In *Obedient Heretics*, Michael Driedger has set out to situate the study of Anabaptist communities within the framework of recent German historiography. He does this by drawing on the paradigm of confessionalization in order to explore the development of Mennonite identity in the Early Modern cities of Hamburg and Altona. It is not an obvious pairing. To begin with, the very objects of the inquiry—the displaced and marginalized Mennonite communities of northern Europe—sit rather awkwardly in a theoretical construct that relies on such close relations (causal and functional) between church and state. Secondly, as it was first set out, there was a clear temporal dimension to the idea of confessionalization: it was, naturally enough, a phenomenon of the age of reform, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet the Mennonite communities of Driedger’s analysis do not really start to grapple with questions of identity until the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a stage when many historians hold that religious developments began to take a back seat to worldly affairs. There are thus departures from the norm in Driedger’s approach; however, as the book demonstrates, this brings with it the advantage of new perspectives on the study of confessional developments and the opportunity to put some of the traditional assumptions to the test.

The opening chapters trace the settlement of Flemish Mennonites in Hamburg and Altona. In Hamburg, a Lutheran city, public worship was denied to the immigrants; for this the faithful had to go to Altona, which was in Danish hands. But the Hamburg community did not suffer persecution, and in time they were granted sufficient civic rights to become active in the economic world, many working as sailors, artisans, shopkeepers, brokers, and shipowners. Similarly, the Flemish community in Altona continued to expand, establishing its own church and cemetery by the end of the seventeenth century. Indeed, the community was diverse enough to accommodate a mid-century schism, as the rise of the Dompelaars added a new dimension to confessional relations in the town. But the largest Mennonite grouping in both Hamburg and Altona
remained the Flemish community, and in their ‘confessional strategy’ Driedger identifies some of the same trends that mark out the histories of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Catholicism of the Early Modern age. Like the larger confessions, the Mennonites fashioned a sense of identity by drafting statements of the faith and contrasting their beliefs with those of other denominations. As Driedger remarks, ‘the loudest and clearest public statements of Mennonite identity were often made either as direct rebuttals to anti-Mennonite propaganda or as pre-emptive defences against anticipated libels’ (p. 103). While doing this, however, they continued to voice a rhetoric of obedience to the state, laying stress on their readiness to support the ruling authorities and remain good subjects. This was a difficult area for the radical tradition, of course, as many resisted (and condemned) involvement in worldly affairs and continued to uphold theological maxims that cut across basic civic expectations, such as the refusal to take oaths or the principle of non-resistance. Once again, in a manner that reflects a more general, pragmatic ‘confessional strategy,’ the Hamburg and Altona Mennonites were able to sidestep some of the more explosive issues by sacrificing (or overlooking) religious principles in order to ensure survival. ‘Lives . . . were not always led according to clearly articulated, official principles’ [p. 128]). Mennonites continued to arm their ships, for instance, emphasizing their political conformity, and claiming it was not in violation of their faith since it was the state, rather than themselves, that called for resistance. Hans Plus, a Hamburg Mennonite, refused to take a traditional oath when summoned before the court. Faced with this impediment, Plus and the Hamburg authorities adopted a compromise formula which ran ‘by the truth of men’ (bei Mannen Wahrheit) rather than the Word of God, and this satisfied both parties (though it did not have the same effect on the imperial lawyers, who identified it as an Anabaptist oath and thus illegal). A similar sense of compromise and pragmatism was evident in the community at large as members married into other confessions and the moral constitution began to weaken in the face of daily realities. As Driedger notes, ‘it was the ongoing and often difficult to follow actions of ordinary members of the congregation which set the agenda with regard to marriages and community boundaries’ (p. 167). Injunction was giving way to the will of lived experience.

The general trend Driedger identifies is that of a religious community weathering the various storms with the similar mix of principle and pragmatism that marked out the other confessional strategies of the age. The process was most intense when the community was most under