

Review: *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba*

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Janis Thiessen. *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 249 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1113-9.

Over the past several decades, historians of the working class have declared their intention of breaking from an earlier fixation on the formal institutions of labour – trade unions and parties – in the interests of understanding working-class experiences and identities in all their complexities. Much has been accomplished and labour history is now a far broader field of endeavour, but at the same time the goal is vague and the balance sheet is mixed. Rarely have historians tackled what appears to be a resolutely anti-union workforce, and one defined more by its membership in a broader religious community than by social class. At the same time, the purpose of this study is clear: understanding the ways in which class and religion interact in a modern, industrial context. Janis Thiessen’s study of Mennonite workers in southern Manitoba, therefore, is an exploration into “lived religion,” reflecting a growing recognition by scholars of religion that belief is malleable and is shaped by different contexts by an array of material social forces.

Such a task requires an openness to integrating different approaches to understanding history. Certainly, Thiessen is conversant with conversations in the histories of theology, business, migration and ethnicity, gender, as well as the ever growing and nebulous world of cultural history. And, while much of this study is rooted in a base of government, community, and business records, the nature of the study relies to a great extent on oral testimony. For the most part, the world of Mennonite workers (and to a surprising extent, the experiences of Mennonite businessmen) is primarily accessible through interviews. In her introduction, Thiessen is forthright in her discussion of the challenges and opportunities that oral history provides. Much more than an entry into the undocumented quotidian world of working people, it allows access to the ways in which the past is understood and shaped by those who have experienced it. Individuals remember, select, and reinterpret the past in terms of their individual and community contexts. What experiences have meaning, and how that meaning is articulated, for instance, is largely shaped by the character of communities and the need to construct a coherent and meaningful past. So, the extent to which one thinks in religious, or class, or generational or gendered terms (among many other potentially overlapping identities), shapes what is remembered and the meanings ascribed to events.

This conforms to Thiessen’s use of “lived religion” as a foundational category for her study. Her subjects are Mennonites, but also Mennonites of a particular time and place as well as Mennonites from a range of class locations. Clearly they viewed their experiences through the lens of Mennonitism, but this was far from being a fixed focus.

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Indeed, Thiessen's foray into theology that she places at the outset of her study is key to understanding the historical range of Mennonitism, and also the potential permutations of Mennonite belief and practice. So, for instance, trends in Mennonite Bible colleges, other religious influences, particularly post World War II evangelical Protestantism, as well as the differential effects of growing urbanization and economic change, reshaped Mennonite communities and belief. As an example that is central to the concerns of this book, Mennonite beliefs could, logically, support or oppose trade unionism, since an ethos of brotherhood and social justice could sustain a labour movement by setting a limit on potential exploitation by capital or, as Thiessen points out was more often the case, a theology of "yieldedness" and non-resistance would lead to an acceptance of workplace hierarchies and injustice (21).

As oral historians recognize that they co-participate, along with others, in the creation of an historical record, this relationship has to be acknowledged and analyzed. Participants' willingness to discuss issues deemed "personal," such as religion, is a product of this relationship, as is the way they shape the conversation on the basis of whether the interviewer appears supportive and knowledgeable, or not. Issues of generation, or gender, or religion, then, affect discourse. This is relevant here, for instance, in that Mennonite history has been of interest, not surprisingly, to Mennonites. Given Thiessen's shared background, participants may make assumptions of shared understandings and beliefs, eliding some topics and directing the conversation in particular directions. For the most part, Thiessen is acutely aware of these issues and combines an insider's awareness of subtle differences and a professional researcher's ability to approach even the familiar as "anthropologically strange" and open to new insights.

Thiessen explores three economically successful Manitoba Mennonite companies: Friesens Corporation (printing), Loewen (window manufacturing), and Palliser Furniture. These are very well-known enterprises in the province and play a prominent role in shaping the image of Mennonite business acumen. Thiessen's chapter on "Mennonite corporate mythology" is perhaps the most interesting in the book, as it explores the ways that businessmen (and they are pretty much uniformly men) have established a bourgeois ideology that references Mennonite ideas in a manner that reinforces their economic and social goals. It is characterized, according to Thiessen, "by a strong work ethic, an emphasis on quality craftwork, and a combination of religious humility and yieldedness" (64). Drawing on insights from semiotics and cultural studies, and carefully analyzing a particular advertising campaign that drew upon Christian themes, she explores the ways in which Mennonite ideas and images are carefully put to work to build the companies and reinforce the status and power of business leaders.

All of this addresses, in quite fascinating ways, a much older historiographical debate about secularization. Several historians have argued that one of the features of modernism has been the increasing marginalization of religious institutions and sentiment since the nineteenth century. Historians of religion, perhaps not surprisingly, dispute this. Thiessen effectively complicates the debate since, it seemed to me as I read the book, that religion is there, and not there, at the same time. No one living in Manitoba would dispute the persistence of Mennonite churches (as well as the often not-unrelated rise of

other evangelical churches in the province). And certainly both employers and workers, as Thiessen amply demonstrates, reference religious themes as they explain their place in the world. At the same time, Mennonite businessmen have been very successful operators in the material world and, they often acknowledge themselves, when they have had to choose between what might be considered religious and business options, particularly in the world of global commerce, they have invariably chosen the latter. This may, at times, have been a difficult decision, and at least some Mennonite employers appeared more openly reflective about the decision process. For the most part, though, religion seems to have only made marginal differences such as a tendency toward paternal forms of labour control, or avoiding (at least in an earlier era) conspicuous displays of wealth or utilizing cheap labour in Mexico, but not building a factory in the *maquiladora* region. Viewing all of this as an outsider, it seems to me that Mennonite business operates in a secular world, according to secular rules of the marketplace.

If Thiessen's discussion of business is the most successful part of the book, her exploration of labour is the most frustrating. This is not particularly a criticism of the book, but an observation (which Thiessen also makes) about the difficulty of the task. The very low rate of unionization among Mennonite workers at Mennonite firms is perhaps attributable to religion. Certainly notions of yieldedness and non-resistance provide workers no perch upon which to brace themselves against the demands of their employers. However, these are firms that expanded in an era of neo-liberalism and, in at least two of the cases, in rural areas that have very low rates of union density in any case. Indeed, anti-union firms seek out rural workforces because of the lack of union history and other factors that make it difficult to even conceive of organizing. Oral testimony, although interesting, is of limited value here as workers spoke sometimes in religious voices to explain their choices, but also exhibited a rudimentary but clear class awareness of their place in the firm and in their communities. As with employers, Thiessen acknowledges that they are perhaps not very different from non-Mennonite workers dealing with the challenges of the early twenty-first century world of work.

No doubt religion is part of this puzzle, and Thiessen leads us to other elements of a solution. Her discussion of paternalism is important in understanding the ways in which authority is practiced in the workplace, and it can certainly be understood as a kind of compensation in a working world where workers have little power. But its power also comes from the ways in which it replicates authority in the community and within families. Thiessen is aware of this, and there are a few glimpses in this direction, but a fuller understanding of workers' lack of militancy requires a broader and more sustained examination. All of this, though, is entirely in keeping with Thiessen's understanding of the rootedness of religion in broader social relations. This is an important and suggestive study that should put to rest tendencies either to ignore religion, or to assume that it has an autonomous power outside of the nexus of capitalist social relations. Janis Thiessen's study demonstrates a welcome ability to listen carefully to her participants' testimony while simultaneously interrogating their language with an eye to the wider history of work, community, and religion.