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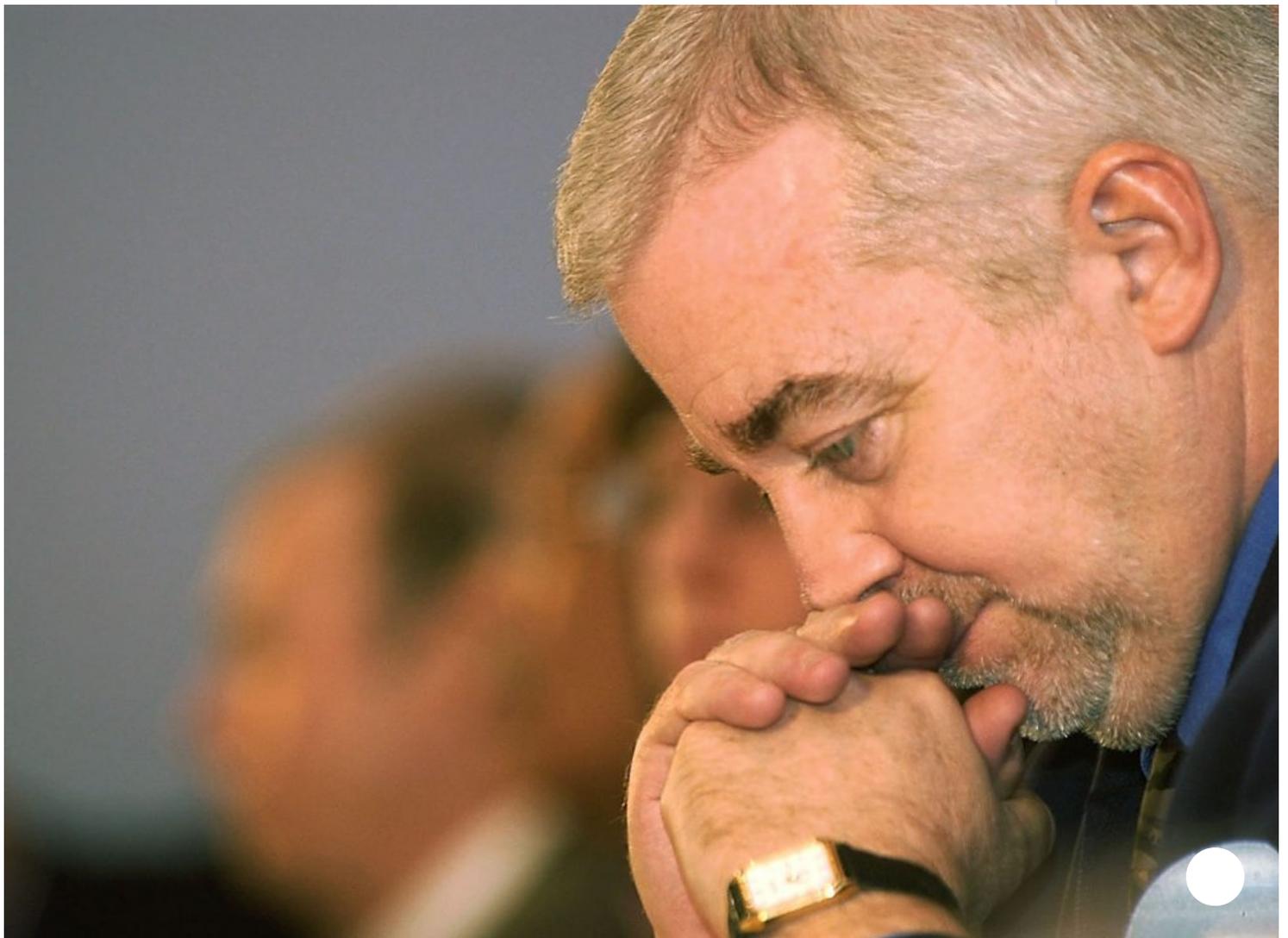
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Here & Now

# Jim Wallis Calls On White Christians To Act 'More Christian Than White'

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Jim Wallis, pictured here in 2003, is president and founder of the Christian social justice group Sojourners. (Graeme Robertson/Getty Images)

The leader of the Christian social justice group Sojourners says the young black Americans who have been killed by police are victims of deep, structural racial sins that go back to the founding fathers.

