

Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona During the Confessional Age

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This book in the St Andrews Studies in Reformation History series has the central purpose of expanding the scope of studies of the radical Reformation into the 'confessional age'. It focuses on the implications for Anabaptists of the institutionalization of their religious life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It addresses the debate surrounding the uses of the terms 'confessionalism' and 'confessionalization' to understand the development of early modern religious communities and their relationship to state power. It contends that studies of Anabaptist communities belong within, and contribute to, these debates on confession-building and confessional identity in post-Reformation Europe.

Driedger's study focuses on the Mennonite communities of refugees from the Low Countries who settled in Hamburg and Altona, and in particular on the career of their long-lived lay preacher, Geeritt Roosen (1612-1711). These refugees from Flanders remained a linguistic, ethnic and religious minority in north Germany, who maintained close relations with fellow Mennonites in the Dutch Republic. The Mennonite community in Hamburg had around 200 to 250 baptized members by the second half of the seventeenth century. These settlers were able to pay the city authorities for rights of residence, and many in time were also able to become citizens in their adopted home. The translation of this community to Hamburg and Altona made a significant contribution to local economic life. Mennonites were particularly involved in textile production, trading, ship-owning, whaling and insurance. The first church building for Mennonite use in Altona was opened in 1675. A congregational council governed the church, and its members included all deacons and

lay preachers, such as the merchant Geeritt Roosen, although only once ordained as elders could preachers conduct baptisms, communion services, and marriages.

Mennonites did not have rights of public worship inside Hamburg, and instead had to travel to Altona. However, the Lutheran authorities on Hamburg's council were well aware of the economic benefits for the city of the Flemish refugees, and were reluctant to see the community leave for permanent settlement in Altona. The ruling count over Altona had invited the Mennonites to settle there in the early seventeenth century, and the privileges offered to Mennonites in the town were maintained when in 1641 the territory was inherited by Christian IV of Denmark. Mennonites in Lutheran Altona were promised protection by the Danish king alongside other Calvinist, Catholic and Jewish minorities. Where rulers in early modern Europe were able to establish a clear and relatively unchallenged legal framework for diversity of religious practice, then a common pattern emerges: that many societies were able to accept such legal arrangements for toleration of religious difference, and developed social mechanisms to limit outbreaks of confessional hostility, and to manage the problems posed by multi-confessional environments. Altona presents a further example of such practical toleration of religious difference, where a majority Lutheran community did not feel threatened by the presence of small minority groups, and reinforces suggestions that communal religious violence in the post-Reformation period often represents above all a failure in the operation of law in early modern states.

The identity of these North German Mennonites was shaped by their inherited religious history and traditions, and by their conduct of religious worship and rituals. It was also defined in moments of crisis, particularly during their migration from Flanders, and was reinforced by challenges from without and contested by schisms from within. Since the Mennonite tradition lacked strong institutional frameworks which could act as arbiters of such internal disputes, the church was particularly prone to fall victim to congregational divisions. For example, Driedger gives attention to the split within the Altona-based congregation over the need for baptism by immersion rather than sprinkling. 'Dompelaar' schismatics also insisted on the need for communion to be celebrated in the evening using unleavened bread, and only after the ceremonial washing of feet. Negotiations about this split in the community, and attempts at reconciliation, forced both sides to articulate defences of their particular religious practices, and Geeritt Roosen produced a manuscript catechism which set out the traditional community's beliefs.

Driedger considers three other key areas of Mennonite belief and identity within the Hamburg and Altona communities: their rejection of violence, non-swearing of solemn oaths, and purity of community discipline. On the first area of non-resistance, Mennonite ship-owners and businessmen were faced with the problem of how to deal with blockades against shipping during war-time and attacks on ships by privateers. Should their ships be defended, or not? It seems clear that some local Mennonites did in fact arm their ships in time of war, despite the official prohibition on believers from committing violence or bearing arms. While Geeritt Roosen was a firm supporter of non-resistance, he apparently had no problems with his family members being involved in gunpowder production. Roosen acknowledged that his secular rulers were expected to use force of arms to protect their subjects, including Mennonites, against their enemies. He therefore justified involvement in the production of gunpowder as long as Mennonites themselves continued to avoid using arms.

