

The English Family of Love

The Family of Love, what a lovely name, (*Familia Caritatis* in Latin). Naturally, the historian will try to place the English Family of Love in context¹, to compare their beliefs and practices with those of contemporaries, to discover their antecedents, to gauge their influence at the time and since. Others may recognize a current of deep humanity always ready to break out in the most unlikely place and when least expected. Without question, the Family's emphasis on tolerance in matters of belief strikes a modern chord, also their insistence on the necessity for every person to find their own way to God in an ongoing, lifelong process.

The loose-knit group was founded by the Dutch mystic Hendrik Niclaes (b ~1501), his many writings providing the foundation stone (they were typically signed H.N.). These writings, virtually scripture to his followers, were translated into English from "base almayne" in the 1570s. They were written in an "extraordinary inspirational style" which attracted attention on the continent starting in the 1540s [Marsh, p. 1].

Little is known of Niclaes's life, and much of that from hagiographic accounts of followers.² He was brought up in a prosperous, devoutly Catholic merchant family and showed early signs of interest in religion and an acuity beyond his years. He had visions even as a boy and started to think he had a unique message of redemption. It appears he remained Catholic for some time but studied the German Bible carefully, as is evident in his writings. He engaged Lutherans and was imprisoned for doing so at the age of twenty seven. Niclaes deplored the religious strife exemplified by the hyper-brutal Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and aspired to transcend sectarian warfare of all kinds. He himself prospered as a merchant even while maintaining an ongoing interest in religious matters, his ministry starting in earnest in the 1540s when he began publishing and attracting followers.

Doctrine and Antecedents

Certainly the Family itself wished to be tolerated, but more than that, tolerance was a keystone of their philosophy, lacking which there was no true religion. They insisted that everyone in the world must seek the Lord in their own way, unobstructed:

Unto the lovers of the Truth, here and there, wheresoever or in what quarter of the world

¹ My main source is *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550-1630*, by Christopher Marsh (Cambridge University Press, 1994), ISBN 0-521-44128-5.

² This paragraph is based on another good source, "'Godded with God': Hendrik Niclaes and His Family of Love", by Jean Dietz Moss, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 71, No. 8 (1981), pp. 1-89.

they dwell or have their abode, of what Nation and Religion soever they be, Christians, Jews, Mahomites or Turks and heathen, with all divided people, of what condition or dignity soever they be ... Let every Nation then have among them, so many manner of grounds, beliefs, religions, ceremonies, and services, as they will, wherein they love God his truth, and the righteousness [*Evangelium regni*³, by Hendrik Niclaes, p. 4].

Ostensibly Christian and relying heavily on the concept of Christ within each person, the Family diverged markedly from key doctrines held across the Christian spectrum. They apparently did not believe in life after death or the resurrection of souls, for example, and may not have believed in a historical Jesus. They seemed to think much of the Bible was metaphorical and should not be taken literally.⁴ The language of enlightenment infused their writings, the light within each person that must be consciously cultivated (Christ's resurrection is taken as his re-emergence in the heart of each believer, the Christ within). The Family was a secretive group by necessity, hated and hounded by Catholics and Protestants alike, this in an age when heresy could get you burned at the stake. They were generally willing to conform outwardly, holding that of little moment compared to the inner search for true humanity through Christ in community with brethren. They did not evangelize or regard themselves as a sect, using terms for themselves like community and fellowship.

Erasmian humanism likely influenced Family thinking considering the philosophical overlap and the timing (Erasmus 1466-1536, Family founder Hendrik Niclaes born ~1501). Scholarship on such a secretive group is difficult, but Christopher Marsh has tracked down a number of wills of likely Family members, which show a decided philanthropic tendency even when there was little to give (bequests to the poor of the parish, for example). Humanists and Familists weren't the only ones with good will towards the unfortunate in their midst, but the near universal outreach in these wills is striking. Good works, but not to save one's soul in the afterlife, rather to save one's humanity today by acknowledging oneness with fellow sufferers.

Another influential stream was Catholic mysticism, always strong since the beginning (consider Francis of Assisi or Ignatius Loyola, for example, not to mention early monasticism). Marsh writes that a disposition towards mysticism "may be the vital factor in understanding the Family of Love at its roots" [p. 76].

