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Book confronts racism, prison issues, but language obscures the message

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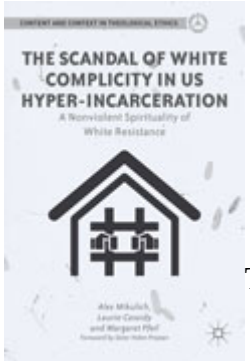

THE SCANDAL OF WHITE COMPLICITY IN HYPER-INCARCERATION: A NONVIOLENT SPIRITUALITY OF WHITE RESISTANCE
By Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy and Margaret Pfeil
Published by Palgrave Macmillan, $85

Board the X2 bus at Lafayette Square opposite the White House and travel its 5-mile route eastward across Washington and there is a very good chance that more than half the African-American men who are your fellow passengers will have been in prison at some point in their lives. The X2 bus, to the extent that white Washingtonians are aware of it, has a reputation as dangerous, prone to passenger fights and occasional shootings. The X2 is a subject perhaps of white curiosity but no real concern, and few white Washingtonians use it. Yet the X2 is a symbol of the white segregation from and blindness to the devastation of hyper-incarceration that Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy and Margaret Pfeil explore in their valuable work.

The Scandal of White Complicity underscores the point that the image of America as a postracial, colorblind society based on meritocracy and individual choice impedes a deeper understanding of the way in which white America is implicated in the systematic deprivation of the African-American community. It is a deprivation that drains that community of the economic and social capital that can break the cycle in which sons of imprisoned men too often meet their fathers behind bars. This impressive work is a product of the authors? ongoing collaboration in the White Privilege and Racism Research Group at the Catholic Theological Society of America.

The term ?mass incarceration? refers to the astounding number of Americans who are imprisoned. It refers to numbers. The authors adopt Loic Wacquant?s term *hyper-incarceration*, which refers to the greater risk of incarceration faced by minority communities, particularly African-Americans, but also Latinos. The term enumerates and describes.

By the ?complicity? in the book?s title the authors mean a deep entanglement -- in this case an unconscious and unintentional state of benefiting from a repressive system. Finally, white and whiteness describe a position of power with American society, something more than a label of skin color.

Summaries draw on several academic disciplines to depict a vivid, unsettling counter-narrative of American history, culture, politics, economics and religion. They intend *The Scandal of White Complicity* to be a challenge to traditional conceptions of guilt and innocence and a call to action to their fellow theologians to follow them on a path of understanding, compassion, engagement and community building.

Citing James Baldwin?s warning that ?history is literally present in all that we do,? Mikulich weaves a history of African-Americans from slavery through Jim Crow and lynching to the war on drugs and the concomitant growth industry of convict labor and prison privatization. In parallel, he describes the increasing self-segregation of white America and its deepening historical amnesia, particularly with regard to questions of race. Today, 9/11 is described as the first terrorist air attack on American soil. That further obliterates the carnage in Tulsa, Okla., in 1921, ?in which white citizens ? commandeered planes from the local army base to firebomb the city?s African American neighborhood and destroy it.?

Today, prison is deeply entrenched in American life as a source of employment in rural areas, a source of enrichment for politicians? campaign chests (donations from prison guard unions and prison owners). Florida Atlantic University recently sold -- then withdrew -- the naming rights to its new stadium to GEO Group, the second-largest prison company in the country. What could be more American than NCAA football in GEO Group Stadium? Fortunately, not all Americans agreed. The deal was canceled. Certainly prisons are hard to beat as an onshore source of cheap, nonunionized labor that will never go on strike.

Mikulich frames white America within the imprisonment prism?s four walls:

- White separation and white isolation from African-American society leads to a loss of empathy for the effects of hyper-incarceration;
- The illusion of innocence leads to the delusion that whiteness and white neighborhoods are the norm to be desired and that black neighborhoods represent segregation;
- This amnesia and its accompanying anesthesia lead to a distortion, if not an outright erasure, of history;
- Power and privilege ensure that a ?white-dominated legal system effectively protects, indeed renders invisible, unconscious racism on behalf of police, prosecutors and judges as it stigmatizes blacks.? (Not to mention the fact that the formerly incarcerated are often denied the right to vote.)

