting was the appearance of the mendicant orders, in particular the Franciscans. Their appearance presents, in the usual narrative, a revolutionary change from not only from earlier Benedictine monasticism, but also from the movement of the canons regular, whose renewal of the Apostolic Life marked the late eleventh century. In addition, what a mendicant order was and still is—for they continue to exist in the modern Roman Catholic Church—seems obvious to writers and readers of this literature.

In place of cloistered contemplation, the Mendicants pursued an active apostolate; in place of stability of life in a single monastery, they were itinerant. Mendicants were part of an international organization under the papacy—an “order.” Most importantly, they practiced a radical form of poverty that included religious begging, the practice from which they received the name “mendicant.” The origin of this new religious movement is generally traced to a single man, Francis of Assisi, who, if he did not create this new way of life out of whole cloth, refashioned earlier attitudes and practices in such a way as to produce something wholly new.1 The Order of Preachers, originally a group of canons regular founded by the Spaniard Dominic de Guzman to preach against heresy, imitated Francis’ prototype, and together they become the models for nearly every new orders founded in the thirteenth century, as well as providing a pattern for remodeling a good number of older ones.2

This essay questions virtually all of these conclusions, at least as they are commonly understood.

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1 On this conventional version of the origins of mendicancy, see, e.g., Félix Vernet, *Ordres mendiants* (Paris, 1933), 10–14, which provides as good a short overview as any.

2 On these other groups, see Frances Andrews, *Other Friars: The Carmelite, Augustinian, Sack and Pied friars in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), esp. 176, who emphasizes the exemplarity of the Franciscans and Dominicans.