In fact Family philosophy seems closer to Catholic notions of the necessity of good works than to Protestant doctrines of salvation by faith alone (nor did Familists hold with predestination),

³ <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A52314.0001.001/1:3.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

⁴ Moss addresses these matters (p. 46). Niclaes viewed the key Old Testament figures as largely symbolic, Abraham exemplifying "those who are set apart from the heathen because of their unswerving love of God", for example. Even with the New Testament, "he constantly warns the reader against losing sight of the central light or spirit of the Scriptures by a reliance on their literal interpretation."

and the Family attracted its share of former Catholics as well as those from older nonconforming traditions:

Although Niclaes was criticized both by Catholics and by protestants, his theological position and his hostile attitude towards the Reformation combined to assure that his most vehement opponents espoused the new religion rather than the old [Marsh, p. 33].

The question of Lollard influence arises naturally, but Lollard and Family concerns differed. The central Lollard passion for scripture-reading was absent among Family members, though they often seemed well versed. Reading religious works in English was important for the Family, but the works favored were Niclaes' own writings and those of other leading Familists, not scripture. Nor does the Lollard antipathy to Church practices if not Catholicism itself find echo in Family thought. Marsh speculates that likeness and possible influence may be found in a similar practice, namely, a secretive small-community based worship centered in the home and at variance with prevailing religion.

Niclaes did not call for adult baptism nor condemn infant baptism as Anabaptists did [Moss, p. 15], so it seems misguided to characterize his thought as Anabaptist, altogether apart from the Catholic connection. All the same, the Anabaptist emphasis on inner spirituality and their adamant heterodoxy suggest an overlap in England as well as on the continent. Marsh stresses the salience of broadly similar views as well as common religious practice in connecting the Family to sub rosa currents like English Anabaptism:

It is possible, therefore, to interpret English Familism as the adaptation of a set of imported beliefs to the established patterns of native nonconformity [Marsh, pp. 30-31].

Social and Geographical Distribution

The difficulty in studying such a secretive group will be obvious and this fact has led to a distorted view of the Family, their enemies being taken at face value because they provide most of the documentary evidence. Marsh's balancing approach is to delve into a kind of microhistory depending on wills, parish registers, subsidy records, and the like. He has studied the Family in Cambridgeshire extensively, identifying a number of interlocking families adhering to the Family of Love. This seems to be the main concentration, though they are also found in Devon and Surrey [p. 7]. Alarmist persecuting authors claimed a large membership for the Family and while suspect because of motive, prudence equally counsels that for every identified Familist, many others must have gone effectively to ground, known to few others at the time and not at all to posterity.

Amazingly, the Family was well-entrenched at the court of Queen Elizabeth, most notably in the person of the redoubtable Robert Seale, a faithful and longstanding member of the Yeoman of the Guard at Court (which included the queen's personal security detail), but not only him.

There is a fair amount of documentation on Seale because of his position, including known instances of contacts with Familists elsewhere in the realm suggesting his ability and willingness to alert them to impending danger.

Marsh cites evidence suggesting that Family adherents came "predominantly from the prosperous middling sections of English society" and were often leading members of their local villages [p. 153]. Such members would have been literate, and there are accounts of accused Familists hiding Niclaes' books. Certainly devoted believers would value literacy considering the centrality of Niclaes' writings in Family life, but there are other instances of accused English Familists claiming to be illiterate.

Other accounts of Familists then and now put them lower on the social scale, the better to cast them as ignorant dupes in the case of their contemporary Puritan enemies. Still, it is perfectly possible that documentary records even of the kind Marsh has studied prejudice the case towards the relatively well-to-do — they are the ones tending to leave records after all.

In fact, Christopher Hill turns the situation upside down, placing the Family in a larger framework of ongoing plebeian religious unorthodoxy including but by no means limited to the Lollards. He writes of early Familists as being "weavers, basket-makers, musicians, bottle-makers, joiners, who lived by traveling from place to place"⁵. Itinerancy would certainly help explain the spread of Family thought early on, though Hill notes the ambiguity of the term "Familist", sometimes attaching to broad tendencies rather than any specific group.

Niclaes himself was a merchant and his chief English missionary to England Christopher Vittels, though spoken of as a joiner, plied the English-Dutch cloth trade. Marsh suggests that economic networks borne of such links aided the diffusion of the Family and provided mutual economic support [pp. 78, 150-151]. Like-minded Quaker merchants depended heavily on such networks shortly thereafter.

The Secret History

Family attitudes and attitudes *about* them in the broader society open a window into the secret history of society played out quietly and so often without report at every hearth in the land. An active desire for peace at large and amity among neighbors appear everywhere, perhaps even more decidedly in periods of nonstop political and religious turmoil never far from blood-letting. The Family exemplifies such currents, and so do many of their more orthodox neighbors in their

⁵ *The World Turned Upside Down*, by Christopher Hill (The Viking Press, 1972), SBN 670-78975-5. See Chapter 3, which speaks of "Mobility and Freedom". The quote is on page 37. The title of Hill's book is evidently based on John Knewstubb's assertion in an influential anti-Family polemic that "N. H. turns religion upside down. He buildeth heaven here upon earth; he maketh God man and man God" [see Hill, p. 22].

matter-of-fact tolerance [see Marsh, p. 69].

