

Introduction

The Family of Love has been subject to a variety of approaches over the years. Hostile witnesses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have left the impression of a sect at the same time dangerous and ludicrous, a congregation of cowards, traitors and lechers determined to undermine the visible churches and, if given the chance, to destroy the state itself. A slightly more recent historiographical tendency, in existence since the late seventeenth century but only truly perceptible since the second half of the nineteenth century, presents the Family of Love as a movement with far more virtues than implied by Protestant and Catholic pamphleteers.¹ It was, after all, a movement which attracted some of the greatest humanists of the time. The printer Christophe Plantin, the historian Justus Lipsius and other eminent intellectuals were all in some way affected by it, and this alone has led posterity to look with interest at the writings of Hendrik Niclaes, the founder of the Family of Love, and those of his schismatic follower, Hendrik Jansen van Barrefelt (Hiël), who was regarded as his successor. More recently still, the secrecy which surrounded what was thought to be a sect, and the uncertainty which remains as to the degree of involvement of those who were connected with it, has

1. The standard account of Hendrik Niclaes's life and doctrine still remains Friederich Nippold, 'Heinrich Niclaes und das Haus der Liebe: Ein monographischer Versuch aus der Secten-Geschichte der Reformationszeit. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungs-Geschichte der anabaptistischen, antitrinitarischen und antinomistischen Lehren', *ZhT*, 32 (1862), pp. 323-402, 473-563.

induced certain scholars to attribute to it a political influence of some consequence.²

The Family of Love, however, presents one particular problem. How are we to define it? Was it a sect, a spiritual movement, an association of admirers of Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt, a business partnership or even a collection of disparate and casual readers of the writings of Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt appreciated as part of a broad and popular mystical tradition? The only country in which it was investigated at all systematically as a sect and about which we have some information is England. On the continent, where the Family of Love originated, no such investigation appears to have taken place. The authorities were far too concerned with the major splits and heresies arising from the Reformation to bother about groups of men and women who were usually exemplary citizens and preferred to conform to whatever faith the state chose to impose. About such a sect, which does indeed seem to have existed in the Low Countries and Germany in some form that went beyond the imagination of Hendrik Niclaes, we consequently have little information other than the complaints and condemnations of the Reformed consistories and the statements in the Familist chronicles.

Where we do have information, on the other hand, is about the business associates, printers and readers of Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt. But can these often highly sophisticated merchants and scholars be said to have formed a sect, and is it right to label them 'Familists', 'members' of the Family of Love? Actual 'membership' of a religious sect surely implies an active part in the spiritual life of that sect such as attendance at prayer meetings and obedience to a spiritual leader, but there is little evidence of this amongst most of the continental readers of Familist works. All too often, moreover, guilt has been bestowed simply by association. If individuals held views similar to those of Hendrik Niclaes, or had even been readers of Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt, it has been strongly suggested that they were Familists. The Family of Love shared a number of features with similar movements and non-conformist thinkers of the time, and it is not always easy to extricate ideas voiced by Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt from the far broader currents of thought in which these and other ideas were absorbed.

2. See, e.g., B. Rekers, *Benito Arias Montano (1527-1598)* (London 1972).

Religious simulation, for example, was regarded as one of the characteristics of the Family of Love. In fact it was widely practised and was one of the outcomes of the confessional changes, the wars of religion, and the suppression of heresy which occupied much of Western Europe in the face of advancing Protestantism from the 1520s on. After the abdication of the Emperor, Charles V, in 1555, a part of the territory of the Holy Roman Empire ruled by the Habsburgs fell under Spain – the Netherlands and pieces of Italy. In the Low Countries in the late 1560s resistance to the policy of the new Spanish King, Philip II, seen to be threatening traditional privileges and liberties, was led by members of the highest nobility, initially all Catholics. In the hope of dominating his unruly provinces, Philip II dispatched the Duke of Alba accompanied by a large force of Spanish troops in 1567. In the following year, William Prince of Orange, who had himself converted to Protestantism, led a substantial army against Alba and started the Dutch Revolt. What was also known as the Eighty Years War would involve the alternate occupation of the cities of the Netherlands by Protestants and Catholics, each trying to impose their own faith on the inhabitants. In England those who had once been Catholic had to adapt themselves to different shades of Protestantism under Henry VIII, Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth, interrupted by a return to Catholicism under Queen Mary, each sovereign demanding a degree of religious conformity. In France, thanks to the dexterity of Calvin and his fellow leaders, an alarming number of powerful French families were won over to the Reformed faith in the late 1550s and early 1560s, and the Roman Catholicism of the state seemed in peril. There ensued a series of murders, massacres and civil wars which started in 1562 and persisted until 1598 and the uneasy coexistence of the two rival confessions.