The issue of non-swearing of oaths led to other sorts of difficulties for Mennonites in Hamburg. When the merchant Hans Plus was sued over a commercial deal gone sour, the authorities in Hamburg were willing for him to use a non-religious affirmation, 'by the truth of men', to support his testimony. When this case was brought to the Imperial Cameral Court in 1661, the city was forced to defend this acceptance of a non-religious oath. Hamburg's lawyer argued that Mennonites, unlike Anabaptists, were Christians and did not fall under Imperial bans. He argued that Mennonites had brought prosperity to the city through their commercial activity, that men like Plus were legally recognized residents of Hamburg, and that the formula of swearing by the truth of men was acceptable in Hamburg and did not break imperial law. The case was never fully resolved, and although Plus was forced into exile in Russia there were no other lasting consequences for the Mennonite community. A mandate from the Hamburg senate in 1694 clarified that Mennonites were able to give legal testimony and conduct business using the approved alternative to a

solemn religious oath. Mennonites retained some uncertainty about this solution, and while on the one hand Roosen pressed for them to be allowed simply to testify to the truth without using any formula such as 'by the truth of men', on the other hand this formula became generally accepted practice within the Hamburg community.

Mennonites defended the purity of their community through their attitude to mixed marriages and by the application of church discipline. Mennonites had to be baptized before they were considered eligible for an official marriage, and marriages were usually conducted soon after baptisms. There is no suggestion by Driedger of the strategic delaying of baptism by Mennonites until they were certain that they were going to marry within their own confessional community. While some Mennonites married with fellow-believers from other northern European communities, and elite families within the congregation built strong local family alliances through marriages, marriage to non-Mennonites features as one of the most common offences which led to disciplinary action by the church authorities. Evidence from the community's records is presented in appendices to the text which place mixed marriages alongside drunkenness, adultery, violent behaviour and bankruptcy as key areas of church disciplinary action. The church recorded those lost to the community through mixed marriages, and also recorded those who left their community and converted to Lutheranism or to Quakerism, in response to the activity of some English missionaries to the region. Problems about maintaining Mennonite families intact faced even church leaders such as Roosen (as one of his daughters-in-law was a nominal Lutheran) and were an intrinsic part of the life of such a small exile community. However, this also meant that the Mennonites of Hamburg and Altona were an increasingly diverse community, with a range of economic, social and family relationships with their host community. An increasing number of families had members who were not Mennonites, which led to the breakdown of cultural barriers between Mennonites and Lutherans, a growing complexity in Mennonite social life, and increasing difficulties for church leaders to enforce discipline on ordinary believers.

The identity of these Flemish refugees as Mennonites was most clearly articulated when it had to be defended against polemic attack and was obscured over time by commercial and social relations with non-Mennonites. Driedger concludes that Mennonite identity had an intermittent character, and points to a positioning of religious commitment as the prime, but not exclusive source, of the public identity of Mennonites in Hamburg and Altona. Driedger considers whether Mennonite religious identity in Hamburg might properly be called 'confessional Anabaptism'. Hamburg Mennonites supported the efforts of some northern European Anabaptists to establish a clear statement of agreed beliefs and religious practices. A Zonist society emerged as the institutional umbrella for such confessional Mennonites, while Lamists were unwilling to move beyond the text of Scripture and rejected attempts to provide statements about Mennonite orthodoxy. The Mennonites of Hamburg and Altona were allied to the Zonist camp, partly as a result of the Dompelaar schism and partly because of Roosen's leadership. Although the congregation only established formal links with the Zonists in 1707, Hamburg Mennonites were thus in some sense a confessional community, bounded by clear definitions of orthodoxy and by the application of church discipline.

