Christopher Craig Brittain


Christopher Craig Brittain’s study A Plague on Both Their Houses: Liberal vs. Conservative Christians and the Divorce of the Episcopal Church USA is an unusually gracious analysis of the fractious and fractured state of Anglicanism in the United State of America. Brittain focuses upon the diocese of Pittsburgh, which divided between 2003 and 2009 into rival dioceses aligned with either the Episcopal Church (Tec) or the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). Intending ‘to offer an intervention into such ecclesial polemics’ (p. 2), his eight chapters offer a broad overview of recent events while also covering more specific matters such as lawsuits (chapter five) and the influence of blogs (chapter six). Using a broadly ethnographic approach, he interviews a number of clergy and laity on both sides of the division, and in chapter four offers a close analysis of the ways in which division affected four congregations—one large and one small in each denomination. Throughout, Brittain is concerned with a key question: ‘How does one speak theologically about the church in an environment in which ecclesiology itself has become "weaponized"?’ (p. 13). This results in the last chapter being prescriptive rather than descriptive, but it does not cause the other seven chapters to feel biased in any one direction. His is an admirable achievement.

The great strength of Brittain’s study is his ability to humanize the acrimonious division between Tec and ACNA. He succeeds in complicating any assumption, on one or the other side, that the members of each denomination are ideologically homogenous. It is especially interesting to note that some of those who joined the ACNA genuinely regret the division in the diocese. One ACNA member described her church as ‘a little self-righteous’ (p. 109), and further commented, ‘So, do I think the split had to happen? Well, maybe, [but] how it happened, particularly in this diocese, I’m not happy with. I think the Bishop basically abandoned forty percent of his congregations. The cost was really high’ (p. 110). These are all but damning words against Bob Duncan, the former bishop of Pittsburgh who became the first archbishop of the ACNA. Some of those in Tec prove no less introspective and self-critical; an unnamed Episcopalian described the current commitments of the Episcopal Church as, ‘There is an idea within Tec that it dropped the ball on Civil Rights. And so many in the church are determined to never let that happen again’ (p. 40). One cannot help but wonder: how might the leaders of these two churches respond to the evident dissatisfaction that exists among their own laity?
Self-serving misrepresentations exist on both sides as well. At one point, Brittain records to his own amazement a conversation with an Episcopalian named George who is, in Brittain’s words, ‘completely unable to grasp how it could be that supporters of realignment thought of the dispute in doctrinal terms’. In his own words, George dismisses the ACNA as ‘Bible thumpers’ who are ‘basically Congregationalists’ (p. 119)—a polemic that Brittain shows is simply false. On the other side, small and struggling ACNA parishes formed out of the split sometimes describe themselves as ‘church plants’ (pp. 136, 140), just as the ACNA claims to be part of the Anglican Communion (pp. 91–92); neither claim is true. Readers inclined to prejudge one or the other church will, however, find their prejudices challenged. Brittain shows that the ‘most liberal’ parish in the Episcopal diocese of Pittsburgh is nothing of the sort (pp. 66–70), and he shows that there is no truth behind the assumption that the ACNA’s members are more homogenous and less educated (esp. pp. 121–2). Time and again, Brittain complicates and even undermines the mythologies that ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ tell themselves.

And yet, as sometimes happens, a great strength can also be a weakness. Brittain repeatedly argues against the ‘culture wars’ thesis advanced by the American sociologist James Davison Hunter in the early 1990s. Hunter’s thesis has occasioned considerable comment and debate, making it one of the most influential if controversial interpretations of American society in the last 25 years. Brittain picks up one line of such arguments by attacking Davison’s use of ‘wars’ as an operative keyword; this is not an uncommon line of critique, but in responding to his critics, Davison has counter-argued that the real focus of his work is less on ‘wars’ than on the cultures themselves—the values and assumptions that make possible a given way of life. Where one places the emphasis—either on the cultures or on the wars—shapes how one engages with Hunter’s work.

For Brittain, the ‘culture wars’ thesis is problematic because it assumes two clearly defined sides. On the one hand, and as noted above, Brittain’s qualitative work undermines such an understanding. He persuasively proposes that terms like ‘liberal’ and ‘evangelical’ are more symbolic than accurate (p. 47); hence the same terms often appear in quotes (e.g., pp. 67, 83, 99). Brittain’s goal is to show that there really aren’t two diametrically opposed worldviews in the once-united diocese of Pittsburgh. Therefore, the culture wars thesis is an unhelpful and even inaccurate way of understanding the current state of Anglicanism in the United States (and, perhaps, the wider Anglican Communion). But time and again, Brittain frames his study in binary terms. He writes of ‘the realignment side’ and ‘the TEC side’ (p. 98), and he proposes that there are two different version of the church in play, one of which stresses ‘purity’