

2017

## America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America

Emily L. Callon  
*Messiah College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Callon, Emily L. (2017) "America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 16 : No. 16 , Article 7.

Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth/vol16/iss16/7](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol16/iss16/7)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).



*America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America.*

Wallis, J., 2016  
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press

Reviewed by Emily L. Callon

72

Numerous books have been written under the broad canopy of “diversity” in higher education, including but not limited to, addressing microaggressions, educating underrepresented student populations, and nurturing inclusive campus environments. In *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, author Jim Wallis helps readers understand the complexities of diversity in a succinct analysis of the foundational issues. His central argument is that the way to break the cycle of racism is “by telling the truth about our history and genuinely repenting of its sins, which still linger, [and then] we can find the true road to justice and reconciliation” (p. 10). Toward this end, Wallis focuses on historical and current contexts, the importance of repenting of the sins of racism, and finding a way to move forward. Although applicable in numerous settings, *America's Original Sin* is a necessary read for educators in Christian higher education.

Wallis begins by discussing our nation's history and current context in regards to issues of racism. He says,

American diversity began with acts of violent racial oppression that I am calling “America’s original sin”—the theft of land from Indigenous people ... and the enslavement of millions of Africans who became America’s greatest economic resource—in building a new nation. (p. 9).

It is more common to think about the concept of “racism” as a tangible and specific act of discrimination—and it is, such as the 2014 shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. However, racism is also embedded in various systems, such as the criminal justice system, and is evident in the context of current events, including the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore. While visiting these cities, Wallis saw numerous community members emerge as leaders from the community and recognized their transformation as impactful in ending the systematic cycle of racism. He says, “I realized America would be converted by these young people’s honest and earnest conversation—they would clearly win a national debate about our criminal justice system’s response to young people of color—if the nation could really see and hear them” (p. 25). What if colleges and universities were empowering students to have honest and earnest conversation and equipping students to be transformational leaders?

Wallis believes that the answer to addressing racism is authentic repentance. Repentance, he argues, is “more than just saying you’re sorry, or even just feeling guilty” (p. 57), but rather “about turning completely around and going in a whole new direction” (p. 58). Wallis highlights five obstacles that must be overcome in order to truly repent. First, one must become aware of the idea of “whiteness” or white privilege, which is “often unconscious” (p. 79) or seen as “normal,” and can easily “become more about how we help people who are black and brown than how we confront our own white racial privilege” (p. 79). The second obstacle is the need for a welcoming community, or as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. describes it, “the beloved community” (p. 97) which offers “a most powerful vision of new coming together” and a space in which “every group, clan, and tribe is included and invited in” (p. 97). The third obstacle exists within our criminal justice system, in which Wallis describes the police culture as functioning like “warriors [whose] mission is to conquer” instead of “guardians [whose] mission is to ‘serve and protect’” (p. 127). The fourth obstacle is overcoming the “New Jim Crow” in order to embrace “restorative justice.” The “New Jim Crow” is the crisis of mass incarceration in the country, often a result of racial profiling and “stop-and-frisk” laws (p. 156-160). Embracing restorative justice

means focusing on “repairing the harm caused by crime” (p. 164). And finally, the fifth obstacle is the biblical charge to accept immigrants, and those who have been alienated and are seeking refuge. These immigrants are “people [who] take very risky and illegal journeys across borders ... all in an often-desperate attempt to find a better life” (p. 168). Wallis suggests that these five obstacles currently stand in the way of the nation’s ability to move forward toward repentance.

Wallis asserts that “we look back in order to look forward” (p. xxiii). The nation’s history of racism is the platform that must launch it into repentance. The nation is shifting and “by the year 2045, the majority of US citizens will be descended from African, Asian, and Latin American ancestors,” meaning that “the United States will no longer be a dominant white nation but a multiracial nation, which will make the assumptions of white privilege ... increasingly less assumed” (p. 188-189). With such a major change, “the question becomes, who will help navigate this fundamental demographic change?” (p. 189). Colleges and universities can empower students to be leading members in a shifting society as the nation moves toward a deeper understanding of ethnic diversity.

Wallis’ book is a necessary resource for those in Christian higher education. Institutions are key players in a national shift as they continue to respond to an evolving global context, one in which institutions should “accommodate diversity, for diversity is clearly our present and our future” (Smith, 2009, p. 3). As colleges and universities seek to integrate diversity into core mission and identity, it is important to remember that there are clear “educational benefits of diversity” and that building “institutional capacity” for diversity is a process (Smith, 2009, p. 178). Institutions must fulfill their role in a national shift toward acceptance, repentance, and reconciliation. To do so, they must recognize that they too are a product of systematic racism, living in the same context with the rest of the nation, built upon this original sin. As such, institutions must first recognize the barriers they face, and then identify the ways in which the college or university can strategically work to deconstruct them. Only then can higher education be a pivotal space in transforming the minds of students and be able to educate them on how they too can dismantle racism and truly repent. Colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to empower young people to be leaders that are seen and heard, similar to the young people Wallis noticed through the events in Ferguson and Baltimore, but they must first be able to recognize these barriers in their own system.

Christian colleges and universities are called to a deeper sense of reconciliation; Wallis highlights this calling by using the language of “sin”

to describe racial discrimination as “something that seeks to undermine the very creation of human beings as being equally valued, loved, and cared for in the eyes of God” (p. 104). Wallis says that “when racism is tolerated, the reconciling work of Christ on the cross is contradicted” (p. 125). In order to empower students of faith, there must be a call to action from Student Affairs professionals in Christian institutions. These educators have the opportunity to foster open and honest dialogue around issues of racial segregation, tension, and discrimination—to truly deconstruct and move forward out of sin. In the end, *America’s Original Sin* is a jarring but truthful call for Student Affairs professionals to educate, empower, and equip students to do the hard but crucial work of reconciliation.

***Emily L. Callon will complete her Master of Arts in Higher Education with an emphasis in Strategic Leadership from Messiah College in May 2017.***

#### References

Smith, D. G. (2009). *Diversity’s promise for higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.