

Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Volume 14

Article 7

12-1-2022

Review – Edward K. Braxton, *The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African American Bishop*

Craig A. Ford Jr.
St. Norbert College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ford, Craig A. Jr. (2022) "Review – Edward K. Braxton, *The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African American Bishop*," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 14, Article 7.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol14/iss1/7>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

***The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African American Bishop.* Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021. xlviii+208. Paper. ISBN: 9781626984066.**

Edward Braxton's third book, *The Church and the Racial Divide*, is a veritable testament to the author's desire to bring about greater mutual understanding to an American society marked by growing racial polarization. Structured as a collection of short essays, seven of the book's nine chapters were composed in the last twelve years. What distinguish Braxton's approach is his commitment to racial reconciliation as one writing out of his particular role as a bishop within the Roman Catholic Church. This stance comes with both its advantages and its limitations.

One of the greatest advantages that Braxton is able to leverage is to append a certain episcopal *gravitas* to his helpful and well-researched review of US racial history, particularly as it bears on recent controversies. Chapters three and four— "Old Wounds Revisited" and "We, Too, Sing America," respectively—are stellar examples of this, including comments on, among other topics, the controversy surrounding confederate monuments (76-81). Indeed, at multiple points throughout the book, Braxton is unafraid to render visible the effects of white supremacy: the brutal human cost of chattel slavery (12.5 million Africans) and of lynching (over 3000 African Americans) (102, 107); the continued limited or lack of engagement with pastoral letters written by the US bishops on racism (24-28); and even the disturbing historical record that connects Catholic past to Catholic present. "The church did not oppose segregated neighborhoods, segregated churches, segregated schools, or segregated and unfair employment," Braxton writes, "Evangelization in African American communities has not gained momentum, in part, because people have long memories" (86). Buoyed by convictions like these, Braxton asks, "Have we reached a tipping point where such radical reform can be undertaken not only in our police departments, but also in our places of government, education, employment, worship, and in our hearts and consciousnesses?" (xvi).

This question is a deeply important one, but its sharpness is at times limited by what emerges as the book's simultaneous strength and limitation: Braxton's desire to mediate across deeply disparate ideological perspectives, demonstrating sympathy with nearly all vantage points. In the interest of preserving the comfort of as many

people as possible, for example, Braxton consciously eschews use of the term 'racism,' preferring to use, as the book's title suggests, the term 'racial divide' instead (69n1). In this instance, what might be gained in terms of accessibility may be lost in terms of moral clarity, since one could easily respond that the critical issue in the US in this respect is not the racial divide as much as it is the racism (structural and interpersonal) and the white supremacy that produces that divide in the first place. Others of Braxton's convictions, while they make sense conceptually, refract uneasily through our nation's political discourse, such as his chapter arguing that no racial group should be referred to as a 'minority', since all Americans, in his words, "really are *one*" (134, emphasis his); or his conceptual defense of both terms "All Lives Matter" and "Black Lives Matter" (40-44).

The book's greatest limitation might be its usefulness in academic theological contexts, though this might be a necessary tradeoff in the desire to be accessible. Just to give one example: in one place, Braxton offers two sweeping judgments of black theology, saying of it that, like liberation theology and feminist theology, it is less concerned with "rigorous scholarly methodology" than it is with "the concrete reality of social, cultural, political, and economic situations" (xlili), and saying of it also that it exists in tension with "the traditional theology of the Catholic Church" (xlii). Given that black theology as an academic field is over half a century old (and growing), and that there are several prominent black *Catholic* theologians, it is not obvious why either of these statements should be taken to be true without more engagement with specific sources.

Nevertheless, it is engagement that is at the heart of Braxton's text—engagement across lines of difference, in the interest of justice, and full of hope for a world where racial division will cease. We should pray that perspectives like these will increase.

St. Norbert College (De Pere, WI)

CRAIG A. FORD, JR.