

Janis Thiessen. *NOT Talking Union: An Oral History of North American Mennonites and Labour*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 232 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Near the beginning of her recent book, *NOT Talking Union*, Janis Thiessen asks the question: why the need for research on the relationships between Mennonites and unions when Mennonites have often been opposed or indifferent to organized labour? A 1937 statement from the Old Mennonite Church (OM) counselled abstention from union membership. The church felt that it was better to endure suffering than to rebel, and that participation on a picket line was a form of violence. Besides, it was imperative, said the Church, that believers not be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (4) by affiliating with unions.

The attitude among members of General Conference (GC) and Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches was much more cautious and pragmatic. Still, even after Mennonites urbanized, small-town values of independence and laissez-faire attitudes persisted among them. Union activists were frequently regarded as “outside agitators.” If there was not outright hostility to organized labour, Mennonites commonly thought of unions as essentially irrelevant – “not part of the landscape” (39).

Much has changed since the mid-twentieth century. The Old Mennonite Church officially stated in 1954 that unions “serve a useful purpose for the maintenance of justice and a balance of power in a sub-Christian society” (45). Still, among Mennonites of the three mainline denominations (OM, GC, and MB: the subjects in Thiessen's study), organized labour, even to this day, is regularly regarded with suspicion.

Nevertheless, writes Janis Thiessen, this is a topic that needs to be explored. Religion has been largely ignored by scholars, particularly by European academics who imagined at one time that institutions of faith would fade away. A powerful method in researching religious attitudes, writes Thiessen, is by way of oral history, verbal account, to some extent subverting or challenging the official documented, archival history. And this despite the weaknesses of oral history: the fact that no two life stories told by the same person will ever be the same; and that personal stories of faith tell not only what persons believe, but what they think or want to believe.

Thiessen, who teaches history at the University of Winnipeg, interviewed well over 100 Mennonites in her effort to unveil their attitudes – sometimes contradictory, paradoxical, even inexpressible – towards labour unions. Interviewees were given considerable power to direct the conversation as they wished. Religion was the starting point. Thiessen believes that five major personal narratives of religion predominated in these interviews: a death narrative, in which loss brings not so much solace as insight; a problem narrative, where guilt and anxiety over salvation can induce suffering; an affective narrative, based on mystical or charismatic experience; countercultural stories of activism for peace and social justice; and finally a progress narrative, in which the individual grows away from fundamentalism but does not necessarily discount earlier truths.

Perhaps surprisingly, Thiessen finds little difference between perceptions of unions held by Mennonites and those maintained by the greater North American society. “Is there anything Mennonite, then, about this study?” (69) Social class, parental attitudes, experience, and religion all influence personal Mennonite opinions on organized labour, but church theology and dogma hold little sway in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. No cohesive theology exists

to influence personal attitudes among Mennonites: the church has moved from a communitarian to an individualistic stance. And so responses to Thiessen's questions vary widely: "[S]mart folks don't want a union job, so loud mouths get them" (54). "It seems like there is a level of self-protection at the expense of anything else" (55). "If you want a good union, then Christians should join and change what's wrong. But people would rather criticize without taking responsibility" (58). "[N]o problem seeing Jesus opposed to the abuse of power and kinds of unfairness workers deal with in many situations" (58).

In the latter half of the book, Thiessen deals with three case studies, each fascinating in its own way, and each undergirded with oral history. The first concerns the activism in California of the United Farm Workers Union led by César Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s. Small Mennonite growers were caught up in the conflict. Earlier, Mennonite churches, along with MCC, had focused on winning souls of Hispanic farm workers, and the result was the creation of Hispanic MB churches. The labour conflict then divided along ethnic lines, with the old MB churches defending their fruit growers and Hispanic churches supporting the union. The conflict also split the U.S. Mennonite community geographically, as Eastern churches and college students criticized Californian growers. MB farmers became defensive: "who are these uppity Mennonite Easterners to say how to behave" (103). Thiessen found her Californian interviewees tight-lipped, even hostile, still remembering the perceived slights of decades ago. Presently, she writes, a "covert silence" is maintained, an intentional avoidance of the topic in order to maintain the peace.

The second case study refers to a conflict in 1970s Manitoba. The newly elected NDP provincial government had provided conscientious objector status in labour legislation – Section 68 (3) – for workers who were unwilling to join unions at their places of employment. An appointed board that heard cases of such workers were rendering decisions that seemed inconsistent and even baffling. Harold Jantz, then editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, led the fight for conscientious objection in the workplace. He was joined by church leaders and MCC Manitoba. Arguments made by Jantz were strangely individualistic: "You cannot go to a person's church to determine what his beliefs are, no matter how sincerely he believes and how close he feels himself to be to his church" (118). Eventually the conflict fizzled out, with few Mennonites having joined the battle. In her oral interviews, Thiessen finds discrepancies between what is now said and what was written during the heat of conflict.

Thiessen's book concludes with an oral history assembled from four workers in the employ of faith-based organizations; in this case, all the employers happen to be MB. All four individuals find themselves in difficult positions, and even firings are involved. An interviewee comments that it is "easy to say what you believe, but not so easy to stand up. It's easy to write a paper; it's not so easy to live" (137). (Rewarding experiences, it must be said, are also articulated.) The problem may lie, writes Thiessen, in the changing spiritual landscape in North America. Mennonites, she says, have evolved from a life based on institutional "dwelling," to "seeking" a spirituality not dependent on the church, and finally to a mode of spirituality based on practice and presence. Faith-based employers find themselves in a difficult position, caught between old notions of institutionalism and new forms of secular business models. And the four interviewed employees, writes Thiessen, were hoping to find an outmoded communitarian way of life in their faith-based workplace – and discovering that did not exist.

"Oral history," concludes Thiessen, "has the potential to bring about reconciliation for both individuals and communities by providing opportunities for people to be heard at length without judgement ..." (159). At times Thiessen may project herself into the conversation to the

point where judgements are indeed being made. Ultimately, though, she succeeds: her interviews have resulted in a thoroughly academic but dramatic, even entertaining book.