In the turmoil entailed by the wars many men and women who simply wanted to get on with their trade or their studies unmolested by the authorities, practised a form of nicodemism or outward conformity. The alternation of Protestant and Catholic rulers made unbending fidelity to a single religion inadvisable and placed the individual authentically devoted to one of the visible Churches in a tragic predicament. We are consequently confronted by the spectacle of the humanists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries assembling in spiritual movements whose aim was often

similar:³ to obtain peace, to introduce some sort of harmony and concord which would enable them to pursue their learning and, in some cases, provide each other with assistance. The Family of Love could be seen as such a movement. There were, of course, havens in late sixteenth-century Europe – courts and universities – where humanist scholars were protected. One of these was the court of Rudolf II in Prague, an admirable illustration of the ever greater interest in magic and esotericism which characterised late humanism.⁴ There were other havens in the Low Countries – Leiden university, for example – but the fluctuating religious situation in the Netherlands in particular, and in Western Europe in general, meant that, with the exception of isolated localities, the liberal humanist was rarely entirely safe.

Nicodemism, then, was the rule in the Family of Love. Hendrik Niclaes invariably advocated the religious simulation which Calvin had attacked in 1537 when writing about those Protestants resident in Catholic countries who, in order to ensure their physical safety, attended Catholic services. Simulation, however, had been justified many years earlier not by Protestants, but by men such as Otto Brunfels with far greater affinities with Anabaptism.⁵ It was legitimate, they had said, to wait in silence for a better time and to frequent the services of a Church not perhaps acceptable on every point of dogma but, like all Churches, with something commendable about it.

Certain scholars – such as Ortelius, whose views have been discussed by Jason Harris⁶ – were indeed attracted by the same mystical tradition as Hendrik Niclaes, but they cannot for this reason alone be regarded as his followers. And then there were Hendrik Niclaes's business associates and printers who contributed to the spread of

3. This development was remarked on by Marcel Bataillon, 'Philippe Galle et Arias Montano: Matériaux pour l'iconographie des savants de la Renaissance', *BHR*, 2 (1942), pp. 132-160, esp. pp. 133, 150, 154, 156.

4. Cf. R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World: A Study in Intellectual History, 1576-1612* (Oxford 1973), pp. 90-100, 146-61; Nicolette Mout, *Bohemen en de Nederlanden in de zestiende eeuw* (Leiden 1975), pp. 51-93.

5. Carlo Ginzburg, *Il nicodemismo: Simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell'Europa del '500* (Turin 1970), pp. 3-28.

6. Jason Harris, 'The Religious Position of Abraham Ortelius', in Arie-Jan Gelderblom, Jan L. de Jong, and Marc van Vaeck (eds.), *The Low Countries as a Crossroads of Religious Beliefs* (Leiden 2004), pp. 89-139.

his ideas, but often did so for the sake of financial profit. This, Paul Valkema Blouw has suggested, was the case of Christophe Plantin,⁷ but we shall see that the evidence points to a deeper commitment. The admirers of Hendrik Niclaes's estranged follower Barrefelt have been described as the 'second Family of Love,' but, probably in deliberate contrast to Hendrik Niclaes, Barrefelt never referred to 'the lovers of the truth' to whom he directed his writings as a sect or to himself as a leader. Nevertheless there is evidence of a far greater financial commitment to Barrefelt who, again in contrast to Hendrik Niclaes, had little money of his own and depended on his supporters for the publication and distribution of his works.