Driedger then considers whether the model of confessionalization developed by Ernst Walter Zeeden, Heinz Schilling, Wolfgang Reinhard and others can usefully be applied to early modern Hamburg. The notion of confessionalization in early modern states and societies suggests that the institutions and hierarchies of confessional churches combined with the bureaucracies of states to enforce religious uniformity and social discipline on their subjects, and that this cooperation was mutually beneficial to churches and states. The application of this theory by historians of the Empire and elsewhere has encouraged them to see parallel confessional paths of social integration, with controls being established over ordinary people's attitudes and actions by clergy and secular officials in Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed states. Heinrich Schmidt has argued that this concentration on the state at the heart of the model of confessionalization produces a very top-down image of power in early modern societies and does not allow for communities to have taken the initiative in programmes of self-regulation. For Schmidt, confessionalization must be recognized as more of a community project, and be less reliant on ideas about the role of the state in the imposition of social discipline.

The application of the model of confessionalization has also been considered for religious communities who

could not form such alliances with state power. For example, Gregory Hanlon has described a weak confessionalization among French Calvinist communities in his 1993 work *Confession and Community in Seventeenth-Century France. Catholic and Protestant Coexistence in Aquitaine* (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, 1993). Hanlon argues that confessionalization should be regarded as the process whereby barricades were erected around each church group. There was concern among Reformed church leaders in the towns of Aquitaine that intermarriage with the majority Catholic community was weakening the Reformed church. Attempts to impose 'Reformed' behaviour and ethics on the local Huguonot community were faced with the reality of constant social and economic interaction with Catholics. Where the Reformed church had been the dominant religion of the region, the attraction of social integration had supported the growth of support for Calvinism, but the same force contributed to the church's decline in the mid-seventeenth century. Hanlon also stresses that Catholicism had the added appeal of being the religion of authority.

Hanlon, like Driedger, does not view religious identity as an autonomous category of social experience, but places it firmly alongside other social, political and economic relationships. The danger in some of this analysis is that the social power of religious ideas becomes a significant concern only to a devout confessional core, while most 'ordinary people' allow their confessional identity to vary according to changing economic, social and political relationships.

There are a number of reasons why the Mennonite community did not end up as the victims of a Lutheran confessionalization of Hamburg. Lutherans launched periodic polemic attacks on the beliefs of Mennonites. There was also an increasing degree of social integration of Mennonites within the city. However, a community of foreign refugees was certainly more likely than most religious minorities to have a high proportion of members who remained committed to combat forces that diluted their religious and social identity. The church leadership worked to provide clear statements of belief for Mennonites, and offered pragmatic counsel on dealing with such practical issues as non-violence and not swearing oaths. While the Mennonites were forbidden from holding political office in Hamburg, they also benefited from divisions within the Lutheran community between Pietists and non-Pietists. Pietist reformers tended to get a sympathetic hearing from the Senate, who were wary of the jurisdictional claims of orthodox Lutheran clergy. A battle in the 1690s between conservative clergy and the council led to political violence as guild leaders challenged the traditional authority of the Senate. This turmoil over religious ideas and political power also brought the position of Mennonites under increased scrutiny, but they remained loyal to the old order.

Driedger points out that Mennonite confessionalism thus led to political conservatism, the 'obedient heretics' of the title, while an intensification of Lutheran piety and identity led to political rebellion. Driedger suggests on this basis that confessionalism and confessionalization in Hamburg should both be taken merely to mean religious identity formation, without any need to emphasize a confessionalizing alliance between secular rulers and leaders of the Lutheran church. This study, alongside the work of Schmidt and Hanlon, offers a growing challenge to the older state-focused model of confessionalization, and certainly suggests problems for its application to the position of minority religious communities in early modern states.

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