

## Religion and Work in Post-War North America: Mennonite Responses to Labour Activism, 1945- 1995

*Janis Thiessen, University of Winnipeg and Westgate Mennonite Collegiate*

*Janis Thiessen received her Ph.D. (2006) from the University of New Brunswick. Her book manuscript Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba is under review by the University of Toronto Press. Recent publications include "Winnipeg's Palliser Furniture in the Context of Mennonite Views on Industrial Relations, 1974-1996," in: Prairie Metropolis: New Essays on Winnipeg Social History, Esyllt W. Jones and Gerald Friesen, eds. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009) and "Communism and Labor Unions: The Changing Perspectives of Mennonites in Canada and the United States," Direction 38/1 (Spring 2009): 17-28. Dr. Thiessen is currently a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Winnipeg (2009-2011). She has been the secretary-treasurer of COHA since 2005. Contact: Janis.Thiessen@unb.ca.*

Labour history has been invigorated over the last generation through the study of the cultural dimensions of work, and the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, and linguistics with worker identity. Religion, for all its current attention in both Canada and the United States, has had comparatively little impact on the fields of North American labour and working class history. While the radical (social gospel, Christian socialist) component has been studied, religious traditions that conflicted with organized or radicalized labour have received less attention.

Over the next two years, with the financial support of SSHRC, I will investigate how ethno-religious identity informed and was shaped dialectically by the culture of work. While various social groups could be an appropriate focus for such a study, the Mennonites offer a particularly rich avenue of research. Given their proximity to agrarian rural life, the value they placed on independent farm families, and their teachings on pacifism and avoidance of 'the world' (that is, avoidance of conformity to non-Mennonite practices), a comparative study of how Mennonites in Canada and the United States interacted with labour radicalism will deepen understandings of both labour and religion.

Although Mennonites are typically associated with rural life, in the post-1945 period, they became increasingly urbanized and were involved as workers in specific locations in both traditional Mennonite enclaves in Ohio, Indiana, Ontario, and Manitoba, and those to which they migrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as British Columbia and California. Mennonites in these locales found employment both as field workers for large agricultural operations and as factory

hands in major manufacturing firms. The postwar experiences of North American Mennonites in these locales caused them to confront and reassess their understandings of labour and religion. A comparative study of these Mennonite workers, ostensibly united by a common ethnic and religious identity, and yet shaped in distinct ways by their differing geographic locations, immigration histories, and cultural contexts, should make a contribution to both the history of labour and the history of religion in North America. A major part of the research base for this project will be interviews.

The interviews will be an opportunity to explore the attitudes and actions of Mennonites of all ages: those old enough to have participated in or resisted various labour issues of the post-1945 period, as well as their descendants. I intend to examine the means by which the interview participants' religious commitments shaped their perspectives on labour issues, the manner in which their class position influenced their religious beliefs, and the ways in which their understandings of religion and labour have changed over time. Differences due to age, gender, national origin, migration history, church conference affiliation, educational background, and class position will be investigated. Oral history theory, memory theory, and discourse analysis will provide some of the techniques for interpreting these interviews and the relations among Mennonites and between Mennonites and secular society. The methods and theories of oral history and the study of memory, as exemplified by the works of Alessandro Portelli, Alon Confino, Michael Frisch, Jacques LeGoff, and others, will be an integral part of my interpretive approach.

Interview subjects will be identified through a variety of means. I intend to focus on six cities: Winnipeg, Manitoba; Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario; Vancouver, British Columbia; Bluffton, Ohio; Goshen, Indiana; and Reedley, California. Notices will be placed in North American Mennonite periodicals, such as *The Canadian Mennonite*, *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, *The Mennonite*, and *Mennonite Life*. In the three provinces and three states, announcements will be placed in bulletins and newsletters of churches affiliated with the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, the United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church Canada, and Mennonite Church USA. In addition, I will attempt to locate individuals named in relevant archival sources, such as those of Labour Relations Boards and Departments of Labour, Mennonite church and para-church organizations (including Mennonite Central Committee), as well as unions and labour associations (including the Christian Labour Association of Canada). Additional relevant archival material will be consulted at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario (Waterloo ON); the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia (Abbotsford BC); and the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Fresno CA). Further, I will analyze relevant articles and letters to the editor in the North American Mennonite popular press, including the

*Mennonite Brethren Herald* (1962-1995), *Mennonite Life* (1947-1995), *The Mennonite Mirror* (1972-1982), *Mennonite Reporter* (1971-1995), *The Canadian Mennonite* (1958-1971), and *The Mennonite* (1946-1995), among others.

My initial reading of the Mennonite popular press from 1945 to 1995 reveals a concern by the newly emerged university-educated Mennonite intellectual elite regarding North American Mennonite involvement in industrial labour. The degree and nature of concern appear to differ depending on geographic context. For example, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Manitoba, at the request of their constituency, was asked in the early 1970s to assist Manitoban Mennonites who were seeking exemption from union membership. These Mennonites believed that union membership was incompatible with their religious beliefs. Further, they thought the newly-elected New Democratic Party government and the Manitoba Labour Board were interpreting provincial labour legislation in a manner biased against Mennonites, and wanted assistance in their struggle against union membership. By contrast, MCC British Columbia had organized a series of seminars in the 1950s and 1960s which asserted that Mennonites should be debating the question “*How* can a Christian be a union member?” rather than “*Should* a Christian be a union member?” In the United States, however, Mennonite consensus on the question of union membership may have been more difficult to achieve. MCC USA was asked by their constituency to investigate the origins of the Delano grape strike in California in the 1960s. Perhaps because Mennonites were involved as both immigrant grape pickers and resident farm owners, MCC USA was unable to recommend a definitive “Mennonite position” on the issue.

I intend to investigate and compare the views and actions of North American Mennonite intellectuals, members of the church hierarchy, and laity with respect to these (and similar) incidents, as North American Mennonites adjusted to the new challenges of urbanization and industrialization in the postwar period. Interviews with Mennonites in three provinces and three states will compare and contrast understandings of “labour action” for both “intellectual” Mennonites (i.e., preachers, theologians, professors) and blue collar Mennonites.

It is hoped that this research will reveal the ways in which a seemingly homogeneous ethno-religious community confronted postwar industrial capitalism in North America, including how politically and religiously conservative groups reshaped their identity in an urban industrial context. A study of Mennonites will add a unique perspective to labour history: the religious beliefs of Mennonites have stressed avoidance of confrontation and self-assertion, where traditional labour history has focused on worker agency and activism. Further, North American labour history has emphasized the triad of class, ethnicity/race, and gender – the role of religion has received less attention from labour historians. Comments and questions of this work-in-progress are welcomed.