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A CRIMINAL INJUSTICE SYSTEM

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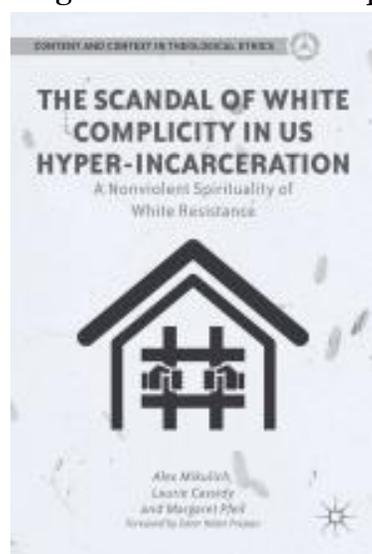
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THE SCANDAL OF WHITE COMPLICITY IN U.S. HYPER- INCARCERATION [4]

Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy and Margaret Pfei

Palgrave Macmillan. 220p \$85



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Statistics alone don't heal, but they can at least incline one toward repenting.

Even as we re-elect the first black president and celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation at the

Oscars, there are more African-American men under the control of the criminal justice system in the United States than were enslaved in the mid-19th century. Blacks and Hispanics make up almost 60 percent of the prison population, though only a quarter of the population as a whole. In the last 30 years, the prison population has quadrupled, and the United States now holds around 25 percent of the world's prisoners—and has the highest per capita incarceration rate of any country in the world.

Much of that growth is due to the failed (yet ongoing) war on drugs. And although five times as many whites report using illegal drugs as blacks, blacks go to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of whites, with much longer sentences. If this pattern continues, one in three black men can expect to be incarcerated, leaving broken families and ruined neighborhoods in their wake.

This is some of the raw material with which the legal scholar Michelle Alexander demonstrated, in her 2010 book *The New Jim Crow*, that criminal justice in the United States has become the basis of a “racial caste system”—a subtler, less explicit successor to slavery and segregation, masked in the plausible deniability of “colorblindness.”

The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-Incarceration is a much-needed attempt by three Catholic scholars to unmask this crisis in theological terms, with a particular focus on the role of white Americans in “cooperation with evil.” In so doing, they pose a formidable challenge to U.S. Catholics, who have been far too silent on this catastrophic threat to human dignity that is hidden in plain sight.

Or maybe not so hidden. The authors identify examples of how the practice of mass incarceration is made to seem normal and justified, from words said in passing on “The West Wing” to the corporate-sponsored rap music that is controlled and consumed largely by whites. The image of black men as dangerous, and thus deserving of prolonged imprisonment, is projected constantly in the media and in white people's behavior, even while they take pains never to say so outright. If a racist slip of the tongue comes out here and there, we treat it as a momentary failing of the individual who said it, not as a reflection of the pervasive culture. Collective racism is supposed to be over.

White Americans, however, self-segregate socially and geographically more than any other racial group; “We imprison ourselves,” the authors write. Yet as the dominant caste, whites are reminded of their racial identity far less than others. They can mistake their perspective for the default, even the objective. In the book's foreword, Helen Prejean, C.S.J., writes of growing up in segregated Baton Rouge, La., unaware of the violence inflicted by the racial subjugation that she participated in daily because it was so carefully kept out of view. Whites face a formidable challenge in discerning the principalities and powers binding them to racist mass incarceration, much less in exorcising its demons from themselves.

The Scandal of White Complicity is a theological intervention—an act of caucusing among white Catholics that they might own up to the spiritual and political crisis. White people often react to the discovery of their own racism with horror and defensiveness, so the authors undertake their intervention carefully. What they hope for is “not blame but responsibility”—not mere white guilt but, as their subtitle puts it, “a nonviolent spirituality of white resistance.”

And spirituality is truly at the center of what they propose. Michelle Alexander’s call for a movement of “all of us or none of us” against mass incarceration, according to one of the authors, “evokes the infinite love of God for all of God’s creation.” Drawing on the language of writers like James Baldwin and Thomas Merton, they present an approach to racial solidarity grounded in the Beatitudes, in contemplation, meekness and integrity.

Upon recognizing the depth of the problem that mass incarceration poses, it may be tempting for many whites, especially those used to positions of influence and authority, to leap into devising solutions. Reading Michelle Alexander’s book certainly brings to mind a litany of anathemas—for instance, discriminatory policing, the senseless drug war, wildly excessive sentencing laws, the broad discretion afforded to prosecutors, the perverse incentives of the private prison industry and chronic underinvestment in communities of color. But the authors of *The Scandal of White Complicity* do not venture far into policy proposals or political strategizing. Nor do they allude to the many biblical passages about freeing captives that might tempt one to play the liberator.

What they offer instead is a call to humility, to accountability to people of color, to solidarity. The task they set for white Americans is to organize themselves and each other as allies, and to follow the lead of their neighbors of color who are already fighting the battle against the new Jim Crow every day.

Nathan Schneider’s first two books, *God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet* and *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes From the Occupy Apocalypse*, will be published by University of California Press in 2013. He is an editor of www.WagingNonviolence.org [5] and a member of Occupy Catholics.

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