**Jim Wallis** argues that in response to this, white Christians need to act more Christian than white. Wallis also says this issue is part of the 2016 election cycle, in which the leading GOP candidates are not taking the Black Lives Matter movement seriously.

Wallis discusses this, as well as his new book, "America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America," with *Here & Now's* Robin Young.

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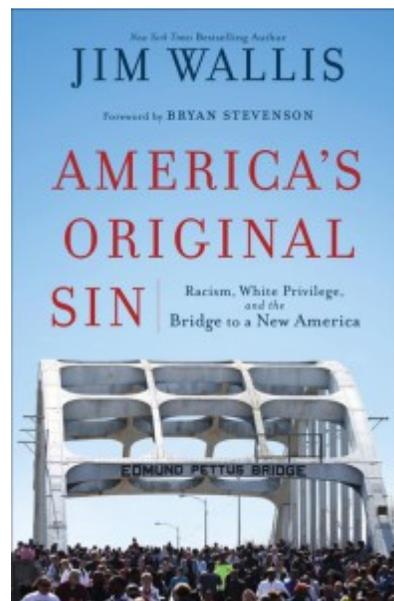
## Book Excerpt: 'America's Original Sin'

*By Jim Wallis*

### **You Will Know the Truth, and the Truth Will Set You Free**

In John 8:32, Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,”[1] which is one of those moral statements that breaks through the confusion and chaos of our lives.

Untruths that we believe are able to control us, dominate us, and set us on the wrong path. Untruths are burdens to bear and can even be



idols that hold us captive—not allowing us to be free people who understand ourselves and the world truthfully.

The families of the Charleston victims have spoken grace and truth, and their example could inspire us to acknowledge and change the truths about race in America. Their grace will test the integrity of our truth and our response. Will we seek, tell, and respond to the truth as we go deeper in our needed new national conversation and action on racism in America?

For example, we have seen and heard painful revelations about how police—and, even more systematically, the criminal justice system—too often mistreat young men and women of color. These revelations are classic examples of how we handle truth questions. What is true, what is right, what holds us captive, and what can set all of us free?

What happened in these incidents? And are they *just* “incidents,” or is there a pattern here? Is there really just one criminal justice system for all of us—equally—or are there actually different systems for white Americans and for Americans of color? Can we look at that truthfully?

Are we hiding behind untruths that help make us feel more comfortable, or are we willing to seek the truth, even if that is uncomfortable? The Gospel text cited above is telling us that only by seeking the truth are we made *free*, and that hanging on to untruths can keep us *captive* to comfortable illusions.

And if the untruths are, more deeply, *idols*, they also separate us from God—which is, obviously, highly important for those of us who are people of faith.

The title of this book, *America's Original Sin*, is itself unsettling and, for many, provocative. We first used the phrase in a 1987 cover story for *Sojourners* magazine. The language of “America’s original sin” helped me understand that the historical racism against America’s Indigenous people and enslaved Africans was indeed a *sin*, and one upon which this country was founded.

This helps to explain a lot, because if we are able to recognize that the sin still lingers, we can better understand issues before us today and deal with them more deeply, honestly, and even spiritually—which is essential if we are to make progress toward real solutions.

New York City police commissioner William Bratton acknowledged at a church breakfast in 2014 the negative role of police against African Americans throughout American history. “Many of the worst parts of black history would have been impossible without police,” Bratton said.[2] You can imagine my surprise when he then used the language of original sin: “Slavery, our country’s *original sin*, sat on a foundation codified by laws enforced by police, by slave-catchers.”[3] Bratton is no theologian or liberal academic but rather an experienced, knowledgeable, and tough cop. In fact, Bratton has been a controversial figure in New York, coming under fire for his “broken windows” policing strategy that focuses on aggressively targeting low-level offenses in order to deter more serious crime—a strategy that many say disproportionately affects people of color.[4]

Bratton reminded fellow New Yorkers that the colonial founder of New York City, the Dutchman Peter Stuyvesant, was a supporter of the slavery system and created a police force to enforce and protect it. “Since then,” said the commissioner, “the stories of police and black citizens have been intertwined again and again.”[5] He called the role of the NYPD sometimes “corrosive” in race relations. Bratton was talking about how the “original sin” has lingered in our criminal justice system, which is a reality that many people of color experience.

