

A Prophet Standing in the Public Square

A Review of *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* by Jim Wallis

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Jim Wallis is a prophet. An Evangelical, in the '70s he founded the Sojourners community and magazine, dedicated to what we now call social justice. Wallis, then, not only follows in the footsteps of the biblical prophets (whose calls for social justice are ignored by many, if not most, of America's Christians) and Jesus (see Matthew 25:35-36, among many), he has pushed on even further. As Wallis has emphasized, prophets "are prophetic interrogators. . . . 'Why?' is the prophetic question."

With *America's Original Sin* Wallis continues to ask the prophetic "Why?" and, more than the biblical prophets, proposes concrete suggestions, in this case for what Americans can do to at least diminish our seemingly intractable racism. Wallis' book could not be more timely. The "2016 American National Election Study" shows that racist attitudes and animus figured prominently with many if not most of those who voted for Donald Trump: "racial attitudes towards blacks and immigration are the key factors associated with support for Trump."¹ Eighty-one to 88 per cent of white Evangelicals, and a majority of white Christians, jettisoning, if not immolating, the Bible, voted for Trump.²

With the ongoing moral debacle of the Trump administration, we need prophets like Wallis more than ever. He opens *America's Original Sin* with the violent and bloody attack on parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in June, 2015. The author had just finished writing this book and in it now hopes that this "horrific event in American history—our current history—will likely set the tone and framework for a new national conversation on racism" (xv). I do not share Wallis' optimism. Given that the firearmaholic United States has a mass shooting every five or six days, new gun horrors have steadily replaced the one at Emanuel AME.³ If the "new national conversation on racism" that Wallis hoped for even birthed, the Trump campaign and presidency throttled it in its crib. Wallis, nevertheless, continues to stand in the public square, confronting our racial and racist principalities and powers; he prays and exhorts that we must turn the "massacre" at Emanuel "into a "redemptive moment." With the 2016 election, however, our redemption is now further away than ever.

¹ Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, "Economic Anxiety Didn't Make People Vote for Trump, Racism Did," *The Nation* (online).

² See "White Evangelicals Voting for Trump Represents 'A Crisis in The Church,' Jim Wallis Says," *Sojourners* (online) and "White American Evangelical Christianity Is a Bubble — and It's About to Burst," *Sojourners* (online).

³ "1,000 mass shootings in 1,260 days," *The Guardian* (online).

But Wallis is not a prophet of despair and resignation. Where, then, lies our hope? As a person of faith, this modern prophet calls on us “to repent from our original sin of racism” (xvi); we must go to “a morally deeper place” (33). Repentance, Wallis biblically insists, “is not just expressing sorrow or admitting guilt; it is about turning completely around and going in a whole new direction” (57-58). But can a biblical appeal speak to a secularizing age? Yes, most assuredly. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, although a state-sanctioned institution, used the Jewish-Christian matrix of repentance-confession-absolution; the Commission may have been the single greatest factor in preventing riot, mayhem, and slaughter after apartheid had ended (segregation that the Reagan administration was complicit in).

So, if we individually and as a nation repent and confess our racist sinfulness, what, once absolved, do we do? Absolution without consequent action is, in spiritual terms, not just nugatory self-deception, it is atavistic, even nihilistic. With the last five chapters of *America’s Original Sin*, Wallis offers concrete suggestions for those, “reborn,” who have “died to whiteness.” Our communities of faith

- must move from segregated churches to beloved communities (Chapter 6).
- We must transform our criminal justice system from its current form, “racialized at every level” (121; emphasis Wallis’) (Chapter 7). Wallis offers fourteen “recommendations for how our broken system can be transformed” (147-153).
- In Chapter 8, “The New Jim Crow and Restorative Justice,” Wallis reminds (or minds) us that “America has become a prison state for low-income people of color” (157).⁴ He counsels us on how to move from retributive to restorative justice (164-166).
- Just before the election of the racist and xenophobic Trump, Wallis was bringing to our attention the “moral crisis created by the failures of the immigration status quo” (168). In Chapter 9, “Welcoming the Stranger,” in a subsection entitled “The Bible Tells Me So” (172-176), Wallis reminds us that the word “stranger” or “foreigner” occurs 100 times in the Hebrew Bible, “with the consistent instruction to protect them” (173). He insists, correctly, that “the stranger and all the vulnerable are at the very heart of the gospel” (173) and quotes Matthew 25:35-36 where Jesus says “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

After these sobering yet encouraging chapters, Wallis concludes *America’s Original Sin* with the book’s metaphorical yet literal subtitle of “Crossing the Bridge to a New America” (Chapter 10). The book’s front cover has a picture of marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March 2015 on the 50th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” the historic—and exsanguinated—civil rights march. Viewing the two marches separated by half a century, it is discouraging, even disheartening, that racism is still rampant in the United States—and, as I write this essay ten

⁴ The title “The New Jim Crow” comes from Michelle Alexander’s outstanding book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

months after the 2016 election, is getting worse. And yet . . . Edmund Pettus was a [Confederate general](#) and, after the war, Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan and a Democratic [U.S. Senator](#). As one looks at pictures of the march in 1965 with its images of tear gas, vicious beatings, and attacking police dogs, who could have imagined that fifty years later President Obama and Representative John Lewis, a civil rights hero, would lead the new march? Neither march could have occurred without our prophets. Jim Wallis marched in 2015. With this book he marches—and prophecies—still.