Familists in the 1570s staked out a fourth way apart from militant Catholics and Puritans, apart too from the Elizabethan establishment trying to contain those two tendencies and willing to apply coercion as needed. Familists cared nothing for matters like the Eucharist or church governance, the inner life was everything for them. They held their beliefs and practiced their religion quietly in the home, making a point of outward conformity and willing to attend Church of England services for show. Likely most of the attendees at those services did likewise as chronicled by authors down the ages like Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope.

Outward conformity joined with inward reservation was exactly what inflamed the Family's most bitter enemies, men like the Puritan extremist John Knewstub, author of an influential diatribe against the Family in 1579⁶. Marsh writes of the "Puritan crisis" of 1580 or so, pointing to their own doubts, unacknowledged as they were, about the attractiveness of their form of godly practice. In short, they worried that the Family might represent a much larger section of sentiment in society than their numbers suggested.

Marsh has identified a number of Family households in Cambridgeshire and Family members he has identified there tended to be prosperous and well-integrated into their communities, respected too as well as any who did their duty by the local community. These were tightly-knit communities where people knew a good bit of their neighbors' business and were perfectly able to interfere with it considering the nature of the English justice system of the period, founded on local courts as it was. Neighbors of Family members were apparently willing to overlook private unorthodoxy as long as accepted forms of neighborliness and civic duty were observed in public (in one case, after an arduous inquisition, the accused "went to dynner with the preacher" [Marsh, p. 107]). In other words, magistrates, clerics, and neighbors did indeed often mirror Family values of tolerance.

Campaign of Persecution

Knewstub was at the center of a far-reaching campaign against the Family starting in 1576 and culminating in 1581. Propaganda came first, the broadside by Knewstub being prominent, though there were others. The Privy Council condemned the Family in 1580, leading to inquisitions by magistrates and prelates and some jailings. The influential Robert Seale went to prison in an attempt to break up the Family cell at court. Elizabeth issued a "violently worded" proclamation attacking the Family, quite possibly written by Knewstub, who had been deputed to root out the Family at court.

Parliament took up an act specifically outlawing the Family early in 1581, apparently conceived

⁶ *A confutation of monstrous and horrible heresies taught by H.N. and embraced of a number, who call themselves the Familie of Love*, by John Knewstub (London, 1579).

and drawn up by Knewstub [Marsh, p. 130-133]. Marsh suggests that hot Puritans like Knewstub were trying to divert attention from their own parlous position with this campaign, the Catholic threat having receded. Thomas Cromwell wrote that the act called for whipping and branding Family members, and for adjudging them felons on the third offense. This appeared too much for many members of Parliament, including some bishops, the Commons discussing at length whether the death penalty was in order for such "heretics". The bill was sent to a committee including the luminaries Christopher Hatton, Walter Mildmay, and Thomas Heneage and was never seen again, ending the campaign.

The persecution ended abruptly thereafter and without routing the Family though evidently driving them further underground. Marsh writes judiciously:

The Family of Love, paradoxically, was not only well placed to serve as a scapegoat for the myriad anxieties of the 'puritans' in the late 1570s, but was placed to respond to the challenge. It was, in part, the ground the fellowship's members shared with the Queen, both figuratively and literally, that attracted such hostility in the first place [p. 138].

The Family at Court

Family members were firmly established at court, "frequently in positions of considerable sensitivity" like Keeper of the Royal Armoury at East Greenwich (Francis Ingoldsby). Identification with this secretive fellowship is never absolutely certain, but fellow-travelers and relatives of likely Family members appear as a royal trumpeter and the "Clerk of his Majesties Aviary", among other positions [see Marsh, pp. 116-22, pp. 162-170 for this section]. The key figure was Robert Seale, who quickly recovered his old post after dismissal and imprisonment in 1580. He was promoted twice in the 1590s, becoming a supervisor of the Yeoman of the Guard, men of unquestionable loyalty, devotion, and martial presence physically close to the Queen at all times. Someone like the Earl of Essex would have had to fight through Seale and his presumably well-trained and definitely well-armed and determined associates to approach the Queen against her wishes.