I agree with Commissioner Bratton that telling the truth about America’s original sin is the best way to deal with it and ultimately be free of it. That makes moral and practical sense. Yet the truth of systemic injustice in the past and present must also compel us to *action*. It remains to be seen whether Bratton’s acknowledgment of the historical issues translates into a commitment to real and ongoing reforms in how his police do their jobs.

I wrote this book to talk honestly about America's original sin and how it still lingers in our criminal justice system and too many other areas of American life. To treat these issues as sin—which can be repented of and changed—is a deeper, more effective way to solve these problems than just seeing them as political issues in an illusory “postracial” America.

The painful and combustible connection between poverty, crime, and hopelessness is another of our lingering national sins. Joblessness leads to hopelessness; if we don't do a better job of educating *all* our children, they will struggle to find decent jobs, and without education and jobs it's very hard to build the strong families that all humans so critically need.

I am often puzzled by the question that some middle-class white people ask when they see protests about economic inequality and unequal criminal justice. The question, asked directly or indirectly, usually seems to be, “What do they want?” And the “they” always implies people of color.

The best answer I've heard lately to that question came from a young black man I met in Ferguson, Missouri. He said, “What do I want? I want an education, a job, and a family.” Well, that's what my two boys want, and that's what I want for them—it's what all parents want for their kids. And the undeniable fact is that those who are being *left out* without an education, a job, and a family are overwhelmingly people of color in America, black and Native Americans most of all—that's the strongest proof of the lingering power of America's original sin.

Recessions and recoveries come and go, while whole communities of people are left behind, never enjoying “recovery,” in predominantly black and brown neighborhoods across the country. Law enforcement is then expected to control or at least contain the predictable outcomes of poverty's chaos, pain, anger, and hopelessness in those black and brown neighborhoods, while the rest of us evade our responsibility to end that poverty and hopelessness.

Our criminal justice system just can't control the results of such poverty, even when it militarizes to do so. Add to that mix the clear racial bias of too many police officers, departments, and *cultures*, and you get the explosive and even deadly results that we have witnessed across the nation. These are more than merely social issues; these are spiritual issues that speak to the lingering and, yes, *evil power* of America's original sin. Sin can be repented of and changed, but only when we acknowledge it for what it is.

One of the most central lingering sins that I focus on in this book is white privilege. I am a white man in America, and I write this book as a white male, a white dad, and a white Christian. For most of my adult life I lived in low-income neighborhoods that have been predominantly black. Confrontation with white racism in my childhood in Detroit and in white churches has been the primary converting experience in my own faith history. It set me on a path that has defined my understanding of faith ever since—a story this book lays out. Allies and companions in black churches and communities have been principal shapers of my direction and vocation.

But no matter where you go as a white person in American society, no matter where you live, no matter who your friends and allies are, and no matter what you do to help overcome racism, you can never escape white privilege in America if you are white. I benefit from white privilege (and male privilege as well) every single day, and I don't have any more say in that than black men and women who experience the opposite. What white responsibility means, in the face of these benefits, is a central theme of my book.

I wrote this book because I believe truth-telling about America's original sin of racism must not be left to people of color alone. Crossing the bridge to a new America will be a multiracial task and vocation.

As I have talked with black friends about this book, especially with black parents, the line that has elicited the most response is this one: "If white Christians acted more Christian than white, black parents would have less to

fear for their children.” Some of their reactions have been, “Are you really going to say that?” “Oh my, what are white Christians going to say about that?” “That’s going to stir things up!” And, “You’re going to need some of us to have your back on this one.” Do I think white people and white Christians can hear this? I truly hope so. And if we can, I believe we might see a new day in our churches and help the nation move to a different kind of future.

