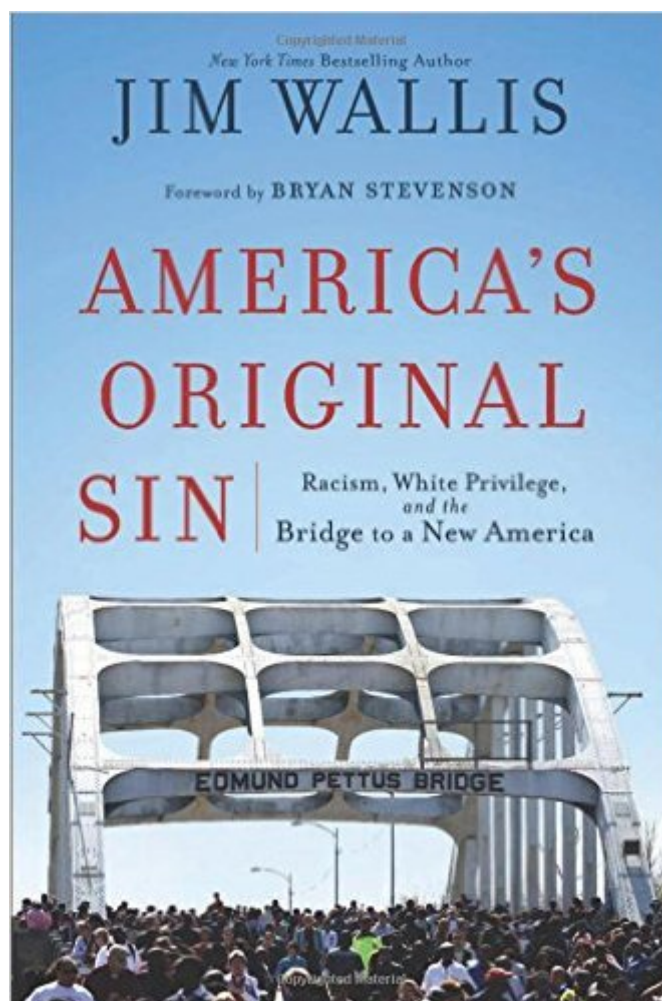


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# America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, And The Bridge To A New America



## Synopsis

America's problem with race has deep roots, with the country's foundation tied to the near extermination of one race of people and the enslavement of another. Racism is truly our nation's original sin. "It's time we right this unacceptable wrong," says bestselling author and leading Christian activist Jim Wallis. Fifty years ago, Wallis was driven away from his faith by a white church that considered dealing with racism to be taboo. His participation in the civil rights movement brought him back when he discovered a faith that commands racial justice. Yet as recent tragedies confirm, we continue to suffer from the legacy of racism. The old patterns of white privilege are colliding with the changing demographics of a diverse nation. The church has been slow to respond, and Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week. In *America's Original Sin*, Wallis offers a prophetic and deeply personal call to action in overcoming the racism so ingrained in American society. He speaks candidly to Christians--particularly white Christians--urging them to cross a new bridge toward racial justice and healing. Whenever divided cultures and gridlocked power structures fail to end systemic sin, faith communities can help lead the way to grassroots change. Probing yet positive, biblically rooted yet highly practical, this book shows people of faith how they can work together to overcome the embedded racism in America, galvanizing a movement to cross the bridge to a multiracial church and a new America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

One Sunday I stood in the church vestibule greeting congregants as they exited. One man

complimented me on the sermon and then asked this somewhat unusual question: "How long do you think it took to prepare that?" "Fifty years," I told him. That was my age at the time. The best messages have to steep for a while, and clearly the message of America's Original Sin has been steeping for quite some time. In fact, a few months ago, Jim Wallis told me that this was the book he's always wanted to write. I believe he's been writing it all his life. It's only now, in the fullness of time, that we're getting to read it. This book lays bare the facts about white America's moral responsibility for this country's racial dysfunction. These facts are not really in dispute but are nevertheless largely ignored by white Christians. Not any more. Jim Wallis doesn't just present the facts; he confronts us with them. America's Original Sin is not just a reminder of our jaded history or our hypocritical present. It is more than the sum of its sobering statistics. It calls into question the very benignity of whiteness. It reminds us of our biblical commitments. It calls us to repentance. The repentance to which Jim Wallis points, however, is not simply a cathartic spiritual experience. He's not just talking about committing to change but about making changes—changes in our relationships, changes in our churches, changes in our politics. And the book is chock full of practical prescriptions as to what that change should look like. Perhaps the best thing about this book, however, is just how very personal it is. Reading this book feels a lot like having a conversation with Jim Wallis, right down to the de rigueur references to Little League.

This book is a concise and focused primer for all Christians, but especially for white evangelicals who are reading the signs of the times and struggling to discern how to respond. In the age of Obama, Ferguson, Charleston, and the fifty-year anniversaries of so many of the key battles of the Civil Rights Movement we need efforts like this and the conversations that will emerge from them. This book's title originates from a November 1987 article in *Sojourners* which began with the sentence: "The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the genocide of another race and then the enslavement of yet another." Such an assertion contradicts the central lie of America's founding narrative. American Christianity has been tangled up in that lie. "It's time," Wallis writes, "for white Christians to be more Christian than white." The legacy of white supremacy disables white evangelicals from addressing contemporary incidents of racialized violence against African-Americans with any degree of sympathy, insight, or relevance. Unfortunately, this has not rendered them mute on the topic even as it has exposed them as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Jim Wallis is trying to keep evangelicals in conversation with concerns outside their parochial worldview. In this book he

presents a strong, uncompromising view of race and racism. He connects central biblical concepts with incisive contemporary anti-racist analysis and then offers some of the best available mainstream progressive recommendations. There is little here that is original or has not been said before. His strength is in bringing it all together in a manner and tone that (some) evangelicals might be able to hear at a moment when we all need to hear it.

I ordered this title pre-publication. I wanted to like the book; but the truth is that I did not. It was a frustrating read for me. Nevertheless, it gave me a lot to think about. Through the course of attempting to articulate what it was that troubled me in these pages, I re-read early chapters of Lillian Smith's 1949 classic, *KILLERS OF THE DREAM* (which was revised and republished in 1961). Hers is the clear-eyed view of the complicated dilemma of segregation in which white Southerners found themselves caught up, written from the empathetic perspective of an articulate writer who was herself a white Southerner. Smith was not a defender of segregation, however. She saw the world as a place where all its children should be able to play together, and grow together, as equals. But she understood intimately the dilemma with which white Southerners lived. It is this rare but necessary perspective that Wallis' writing seems to lack. In his engaging "My Story" in the opening pages of chapter 1, Wallis reveals how it was that he gained a sympathetic perspective of African Americans; but evidently he never was able to get beyond his anger to the place of developing a similarly sympathetic or empathetic perspective of the white, racially- and socially-unengaged Christianity that he rejected. Consequently-â "or so it seems to me-â "that same anger, unresolved, pervades and weakens his ability to communicate effectively with the audience he most hopes to reach with this book: That would be white America, and particularly the white Evangelical Christian America in which he grew up (xxiii; 3-4, 62). Following are some of the specific problems I had with this book.1.

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