

Ronald Tiessen. *Menno in Athens*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2022.

Menno In Athens by Ronald Tiessen tells the story of a young Mennonite's pilgrimage to a series of Grecian locations, where he searches for parallels in the thought of the ancient Greeks to the Anabaptist tradition in which he was raised. Although the book has a thin novelistic veneer, it is really a travelogue and intellectual memoir that consists of about twenty-five visits to cities, towns or regions, each of which is associated with one or more Greek thinkers. At each of these stops, Menno, the protagonist of the novel, finds correspondences with elements of Anabaptism. Sometimes these are fairly mundane (the Athenians selected public officials by lot; some Mennonite communities chose their leaders by a form of lottery), sometimes surprising (a thread of non-violence theory in what we think of as a martial culture), and sometimes astonishing (the possibly Johannine mysticism of the Pythagoreans). They are always interesting.

In the Foreword Menno tries to explain his pilgrimage to his disapproving stepfather, Paeta. He tells Paeta that he is "drawn in by a sense of familiarity" because modern Mennonites and ancient Greeks share some common insights (11). This seems innocuous enough. Throughout his journey, Menno will cross paths several times with a fellow Mennonite, an MCC volunteer named Virgil. Virgil will also disagree, sometimes strenuously, with both his program and his conclusions. Why? What do both Paeta and Virgil find objectionable about this apparently innocent project? The answer goes to the heart of why *Menno in Athens* is such an interesting book.

Paeta articulates his concerns in the Foreword: "I imagine you even consider your Greek myths to be divine revelation! Everything you say points to a denial of the true revelation in Scripture." (9). Near the end, Menno seems to circle back to Paeta's accusation when he comments that his pilgrimage is an attempt to examine how the thinkers of ancient Greece *foreshadowed* tenets of Anabaptism:

"It was not evident to Menno how this came to be. He was not one to identify direct lines of causality and connectivity, but at the same time he favored Simone Weil's commitment to the idea that there is a clear continuum between ancient Greece and the

Gospels” (173-174, emphasis added).

Is Menno being disingenuous? Questions of causality and connectivity (which comprise the larger question of literary influence) are unavoidable. Even if the text does not explicitly pose them, they will surface in the mind of any attentive reader. Paeta’s concern is real, although he may have it essentially backwards. There is very little danger of Menno (or us) coming to believe that the Greek myths are divinely inspired. The problem for Paeta and Virgil is the reverse: how we come to view the inspiration of Biblical texts.

In his chapter on Epidauros, Tiessen argues that the healing ministry of the New Testament is a continuation of a Greek experience rather than a tradition found in the Hebrew scriptures. As a case in point he cites the legend of Asklepios and notes its parallels to the story of Jesus. Both Jesus and Asklepios claim divine ancestry, both are healers and have followers who extend their ministry, and both were resurrected and deified, albeit in different ways. It may not occur to us to ask whether Asklepios’ story is divinely inspired, but it will almost certainly occur to us, recognizing the legendary elements of Asklepios’ story, to interrogate the Biblical narrative. Does it also incorporate legendary elements? *That* is the problem for Paeta and Virgil. To notice the parallel is to ask the question, and once the question is asked, it cannot be unasked. We may answer in favour of Biblical literalism, as do, for instance, C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, but we will always know that we might have answered otherwise. A new deliberateness is required of us; an innocence has been lost.

In one of the most interesting chapters in the book, Samos-Pythagorio, Tiessen finds parallels between the beliefs of the Pythagoreans and the mystical theology of the Gospel of John. Was the writer of the Gospel a Pythagorean? Influence, if it exists, can go only one way. Pythagoras could not have read John.

The presiding genius of *Menno in Athens* is Simone Weil. She figures directly in at least four important chapters: Chios (Homer and the *Iliad*), Samos-Pythagorio (the Pythagoreans), Thebes (Antigone) and Poros (Prometheus and Zeus). Chios is, in fact, essentially an account of her brilliant (mis)reading of Homer: *The Iliad, The Poem of Force*. If nothing else, we owe Tiessen a debt of gratitude for reminding us of her book *Intimations*

of *Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*. Her thought informs almost every page of the novel.

Weil herself remains contentious among Christians, probably for the same reasons that Virgil and Paeta are suspicious of Menno. To read her is to open hermeneutical doors that we might prefer to leave closed. *Menno in Athens* will, I suspect, do the same and that is why, for believers like Paeta, it is a dangerous book. To read it is to see correspondences and to ask questions—questions that may produce tremors in the ground of a naïve faith. So be it. Difficult questions and honest answers are essential in the transition to maturity, in faith as in everything.

Charles Roth, Rainham Mennonite Church, Selkirk, Ontario.

Knut V.M. Wormstädt, *Versöhnung erzählen. Eine prozesstheologische Untersuchung ökumenischer Versöhnungsbegegnungen mit den Mennonit*innen* (FSÖTh 173). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022.

In *Versöhnung erzählen*, Knut Wormstädt draws on process theology and particularly the work of philosopher Donna Haraway to interpret the sense of “reconciliation” in ecumenical dialogues between Mennonites on the one hand and Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches on the other. Typically, Wormstädt notes, this sense of reconciliation is understood along two axes: a “vertical” reconciliation between humanity and God which precedes and conditions the “lateral” dimension of inter-personal (or in this case inter-ecclesial) reconciliation. Wormstädt’s work, which is based on his doctoral dissertation, productively complicates this relationship, seeking ways of thinking about reconciliation that bring these axes together, seeing God’s reconciling work and creaturely healing of hurt relationships as significantly intertwined.

The theme of reconciliation is significant in these ecumenical dialogues, not only because of the theological identity of Mennonites (in which peace is central), but particularly because of the growing significance of a “healing of memories” after the sixteenth-century persecution of the