The aim of the present study is to examine the circumstances in which the Family of Love developed and the cause of its appeal. I shall also be discussing some of the scholars who have been suspected of 'Familism', but I hope to make clear how tenuous or doubtful their links with it were. I shall approach the Family of Love as the sect dreamt of by Hendrik Niclaes and actually established in England, and as a spiritual movement which drew the sympathies of various scholars and humanists and involved a number of merchants on the continent.

As the sixteenth century drew on it became increasingly common for those Catholics attacking the Reformation to list the sects which had emerged in the areas affected by Protestantism as proof of

7. *TB*, p. 269. Of the relations between Hendrik Niclaes and Plantin we read that they were 'determined by reciprocal business interests. They thereby assume a character very different to what has hitherto been supposed. Plantin's connections with HN, which have served for over a century as proof of his involvement in the Family of Love, now appear to have had another background. From a historical point of view, there is no evidence that he was one of the prophet's followers.' Sandra Langereis, *De woordenaar: Christoffel Plantijn 'swerelds grootste drukker en uitgever 1520-1589* (Amsterdam 2014), pp. 383-84, goes even further on the basis of a single mistranscription in Plantin's correspondence. This leads her to conclude that 'all the interpretations of letters about Plantin's membership of the Family of Love are distorted', 'Alle interpretaties van brieven waarin sprake zou zijn van Plantijns lidmaatschap van het Huis der Liefde zijn geforceerd', and she dismisses the information in the Familist chronicles as unreliable.

the disruption entailed by the Lutheran schism.⁸ That these sects should frequently have veered to positions in many respects closer to Catholicism than to Lutheranism was something which the pious authors of the *catalogi hereticorum* overlooked. The point on which they insisted was that, by breaking with Rome and creating a visible Church independent of the papacy, Luther had set a precedent which proved irresistibly contagious.

There had been other schisms in the history of Christendom, but never had the Western Church been divided into so many visible ecclesiastical organisations as after Luther's excommunication and condemnation at the Diet of Worms in 1521. The Reformed Churches that came into existence over the next twenty years in different cities – in Zürich under Zwingli, in Strasbourg under Bucer, in Basel under Oecolampadius, in Geneva under Farel (and later under Calvin), and so on – had an autonomy of doctrine and structure which made it impossible to associate Protestantism with a single head. And even these organised Churches were constantly menaced by further schism; they were threatened by men following the example of Thomas Müntzer and Andreas Carlstadt who had broken with Luther, or Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz who had defected from Zwingli over the question of infant baptism. Anabaptism, the movement which these particular dissidents started and which was originally a spiritual movement with no external structure, a movement in which the Lutheran devotion to the Word of the scriptures was replaced by a supreme respect for the inspirational power of the Spirit, was soon divided into a mass of smaller groups which, in the face of persecution, found that some external organisation was essential.⁹ Such divisions were accompanied by attempts to mediate between, and to reconcile, the various parties. This was the object not only of some of the great humanists emulating Erasmus – Julius Pflug, Georg Witzel and Joris Cassander – but also of many of the schismatics themselves, of Hendrik Niclaes, Barrefelt, and their admirers.

I shall be using the word Protestant to describe those who, in the very broadest sense, adhered to the ideals of the Reformation, excluding the Anabaptists; I shall be using the term Reformed Protestant in a slightly narrower sense to describe those who regarded

8. For the works by Lindanus and Costerus, see below, pp.83-4.

9. Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618* (Ithaca, NY 1972), pp. 49-76.

Luther's reformation as insufficiently radical and who desired an external ecclesiastical structure based on the one that developed in Switzerland, first under Zwingli and then under Calvin.¹⁰ When discussing the situation in England, I shall be using the word Puritan to denote the English Protestants who wanted to reform the English church in a manner more radical than that entailed by the Elizabethan settlement. Protestantism changed over the years.