This closeness was well known to enemies of the Family and appears to have provoked them, considering the centrality of the court and the Queen in particular to all high politics in this hierarchical society. Politics at that level determined religious policy as well, the real interest of anti-Family Puritans. Elizabeth's religious instincts were similar to those of the Family, namely, tolerance for a wide variety of inner beliefs as long as the forms were maintained in public. Of course the Queen can never be at fault, can never be attacked, so the Family may have been the scapegoat for the angst felt by hotter Puritans over the Elizabethan middle way in religion. The Queen had the means to learn about the Family of Love in the most direct way. It is hard to say if she sympathized with them; it is a matter of fact that she was like-minded in many ways and tolerated them in the most sensitive positions imaginable.

Survival and Lasting Influence

Secret religion-based groups can survive for some time even when brutally persecuted. One example is Japan's hidden Christians⁷, converted by Jesuit missionaries at the time of Queen Elizabeth and loyal over centuries without priests and despite the most draconian penalties if exposed. Their Latin *Salve Reginas* and *Misereres* discovered in the late nineteenth century had a Japanese accent, but were not hard to recognize.

The Spanish Conversos too were forced underground, their remote descendants sometimes playing with dreidels in Spanish America. The failed Torquemada John Knewstub could only wish for the Grand Inquisitor's powers; certainly his obsession with the wickedness of outward conformity and private unorthodoxy mirrored the Spanish Inquisition. The contrast is what throws light on English society though. Queen Mary presided over a great persecution to be sure — 300 burnings in six years — but execution depended on the zeal of local bishops and magistrates, entire sections of the country opting out. None from cottager to Queen had much stomach for pursuing the Family of Love, Elizabeth at one with her people on this.

Or take the Muggletonians, a Ranter-like English group who persisted even as their thought was frozen in the seventeenth century. They were odd even then, accentuating some religious attitudes of the day as hearty cursers of reprobates, starkly contradicting others like the spiritual nature of God (they believed He was corporeal, the size of a "middle-statured man"⁸). Like the Family, they kept to themselves; they seem not to have been seriously persecuted, certainly not after official toleration in 1689, but remained underground. They were thought long extinct, but an adherent with deep pedigree surfaced in the 1970s, underscoring the group's long success at remaining undetected [Hill, et al., pp. 1-5].

The Family of Love appear to have died out in England though. There are signs of them well into the seventeenth century and of the Puritan preoccupation with them as well, but they seem to have been completely gone by 1700. Perhaps the Puritan zealots underestimated the power of long-standing public conformity to change the inner life of even devoted Family members.

In *The World Turned Upside Down*, Christopher Hill explains at many points how the Family of

⁷ See *Japan's Hidden Christians*, by Ann M. Harrington (Loyola University Press, 1993), ISBN 0-8294-0741-3. *Salve Reginas* and *Misereres*: p. 116. Some 30,000 of these "kakure Kirishitan" survived late into the nineteenth century [p. 35], so deeply underground as to be unaware of virtually identical communities short miles away. They were not all enthralled at being revealed even after persecution ended or in hearing about orthodox nineteenth century Catholicism.

⁸ See *The World of the Muggletonians*, by Christopher Hill, Barry Reay, and William Lamont (Temple Smith, 1983), ISBN 0-85117-226-1. Middle-statured man: p. 25. "Muggleton said that cursing did him more good 'than if a Man had given him Forty Shillings'" [p. 29].

Love reflected and manifested vital religious currents in the sixteenth century, currents revived by groups like the Diggers and Fifth Monarchists in the great religious efflorescence of the 1640s. Many Seekers were found in the diocese of Ely, for example, where the Family had been strong two generations before [Hill, p. 38].

The few Familist lines Marsh has traced forward went in many different directions, though unorthodoxy and engagement were common — at least one Family descendent ended up in Puritan Massachusetts [Marsh, p. 235]. He found Family descendants on both sides of the civil war, speculating that the royalist cause better fit the authority-respecting ideology of the Family (one is tempted to note that Parliamentary ranks would have been considerably thinned were respect for authority disqualifying).

Continuation must have been difficult for such a determinedly private fellowship, especially considering the profusion of non-conformist groups competing for adherents starting in the 1640s. Many Familists presumably gravitated to the out-reaching Quakers in the mid-seventeenth century, so similar in illuminationist thought, tolerance, and even loving language ("many early Quakers probably read Niclaes' works, reprinted in the 1650s" according to Marsh, p. 260).

Much Family doctrine has a curiously modern feel — principled tolerance for all faiths, cultivation of the Christ within, the necessity to love all one's neighbors, the allegorical nature of scripture (and no less powerful for that). Also the thought so horrifying to the Puritan divines that heaven and hell too are to be found in this life and not any to follow. Maybe that is the root of the persecutors' fury at this private and inoffensive fellowship, the nagging and crazy-making feeling that the future belonged not to them but to the Family of Love.

Mike Bertrand

May 27, 2018