

History and Social Science Reviews

Janis Thiessen, *Not Talking Union: An Oral History of North American Mennonites and Labour*.

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Janis Thiessen is Associate Professor of History and the Associate Director of the Oral History Centre at the University Winnipeg. Her research into the relationship between work and religion among Mennonites in the post the Second World War era challenges the writing of modern Mennonite history and to the broader areas of inquiry into labour and business history. *Manufacturing Mennonites*, in which Thiessen first delved into these themes, is a thoroughly researched and analytical investigation of Mennonite business owners' understanding of the relationship between religious belief and the practical requirements of operating a profitable business. In *Not Talking Union*, Thiessen shifts her focus to the other side of the ledger to probe Mennonites perspectives on and engagements with the labour movement. Taken together these two studies provide one of the most comprehensive explorations of the relationship between business and work in a Canadian religious community.

Thiessen faced a major dilemma when studying Mennonites engagements with the labour movement. There was not much to write about. Her experiences as a Mennonite and preliminary research showed that Mennonites did not participate significantly in the union surge of the post Second World War years. Yet, Mennonites were primarily a working people. Fortunately, for us, Thiessen did not abandon the project. Why, she asked, were Mennonites reluctant to take up the cause of the worker with their brothers and sisters in the growing union movement of post war North America? Thiessen wondered whether theological doctrine and, on balance, a conservative clergy kept Mennonites from joining unions. Perhaps part of the explanation was to be found, Thiessen speculated, in the very work Mennonites did. They

tended towards jobs in rural areas and in small to medium size companies in which unionizations were generally lower. Thiessen argues in *Not Talking Union* these factors with social class, gender, family, and ethnicity are part of the explanation. However, she argues it was the individual's daily experience of these social, political, and religious pressures that ultimately best explains their choices. The key to understanding Mennonites and the labour movement, Thiessen concludes, is found in the concept of lived religion: "lived religion is, more broadly, the ways in which people connect their religious beliefs to their daily lives." (13)

This perspective created yet another dilemma for Thiessen. Where would she find research sources rich enough to sustain such an investigation? The very fact that the focus was on daily lives and the workplace meant a paucity of traditional historical sources was available to her. One just does not find in archives reflections by working people on their daily work experiences. There are no troves of memoirs or letters to be discovered. A different methodology would be needed to explore the daily, lived lives of Mennonite workers. A student of oral history, Thiessen recognized this methodology's potential to unlock those daily thoughts and actions of Mennonites workers.

Janis Thiessen is no novice when it come oral history. The oral history practice detailed in *Not Talking Union* is sophisticated and thorough. It is a primer for anyone contemplating oral history research. Thiessen's interviews are a multi-staged process that encourages interviewees to express their ideas in depth. Her approach furthermore facilitates probing questioning by the interviewer. Thiessen reflects on how to encourage sometime reluctant speakers to be forthcoming with their stories. She offers interesting reflections on interviewing persons with whom the interviewer strongly disagrees or dislikes. The whole interviewing experience was complicated for Thiessen by the fact that she was a Mennonite interviewing other Mennonites about deeply held personal, religious beliefs.

Thiessen conducted 115 interviews. She combined this research with an extensive investigation of more traditional historical sources and the result is analytically thoughtful and engaging study of Mennonite attitudes towards unions that explores the relationship between work and religion in their lives. The book begins with an overview of the historical differences among General Conference Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, and (Old) Mennonite Church adherents toward organized labour. The study then launches into a number of case studies spread widely across North America. Debates in Manitoba in the 1970s and 1980s on

extending the rights of unions in the workplace to which some workers and most church leaders objected is given a thorough airing. However, the most compelling case study focuses on United Farm Workers struggles to unionize in California in the 1970s. In some cases, Mennonites worked alongside the predominantly, poor migrant Hispanics workers in the fields. But in most cases Mennonites owned the fields on which those Hispanic farm hands toiled long hours for poor pay. Mennonite owners found themselves in a complicated situation between the struggling farm workers and the large corporate producers.

What were Mennonite producers to do? What guidance did their religious beliefs provide on what is a fair wage? Not much is Thiessen's conclusion. The struggles of the Hispanic farmworkers for some brief period split Mennonite communities across North America. Mennonites, in California, were almost unanimous in their opposition to recognizing the union. (They were also reluctant to be interviewed.) Many Mennonites living in more easterly communities, far from the actual confrontations in the fields, were more sympathetic to and sought compromise with the United Farm Workers. In the end, however, money and political power within the broader church silenced those sympathetic to the farm workers. Thiessen is highly critical of this process. She understands but disagrees strongly with the farm owners' resistance to the union. However, she reserves her sharpest criticism for church leaders across the country that set aside compassion for the migrant farm families to preserve funding from the elites. Aspirations of the farm hands were squashed to protect the church's financial structures underpinning its schools and churches. Thiessen argues that church leaders silenced all opposition, especially social justice advocates. Silencing alternative views ensured the church's financial viability. But the cost of this silencing of dissent, in Thiessen's view, came at the cost of compromising religious practices. Thiessen wonders how the compassion that church demonstrated towards exploited families in the global south was much harder to find in its home communities.

There is much to value in *Not Talking Union*. Labour and social historians will be intrigued by the analysis of religion and its relationship to working class life. Oral historians will learn much about interviewing individuals on difficult personal topics. Historians of Mennonites will have to decide if they wish to take up *Not Talking Union's* challenge to adopt an approach probes more deeply into the issues of religion, class, ethnicity, and sexuality within this history. However, Thiessen's intended audience

reaches well beyond academics to all Mennonites and advocates of social justice. “The sharing of stories that had not been heard, and are uncomfortable to hear, is only the first step,” says Thiessen. “Mennonites and non- Mennonites alike will need to move from the role of listener to that of activist. Do we have the courage,” she asks, “to leave our ‘safe, comfortable, but illusionary retreat?’” (160)

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