The Family of Love was conceived in the early 1540s; Hendrik Niclaes gained his most distinguished followers in the 1550s; the movement split in 1573 when some of Hendrik Niclaes's former admirers decided to follow Barrefelt. The number of Protestant Churches which came into existence in this period is a sufficient indication of the difficulty of defining Protestantism with any measure of accuracy, and indeed, if we except the reformers themselves, it is questionable how many Protestants, especially in the Low Countries, were aware of more than their own anti-Catholicism. Yet, despite the vagueness and diversity of Protestantism in these years, there remained two basic points of doctrine which induced the Protestants to abhor the Family of Love as much as they abhorred Catholicism: the doctrine of solfidianism, justification by faith alone, and the attitude towards the scriptures.

Like Erasmus, who had attacked Luther's denial of free will, Hendrik Niclaes was too optimistic to accept the Lutheran view of the essential evilness of human nature, and he came far closer to the Catholic position sanctioned at the Council of Trent in holding that human beings, with God's help, could contribute to their own salvation. Believing in the potential goodness of human nature, he taught that it was possible not to be a sinner in this life. His statements on the subject were ambiguous, and this caused him a great deal of trouble, but the perfectionism of Hendrik Niclaes, not unlike that of Coornhert, also meant that it was possible for people to improve morally to such an extent that they could obey the commandments of God perfectly.

In the process of justification by faith there was a single authority which the Protestants admitted to be of assistance: the Bible. It was through reading the Bible that one would become aware of one's sinfulness and of God's mercy; it was by reading the Bible that one could

10. I have been deliberately reluctant to use the word Calvinist. For a discussion of the origin of the term see Uwe Plath, 'Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Wortes "Calvinist"', *AR*, 66 (1975), pp. 213-23.

understand the process of justification; and it was from the Bible that one would derive instructions for one's subsequent behaviour. One must stick to the Word, and the Word alone. One must take it literally and never give to it the allegorical interpretations authoritatively, and elastically, bestowed on it by the Church of Rome. Hendrik Niclaes, however, like Sebastian Franck and the other so-called *spiritualisten* of the sixteenth century, rejected this attitude. There was something far more important than the Bible, they claimed: the Spirit, without whose inspiration the scriptures would never have been written and whose inspiration continued to function independently of the scriptures.

These were the two main points which divided Familism and Protestantism. There were many others, and Protestantism itself covered a wide enough spectrum for there to be plenty of room for more modified versions of the doctrines I have described. Yet these two points help to explain why Familism seemed to the Protestants a variant of Catholicism. The potentially schismatic element in Hendrik Niclaes's writings, on the other hand, together with their obvious debt to a tradition associated with Anabaptism, were sufficient to disqualify them as far as the more orthodox Catholics were concerned. But the Catholics took the Family of Love less seriously than did the Protestants; they attacked it less frequently and when they did so they used Protestant sources in order to conclude that Familism was one of the many products of Luther's schism. The main enemies of the Family of Love were Protestants, and the religion against which Familism was forced to define itself was Protestantism.

The Protestants were not completely wrong in fearing the doctrine of Hendrik Niclaes and the other *spiritualisten*. There was leeway for a sufficient number of dogmatic variations in Protestantism for some of Hendrik Niclaes's ideas to find their way into communities which might be expected to have rejected them out of hand. Moreover, the Reformed Churches which came into existence in the Low Countries in the 1570s were small and exclusive organisations, ill-prepared to cope with large congregations deserted by their Catholic priests. In the efforts of the more liberal pastors to widen the appeal of Reformed Protestantism some of the conciliatory ideals of Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt were occasionally adopted, their books were read, and a certain admiration was sustained for their thought. An interest was again shown in the spiritual tradition in which they developed their doctrine. And although the various individuals associated with the

Family of Love whom we shall be encountering were humanists, intellectuals of some distinction, it would be well to keep in mind that they were in fact part of a far broader section of the population repelled by the prospect of having to choose between a commitment to Protestantism or a commitment to Catholicism. They were in a search of a third way and it was to them that the moderate preachers, some of whom, rightly or wrongly, were accused of Familism, appealed.¹¹

11. Discussed, e.g., by Judith Pollmann, *Religious Choice in the Dutch Republic. The Reformation of Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641)* (Manchester 1999), pp. 26-32.