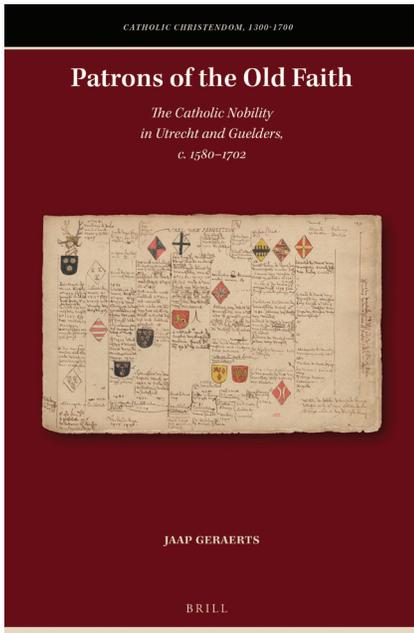


Review

Jaap Geraerts, *Patrons of the Old Faith. The Catholic Nobility in Utrecht and Guelders, c. 1580-1702*, Leiden, Brill, xiii+325 pp. ISBN 9789004337534.



The Dutch Republic has often been portrayed as a society dominated by urban regents, merchants and ministers – bourgeois elites whose lifestyles contrasted fundamentally with the aristocratic culture that prevailed in early modern European monarchies. G.J. Renier once even characterised the Republic rather sarcastically as ‘the dictatorship of the upper middle classes’. This label left hardly any place for noble families and institutions. Most scholars treated them as relics of medieval times, whose history could easily be left in the hands of amateur antiquarians and genealogists. Over the past few decades, however, this interpretation has been challenged, most notably by Henk van Nierop’s *Van Ridders tot Regenten* (1984), which served as a starting point for academic interest in the role of the nobility in the early modern Netherlands. Recent historiography largely dismisses the traditional image of decline and crisis, stressing instead the consolidation and trans-

formation of noble power and identity after the Dutch Revolt.

At first glance, Jaap Geraerts’s study of the Catholic nobility in seventeenth-century Utrecht and Guelders might be seen as yet another example of this paradigm shift. Geraerts is not the first modern scholar to address the theme of noble families in the Northern Netherlands who remained faithful ‘papists’ after the collapse of the episcopal hierarchy and pastoral care in the 1580s and 1590s, and, by sticking to that choice, were stripped of their right to attend meetings of state assemblies and to hold political office. Nor is he the first to stress their immense importance for the survival of Catholicism in these provinces. Already in the 1940s, the church historian L.J. Rogier argued that the existence of

Catholic enclaves in the nineteenth-century Netherlands was the result of the protection and patronage of missionary priests during the Dutch Republic by noble families who had, both secretly and openly, opposed the proselytising policies of the Calvinist authorities. Geraerts comes to roughly the same conclusions, although he dismisses Rogier's view on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century 'minority Catholicism' as a passive, inward-looking church. Instead, he presents a much more nuanced view on the subject, based on a wide range of recent international literature. More importantly, his *Patrons of the Old Faith* does not confine itself to questions regarding the support of the Catholic Mission by noble families. Geraerts presents a comprehensive overview of the marriage strategies of these families and their interaction with Protestants. He even manages to penetrate the religious beliefs that underpinned their confessional identity – a challenging task, since hardly any written testimonies on their faith by Catholic nobles have survived. Here, Geraerts is truly breaking new ground.

Patrons of the Old Faith is based on a prosopographical study of the Catholic nobility in two provinces, but its scope and significance go far beyond its primary object. The book's real strength lies in its strong conceptual and theoretical framework; in its international, comparative perspective; and in the thoughtful, cautious way in which the author presents his case, always paying attention to possible counterarguments. Geraerts's reluctance to restrict his research to those families whose male members traditionally were eligible to attend meetings of the provincial knighthood (the *riddermatige adel*), and his inclusion of the 'new nobility' in his analysis, has proven rewarding. By expanding his scope, he not only provides us with a much-needed dynamic approach to Dutch noble culture, but also highlights the intricate relationship between civil and confessional identities. Indeed, the interaction of those two identities in different spheres of Catholic noblemen's lives constitutes a key perspective of this study. For ambitious upstarts, taking up a self-assumed role as patron of a local congregation by opening their country house for clandestine religious ceremonies seems to have been especially rewarding, because it enhanced their noble stature amongst co-religionists as much as did their adaptation of an aristocratic lifestyle and the buying of seigneuries and foreign titles.

However, some of Geraerts's choices are more debatable. The book probably would have benefited from taking the 1550s as starting point, a decade in which the nobility still performed its traditional role within the *corpus christianum* – the local spiritual and secular community. The religious turmoil of the 1560s and the appeal of Protestantism among many noblemen and noblewomen in these turbulent years are also almost entirely left out of the picture. The important question of why most of the noble families of Utrecht and Guelders seem to have converted to Calvinism after the collapse of the Catholic Church without much protest, while others increasingly manifested themselves as staunch patrons of the old faith, thus remains entirely unanswered. The unwavering Catholicism that some lineages displayed after the 1650s seems to have depended largely on the religious zeal of just one family member, often a priest, who successfully succeeded in convincing his brothers and sisters to stay loyal to the 'true faith'. In other instances, old family networks and marriage alliances probably played a decisive factor in the shaping of religious identities. However, much remains unclear about the way confessional choices were negotiated in noble families during the crucial decades around 1600. It seems doubtful whether a

more exhaustive archival research would have provided us with conclusive answers in this respect. Regarding some other subthemes, however, a few relevant primary sources do not seem to have been considered in the present study. Surviving *alba amicorum* ('books of friendship'), for example, are particularly meaningful when it comes to assessing the sociability of Catholic noble families, while the (poorly inventoried) archives of Ter Horst castle held in the Historisch Centrum Limburg include a series of letters addressed to Willem Vincent, baron van Wittenhorst, one of the most fascinating Catholic noblemen of his generation. Just as the *alba*, these letters could at least have adorned the author's academic prose with a few more anecdotal, intimate accounts.

Geraerts's study should not just be applauded as an important contribution to the historiography of the Dutch nobility and to the study of spiritual practices and confessional identities in early modern European noble culture. By focussing on a particular social group within the Catholic minority in a Protestant state, he manages to deepen our understanding of religious practices and power structures within the Holland Mission. But the relevance of his study does not end here. Through his firm commitment to a comparative perspective, Jaap Geraerts not only underlines the similarities in the Catholic experience on Protestant soil during the seventeenth century, he also points out the differences. Praise for his intellectual feat will undoubtedly outlive any of the aforementioned punctilious remarks about missed archival opportunities – and rightly so.

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