Policing isn’t our only issue, nor are the systemic reforms our criminal justice practices need. So this book is also a *primer* on the underlying racism that still exists in America and that lies beneath the deep tensions related to the police killings that have recently refocused the nation’s attention. We will try to look truthfully at underlying racial injustices, misunderstandings, and conflicts that continue to hold us back from being the country we can and should be. We will look at these crucial questions both structurally and spiritually. The book also describes how a new generation, of all races, is ready to deal with America’s original sin in new and hopeful ways.

In the following pages we will take a positive, hopeful, and forwardlooking approach. We will talk about what it means to “repent” of our original sin—and repentance means more than just saying you’re sorry. It means turning in a new and better direction, which I believe we can do. We look backward in order to look forward. And this book makes a spiritual statement: our racial diversity and social pluralism are a great strength and a gift for our future, because our *primary* identity is as the children of God—all of us are created in God’s image. Thinking about ourselves in that deeper way helps us to sort out a lot of things.

So what can the truth do for us?

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *defensive*? I think we can do better than that.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *dishonest*? I don't think we want to keep doing that.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *deceptive*? We've seen way too much of that from public officials, and many people are now calling for accountability.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *bitter*? That just makes us miserable, and miserable to live with.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *angry*? Anger can be a positive thing, but only if it is channeled toward constructive change and gives us energy instead of hatred. We can eventually move beyond that too.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *free*. I truly believe that would be the best thing for all of us.

To become more *free* because of the truth.

To become more *honest* because of the truth.

To become more *responsible* because of the truth.

To become *better neighbors* because of the truth.

To become more *productive and contributing citizens* because of the truth.

To become *better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, people of other faiths, or people of conscience with no religion*—all better because of the truth.

To become a *better and freer country for all of us* because of the truth.

And a big issue for me, as the father of two teenage boys, is how we can all become *better parents who are more supportive of other parents* because of the

truth.

Finally, to *become better and freer human beings* because of the truth. I think that's what Jesus was getting at in the Gospel passage.

We can no longer be afraid of the truth about race in this country—past, present, and future—because our fears will keep us captive to all kinds of untruths.

This book is about how to find the truth together in these difficult, challenging, and complicated matters of race in America.

We will try to answer the question Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. named in the title of his last book, released just months before we lost him: *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* A new generation will answer that question for a new time.

I crossed the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on the fiftieth anniversary of the historic march that helped bring voting rights to all our fellow citizens. It was then I realized that the answers to these questions will be found in crossing another bridge—the bridge to a new America that will soon be a majority of minorities. This book seeks to describe that new bridge and how we and our children can cross it together.

We need to better understand the past so we can cross the bridge to a new, freer American future where our growing diversity is experienced as a great benefit and not as a great threat. I hope you will take this book as an invitation—to explore the truth of America's racial past, present, and hopeful future so that, yes, together, we might all become more free, our congregations more faithful, and the state of our union “more perfect.”

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

[1] The New International Version (NIV) uses the wording “the truth will *set* you free.” I use the two wordings interchangeably for the purposes of this introduction.

[2] Ross Barkan, “Bratton: Police Made Worst Moments of Black History Possible,” *Observer*, February 24, 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/02/bratton-worst-parts-of-black-history-wouldnt-have-been-possible-without-cops/>.

[3] *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

[4] Christopher Mathias, “Bratton Says Police to Blame for ‘Worst Parts’ of Black History, but

Reform Advocates Are Unimpressed,” *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/24/william-bratton-nypd-slavery-history-broken-windows\\_n\\_6746906.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/24/william-bratton-nypd-slavery-history-broken-windows_n_6746906.html).

[5] Barkan, “Police Made Worst Moments.”

*Excerpt from America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America (Brazos Press). Copyright Jim Wallis.*

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## Guest

- **Jim Wallis**, president and founder of Sojourners. His latest book is “America’s Original Sin: Racism , White Privilege and The Bridge to A New America.” He tweets @jimwallis.

*This segment aired on March 3, 2016.*

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