Cassidy unearths the cultural assumptions that underpin hyper-incarceration, beginning with the image of the dangerous black man. This frequently plowed ground is particularly relevant here -- from the recalcitrant slave in general to Nat Turner in particular, from lynching to locking up the drug dealer on the corner, the dangerous black man has been a constant in American history. (One could argue, though the authors do not, that to many Barack Obama is merely its latest incarnation.)

Certainly, there is no doubt that the black man is dangerous to the maintenance of the Republican majority. That explains the drive to suppress minority participation in the last election.

Rap and hip-hop emerge as the latest manifestation of the dangerous black man, but Cassidy finds in the early days of this genre a positive attempt to rescue black history on the part of young black men through ?perfecting the craft of orality.? What started out as a positive movement morphed into a caricature and merely reinforced the dominant image.

Cassidy, drawing on the work of Johann Baptist Metz, argues that history is essential to Christian life, beginning with the constant remembrance of Jesus? suffering and death on the cross. Metz called this a ?dangerous memory? because it commands Christians to remember the suffering of others. Returning to the theme of white amnesia, Cassidy says that amnesia deprives Christians of the power to act, to change.

Confronted by hyper-incarceration, Pfeil asks how Christians respond. Following Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Pfeil looks to the message of the Sermon on the Mount to understand the personal and communal relationship to the world of materialism. The beatitudes envision a different world, one that exalts a wealth of spirit over a wealth of things.

Because of our deep immersion in this world in which we consciously or unconsciously benefit from a system of oppression, both historical and contemporary, it is difficult to effect the change that is necessary. Instead of the hapless question what can I do, one should ask what needs to change.

Merton wrote ?that American society has to change before the race problem can be solved.? Pfeil believes hyper-incarceration by its very nature will not end without a complete societal change.

Pfeil looks to a communal engagement in which committed white men and women engage as equals with African-Americans to hear and respect the suffering and the aspirations and to create a strategy to break the grip of the prison on the African-American community. All three authors call on their colleagues to create a theology that engages in this effort.

There is much to commend here, but the book itself often frustrates that effort: It cries out for an editor. Starting with the basic facts, the authors confuse the readers. Cassidy says there are more than 6 million people in the American prison system. Mikulich writes that there are 7.3 million in the criminal justice system and 2.3 million in prisons and jails. Must the reader resolve this? Pfeil cites Woolman writing in 1743 and implies that he was writing 12 years after Turner?s 1831 insurrection.

Too often the reader encounters italicizations that are unattributed. In the Merton quotation noted above, the reader goes to the footnotes to learn who hit the Command I key and is further confused because the citation comes not from Merton but from someone quoting Merton, so the reader has three possibilities. These are not minor issues. Why stop the reader in his or her tracks and ask them to figure these things out for themselves?

More troubling is the frequent resort to the rarefied language that characterizes too much academic writing today. Presumably the authors intend their audience to be theologians who are already mired in this linguistic morass.

That limitation is not merely unfortunate, but almost unpardonable in a work that deals with such a vital problem. As with many other fields today, I am left to wonder how the practice of theology became so removed from general discourse that a reasonably well-educated reader finds himself struggling to make his way through a jungle of language to follow the trail of the argument.

These authors are not merely academics: Their biographies show them to be individuals whose lives bear personal witness to the problem of hyper-incarceration. That term that itself bears witness to the linguistic problem -- hyper-incarceration tells the uninitiated nothing. As an experiment, I asked friends, black and white, people engaged in social ministry in the African-American community, public health professionals working in the addiction field, even lobbyists, what hyper-incarceration meant. All struggled, none got it.

Granted, the authors borrowed the term, but unless they want only to preach to the choir, they need to find a more revealing term.

I hope that the urgent argument of this book can be translated from the Latin of the theologian to the vernacular of the general reader. We cannot afford to wait for this message to trickle down from the seminary to the people in the pews.

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