

one option exercised overwhelming appeal, and *petit-bourgeois* constituencies tacked back and forth between all three, injecting a new element of uncertainty into *fin-de-siècle* electoral politics.

This last observation raises an interesting comparative question. Elsewhere on the continent, in France and Germany for example, the obstacles encountered by desperate *petits bourgeois* in search of an entrée into the political system generated powerful, if short-lived, eruptions: tax protests, street actions, nativist riots. None of this seems to have happened in Belgium, but why? The present volume does not tackle the issue directly, but it contains the materials from which the beginning of an answer might be constructed. For whatever reason, the department store in Belgium never became a major target of *petit-bourgeois* anger. In France and Germany, by contrast, lower-middle-class agitation against the big stores was so furious that on occasion it spilled over into demonstrations of a demagogic, “populist”, or even ultra-nationalist cast. The Catholic ascendancy in Belgium also has some connection to the dampening of *petit-bourgeois* protest there. It is not altogether clear why, but the Catholic parties of continental Europe showed more imagination and skill than their competitors in addressing the problems of the *petite bourgeoisie*. Still, in Third Republic France, the Catholic *Action libérale populaire* never played more than a marginal part in parliamentary politics. The Catholic *Zentrum* in Wilhelmine Germany did carry sufficient weight to have its interests taken into consideration, but it was in no position to set the national agenda. In Belgium, however, the Catholics enjoyed the upper hand. They made a fuss over the *petite bourgeoisie*, which may help to explain why local *petit-bourgeois* protest remained so temperate.

Belgium in the late nineteenth century played a pioneering role in shaping the international debate on the *petite bourgeoisie*. *Aux frontières des classes moyennes* suggests reasons why this might have been so. It charts social terrain, hitherto more talked about than studied, and brings into focus a social universe, destined not to an early death, as once supposed, but to a long if sometimes troubled life.

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Christopher W. Marsh — *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550–1630*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xvii, 305.

Christopher W. Marsh’s study of the Family of Love in England sheds considerable light on one of the most puzzling religious groups of early modern England. It does so largely as a result of Marsh’s intensive archival research and application of a microhistory approach. Added to this fresh information on Familism is Marsh’s willingness to explore new questions and suggest creative interpretations. The result is an innovative portrait of the English Familists that challenges long-cherished notions about the place of this sect within English society. Moreover, by examining sources not related to the propagandistic court and pamphlet battles, Marsh reveals

a new facet of broader English society, one that could tolerate known heretics on the community level. For both sides of the equation, Marsh's impressive study is both important and interesting reading.

The English Familists were devotees of the writings of the Dutch mystic Hendrik Niclaes (1502–c.1580) who developed a spiritualistic sect in the Netherlands which found considerable appeal among the middling and upper strata of Dutch society. For a long time scholars have believed, mainly based on the negative commentary of its opponents, that Niclaes's English following was quite different from its continental form, consisting of "lower-class" radicals and malcontents instead of the merchants, scholars, and nobility who joined his continental circle. Marsh's evidence brings an end to this facile distinction. For the first time the social background of English Familists is traced in considerable detail, revealing that not only was there a group of Familists within Queen Elizabeth I's court, but that even rural Familists (especially in Cambridgeshire, Devon, and Surrey) tended to be more affluent than their neighbours, belonging to "a prosperous band around the middle of the social hierarchy" (p. 15). What is more, Marsh ascertains, they were often among the social and political leaders of their communities and were regarded by their non-Familist neighbours as respectable and trustworthy. Far from the socially popular and potentially dangerous heresy of their reputation, English adherents of Niclaes, like their continental confreres, turned to Niclaes's writings (translated into English in the 1570s) as a means of supporting their desire for a sophisticated, contemplative religion that emphasized religious toleration.

Marsh's major source for his analysis of the social position of the Familists is a number of their wills, 46 of which he was able to uncover. Comparing the religious wording of these to that of some 1,200 other wills, Marsh discerns in a minority of cases significant divergences from the formulaic wording of the wills' prologues, suggesting intentional, coded references to the key words and themes of the Familists: emphasis on God's mercy in the testator's salvation; references to the resurrection of Christ; and the specific phrase of existing "*in the love of Jesus*" (pp. 44–46). He was then able to find corroborating evidence — detailed in an appendix — of Familist connections for most of these testators and other individuals in local parish registers, manorial court rolls, lay subsidy returns and court records, and, in one case, in the controversy over a grave. Although it could be argued that the precise wording of will prologues is a less than firm base upon which to build an argument, Marsh is fully aware of the potential hazards and presents his case very carefully. As a result, for the first time the Familists appear to the modern reader as real persons, involved in their local communities and struggling to maintain their religious integrity in an occasionally hostile society.

The Familists at the court of Elizabeth I included five Yeomen of the Guard, most notably Robert Seale, eventually Clerk of the Cheque. The number of Familists in such close physical proximity to the Queen raises the question of Elizabeth I's own knowledge of and attitude toward Familism. Marsh is not able to provide an answer to this question, although the fact that the courtly Familists survived the persecution of 1580 is suggestive (p. 170). That campaign of intolerance, Marsh argues, was brought about as a result of the pressure and pamphleteering of Puritan

writers, anxious about their own place in English society and fearful of the seemingly growing influence of mystical nonconformists in the heart of the government. The effects were shortlived, however, and after the “storm of official magisterial hostility” had passed in 1581 (p. 110) Familists were able to maintain considerable cohesion in both country and court. One of the most intriguing aspects of Marsh’s discussion is his elaboration of the familial connections among Familists, who seem to have preferred to marry within their religious group and to use their wealth to support each other. Yet, as revealed in the bequests of several prominent Familists, they were well integrated into society and could also be remarkably generous to the broader community.

At the same time, English society tolerated the religious dissenters in their midst to a far greater level than previously appreciated. As Marsh notes, “in early modern England, religious beliefs of great depth did not necessarily threaten the existence of peaceful social relations to quite the extent that historians may have supposed” (pp. 249–250). This tolerance, he continues, was not the product of ignorance, for neighbours often were aware of the Familists in their midst. What he suggests instead is that English society at the time “possessed considerable resources of religious tolerance” based upon an “intellectual flexibility” that enabled both sides to live together peacefully (p. 250). This suggestion helps to explain the apparent disappearance of Familism in the seventeenth century. Once tolerance was officially declared in 1689, Familists were no longer called before the courts and therefore no longer appear to the historian. At the same time, with the advent of official toleration, it seems Familists, whose religious identity had been based on “secrecy and extremely discreet dissemination of belief”, were eventually absorbed into the other nonconformist groups, especially the Quakers.

There is little to criticize in Marsh’s study. His approach is fresh, his research solid, his interpretation both imaginative and careful. Apart from a reference on p. 260 to “this thesis”, the transition from dissertation to book has been successful. Also to Marsh’s credit is his extensive use of Alastair Hamilton’s 1981 monograph on the continental followers of Hendrik Niclaes (*The Family of Love*, Cambridge University Press). However, Marsh refers to none of Hamilton’s later studies on the subject nor to the research of other specialists of continental Familists. Hamilton’s more recent research, for example, would have helped elucidate the slippery question of what happened to the Familists in the seventeenth century and brought up to date Marsh’s comparison of English and continental followers of Niclaes. (A good summary is provided in Alastair Hamilton, ed., *Cronica. Ordo Sacerdotis. Acta HN: Three Texts on the Family of Love*, vol. VI, Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988]). This is, however, a small criticism of what is certainly to be regarded as the most important study of English Familism published to date and a fine contribution to the broader field of religion and society in early modern England.

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