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Janis Thiessen. *Not Talking Union: An Oral History of North American Mennonites and Labour*. Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.

Janis Thiessen's *Not Talking Union* is a significant contribution to the emerging body of studies on how religion intersects with labor organizing, work, class, and material circumstances in North American history. Whereas many of these studies have focused on labor activism, Thiessen has written an "atypical labour history" by asking how anti-union sentiments grow in religious contexts (12). To a large extent, as her book makes clear, they thrive in silences—in this case, the unenforced spaces of a decentralized, flat, religious tradition.

*Not Talking Union* begins with an outline of Mennonite religious belief, drawn from Thiessen's extensive oral interviews and following Robert Wuthnow's observation that stories are "a way of reconstructing ourselves" (35). Most of Thiessen's conversation partners tell a narrative of progress—from a limited religious understanding to a more robust, validated one, or from the position of passive bystander to that of active stakeholder in theological conflict and debate. In the best tradition of oral history, the author refrains from judgment, from cobbling together various narratives into a supposedly coherent one, and from pointing out what might appear as inconsistencies to potential readers.

Indeed, most of the Mennonites introduced here, all of whom reappear as major characters in the rest of the volume, offer no neat theological explanations for their journeys in life and work, and many hesitate to connect their religious sentiments to their class, wealth, or lack thereof. It is in this absence of neatly constructed stories of self that Thiessen's work takes place. It invites readers to puzzle, and leaves ample space to connect various dots and seeming contradictions. Above all, its greatest success is that out of many historical silences it brings forth a story.

That story takes the reader across North America, from Manitoba to Indiana, Indiana to California. California, it is worth mentioning, looms large as a Mennonite cultural frontier in the story. Thiessen is particularly attentive to the American west coast, because her sources led her there. The payoff is an overdue reorientation of 20th-century Mennonite geographies. In succeeding chapters, the book foreshadows and enlightens divides that

have come to define various Mennonite denominations even more sharply: east versus west (North American), urban versus rural, educated Mennonite “busybody idiots, just causing trouble” versus growers’ self-perception as those who actually get their hands dirty (104), and (Old) Mennonite Church cultures versus Mennonite Brethren and General Conference cultures.

These denominational dichotomies are broken up consistently by the voices of farmworkers and organizers themselves. The dynamics are perhaps most visible on the fields of the San Joaquin Valley, where Mennonite Brethren and General Conference growers, self-declared “poor, average businessmen,” encounter the tensions within MCC and the (Old) Mennonite Church: Lupe De Leon, convinced that God sent Cesar Chavez “just as He sent Moses”; Guy Hershberger, eager to put the brakes on such comparisons; and J.R. Burkholder of Goshen College, who disarmingly confessed he was in a “difficult situation, as a self-styled supporter of the oppressed (armchair style . . .).” Their voices all speak to the many fault lines among North American Mennonites (96-99).

*Not Talking Union* does not follow a historical timeline, and the author’s explanations of causality are muted. However, the longer one listens to Thiessen’s oral sources and realizes how sparse are the written documents she was able to work with, the more obvious is the merit of this entertainingly written work. Between the well-told Mennonite denominational causalities and decades of labor histories that have bothered little with religion, and between the often individualized understanding of spirituality expressed by Thiessen’s interviewees and the connected worlds of their marketplace and their workplace, there was—and is—often little but silence. By carefully letting her sources speak or remain silent, the author succeeds in identifying this discomfort and in pointing those interested in religion and labor to more stories.

For students of labor, *Not Talking Union* is a reminder that anti-union sentiments do not always persist because of the crushing fist and manipulative lingo of evil capitalists. For students of religion, the book complicates contemporary dichotomies between “evangelicals” and “progressives.” And

Mennonites will be reminded that polite silence weighs at least as heavily on their ways of engaging culture and politics as conflict does.

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Paul G. Doerksen. *Take and Read: Reflecting Theologically on Books*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016.

When I graduated from high school, my home congregation (Steinmann Mennonite Church in Baden, Ontario) gave me a bookmark with a scripture verse on it—presumably one meant to offer some guidance and counsel as I entered university life. The verse was from Ezekiel 3, part of which reads: “Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.” Around the same time, I read Richard Foster’s *The Celebration of Discipline* (Harper & Row, 1978), which outlines spiritual disciplines for the Christian life, among which is what Foster refers to simply as ‘study’ but which includes many modes of inquiry. These two events soon led me to discover that the disciplines of reading and writing were deeply meaningful paths to spiritual and moral formation.

Paul Doerksen, Associate Professor of Theology and Anabaptist Studies at Canadian Mennonite University, has recently published *Take and Read: Reflecting Theologically on Books*, which is the result of taking this spiritual discipline of study seriously in a long-term group environment. The book is an excellent example of how to do service to church and community as a university professor. Picking up on a reading circle begun in 1993 by Gordon Matties, for well over a decade Doerksen has led a group of diverse individuals through scholarly and popular texts of all kinds.

*Take and Read* offers selections from the papers Doerksen read at each gathering, and the title of the collection comes from the conversion of St. Augustine, which itself was inspired by the prophetic words of a child: *tolle lege*, take and read. Augustine’s life was changed when he began to read and be challenged by the gospels (*Confessions*, VIII, 12), and the words from Ezekiel also reflect this transformational message in the image of the scroll tasting