Book Review


Muriel Porter has carefully documented the discussion and dissension between the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and other Australian Anglican dioceses, particularly as this has occurred since the late 1980s. She notes ‘Impartiality would be impossible for me, given my participation in national church affairs and in particular, some of the key issues that involve Sydney, such as the ordination of women debate’ (p. xv). While the perspective she takes on issues is never in doubt, she has been meticulous in the care and detail of her documentation, not least in relation to the issue about which she is most passionate: the equality of women within the church.

Porter also documents some of the ways in which the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, and, in particular, its leader, Peter Jensen, have been active in world Anglicanism. She describes how Jensen contributed to the 2008 ‘alternative gathering of world Anglican leaders’ which was held in Jerusalem under the heading of GAFCON (Global Anglican Future conference). In so doing, Jensen not only aligned himself with a number of other conservative Anglican leaders, particularly from Africa, but sought a leading role among them. The presenting issue was the ordination of Gene Robinson, a practising homosexual, as a bishop in the United States; however, the potential outcomes for the world Anglican communion were much broader.

Porter acknowledges that many Sydney Anglicans would see the real issue as that of loyalty to the Bible. Indeed, it is highly likely that most Sydney Anglicans would see the threat to ‘World Anglicanism’ being the failure of significant parts of the Anglican Church to be true to the teaching of the Bible, especially in regard to the ‘sin’ of homosexual practice and the failure of many Anglicans to acknowledge the ‘headship’ of men over women, particularly in home and church. However, if one is looking for a detailed theological debate over these issues, one will not find it in this book. Porter carefully sidesteps the theological and biblical issues, although referring from time to time to contemporary biblical and theological scholarship.

Porter’s account of the particular kind of evangelicalism that has evolved in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is primarily historical. She sees T.C. Hammond, who was principal of Moore Theological College in the 1950s, and, more significantly, Broughton Knox, who was principal of Moore Theological College from 1959 to 1985, as being highly influential in the form which Anglicanism takes in Sydney today. She argues that Peter Jensen and his brother, Philip, who have been so prominent in their leadership of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, have put into practice the theological principles of a rigid interpretation of the Bible and a ‘congregationalism’ in ecclesiology that lay at the heart of Knox’s theology. She sees these applications of Knox’s theology as the source of the conflict between the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and other Anglican dioceses around Australia.
It could well be argued, however, that the development of the particular form of Anglicanism found in the Diocese of Sydney is not just the result of historical circumstances, but reflects its cultural context. Several other denominations also have their most conservative expression in Sydney. Porter mentions the parallels between Jensen and his Catholic counterpart, George Pell. Reference could also have been made to the Baptists, the Churches of Christ, the Assemblies of God, and also the Muslims in Sydney. Religion in Sydney is more conservative and more strongly defined against the culture than in most other parts of Australia. However, for example, while opposition to homosexuality is probably stronger in the Sydney churches than in any other major city in Australia, there is no other city which hosts such a strong expression of homosexual pride as the Sydney Mardi Gras.

Behind the issues that the book discusses are the theological issues of faith and culture. To what extent does the Christian faith require the church to stand on principle over against the culture? Are there areas, such as the equality of women, where changes in culture legitimately challenge the churches to change? How are the decisions to be negotiated in a world where there are different views of the extent to which the Bible is seen as reflecting the culture of its time or reflecting eternal principles revealed from heaven?

The book shows that sectors of the Anglican church are approaching the ‘faith and culture’ issues in quite different ways. The Anglican Diocese of Sydney, along with many other evangelical churches in Australia, has taken a much stronger position of ‘Christ against culture’, to use Neibuh’s phrase, than have other parts of the Anglican Church in Australia. Rather than arguing the theological issues, this book shows how the issues have been negotiated in one denomination, sometimes through theological speeches and documents, but more frequently by appeal to legal argument on the interpretation of traditions and long-standing legal frameworks.

Porter is not convincing in her argument that the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is a threat to World Anglicanism. To make that argument, one would need to look more closely at the power and the position of some of the other players, as well as at Sydney’s part in this power-play to evaluate fully the threat to world Anglicanism. It could be argued, for instance, that a more major threat to the unity of world Anglicanism lies at the increasing cultural distance of most Western Anglican dioceses from many dioceses in the developing world, particularly in Africa. In time, it may well be that some of the African dioceses will throw off the remnants of what they might see as the colonialism of Lambeth under the guise of keeping the faith pure. While the Anglican Diocese of Sydney has stood by some of the African dioceses, I suspect that, should such a division take place, the role of the Diocese of Sydney may be quite limited. Indeed, the final chapters in the book suggest that the influence of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is on the wane, both in Australia and overseas, particularly because of the mismanagement of its financial resources and the failure of its ambitious mission strategy.

Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism sheds light on Anglican church politics and the picture is not inspiring. Indeed, the book will confirm the opinion of many Australians that the churches are largely irrelevant to many of the key moral issues of our day, such as the environment, and their structures are neither transparent nor accountable. Recent surveys have shown that the majority of Australians has little confidence in the Australian churches. For most Australians, there are bigger issues than whether women or people in a homosexual relationship or non-ordained people can preside at Holy Communion.

Philip Hughes
MCD University of Divinity

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2013.