
When the philosophes attacked Christianity in the eighteenth century, they did so quite fearlessly: they disputed the Biblical narrative, they rejected the divinity of Christ, they mocked the Gospel stories, and they levied withering attacks on the clergy. Many a Catholic, including men such as Alexis de Tocqueville, never quite recovered the faith that these soi-distant intellectuals ruined.

Modern opponents of the Church like to fancy themselves courageous critics of a powerful institution, but they are in no way as bold in their challenge to the institutions of Christendom. And the Catholic Church of today is in no way the same sort of temporal powerhouse that it was in eighteenth-century France. For all their protestations of courage and speaking-truth-to-power, these critics are like Tolkien’s character Wormtongue, who undermined the good by deception and guile rather than direct attack.

Papal Sin is aptly subtitled “Structures of Deceit.” Wills sets out to cast himself in the mold of St. Catherine of Sienna and others who spoke fearlessly for the right and against wrong, even when it meant challenging the Pope himself. But Wills is no St. Catherine, and his book is no revelation: it is an exercise in deception.

Wills presents the book as an exposure of “dishonesties” in the Church, especially in the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II. The first type are what he calls “historical dishonesties,” which he claims include the question of the Church and the Holocaust, controversies about St. Maximillian Kolbe and Blessed Edith Stein, and a nebulous charge of anti-Semitism in the institutional Church. The second type are what he calls “doctrinal dishonesties,” including Wills’s disputing of *Humanae Vitae*, the non-ordination of women, birth control, abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality, and the status of the Blessed Mother. In short, the book is about the usual suspects in liberal and secular attacks on the Church.

For all Wills’s claims, however, the book is deceitful and unconvincing. It is also a textbook example of bad scholarship, weak reasoning, assignment of blame by innuendo, and other intellectual wrongs that a well-educated man such as Garry Wills knows better than to commit. A few examples will be sufficient to demonstrate how badly flawed this book is and why it is not worth the time of someone who wants to understand the Catholic Church, the papacy, or good scholarship.
First, Wills commits the error of conflation. He frequently conflates bad judgment by individuals with what he considers to be doctrinal or dogmatic errors made by the Church. For example, discussing the very serious issue of pedophilia committed by some priests, he conflates misjudgments by individual bishops and authorities with some kind of systematic tolerance of pedophilia that is somehow supposed to be linked to official Church teaching on the nature of sex. It is a miasma of bad reasoning.

Next, he relies on second-hand slurs and condemnations to do his dirty work. One victim is Pope St. Pius X, whom Wills charges “instituted a crackdown that has been called a form of theological McCarthyism . . .” (44). Amazingly, Wills does not see the irony in using “McCarthyite” tactics to denounce “McCarthyism.” Another victim is St. Maximilian Kolbe, who he tells the reader was denounced by Commonweal (!) as an anti-Semite and a believer in “the existence of a Communist-Freemason-Zionist conspiracy to subvert and destroy Christianity” (61). There is little courage in such attacks.

Third, Wills assigns guilt by association and doubt. This technique is employed throughout his attacks on Popes, ordinaries, and saints, but is most viciously carried out against John Paul II. Consider this sentence, taken from the discussion of St. Maximillian Kolbe cited above: “Karol Wojtyla was never an anti-Semite in any sense; but he shared Kolbe’s ardent devotion to the Immaculate Conception, and personally admired the undoubted heroism of Kolbe’s death” (61). As far as I can determine, this is the only case by a self-proclaimed Catholic in which devotion to the Immaculate Conception and admiration of a saint have been linked to anti-Semitism. This attack is one of the most deceptive in the book: at first glance, it seems to be a back-handed compliment; upon closer examination, however, it is clearly meant to chain the Holy Father to everything that Wills finds unacceptable in Fr. Kolbe’s life and thought.

The entire book is reminiscent of an old line among believers about self-righteousness: here is someone claiming to be more Catholic than the Pope. Here is the essence of what Wills is truly about: he is trying to paint a picture of what Catholicism really ought to stand for: abortion, artificial birth control, celebration of homosexual love, women priests.

To accomplish this task, he uses techniques that he has employed in other books. One is the close and careful misreading of a subject (in this case, St. Augustine), which he then employs as a club against his adversaries. Throughout this work, Wills wields an interpretation of Augustine (seldom a quotation) as evidence to knock down what a recent Pope has held to be the true teaching of the Church. Wills does this so often that Papal Sin becomes an exercise in a kind of Augustinolatry which the saint himself would reject. Another Wills tactic is to bring in details when convenient, but paint in very
broad strokes when more concrete examples would not support his claims. For example, his portrayal of the history of Church teaching on contraception misrepresents the facts in such a way that the reader is left thinking that the traditional Christian objections to artificial birth control (shared by all Christian denominations until the 20th century) are a fairly modern innovation. Finally, Wills likes to make grand claims without citations. Throughout the book, crucial arguments, assumptions, and “facts” are laid out without any supporting structure of evidence.

The structures of deceit are clearly the arguments of this book. It is hardly worth the time that a reader will spend on it, except as it may be important for Catholic social scientists to know what to say when confronted by friends and colleagues who have been misled by Wills’s misrepresentations.

Ryan J. Barilleaux
Miami University Ohio


Nearing sixty years of priestly service, Monsignor George Kelly has seen and heard it all. Well . . . almost all. He has certainly lived to tell a lot of what he has seen and heard. I am referring of course to his published volumes, among which The Battle for American Church (1979) is probably the best known. The illustrious New York priest revisited this topic in 1995. Decades earlier, there were his volumes on marriage and family life. In due course, we also received from the hand of Msgr. Kelly books like Who Should Run the Catholic Church? (1976), Keeping the Church Catholic with John Paul II (1990), and even an autobiography with the title Inside My Father’s House (1989).

The irrepressible Msgr. Kelly had to sit still and listen in April of 1999 to others tell what they had seen and heard when Msgr. Michael Wrenn convened a colloquium in honor of his friend. To mark this occasion, Christendom Press has produced Keeping Faith (2000), edited by Patrick Riley. The book features eight essay-length contributions from scholars in fields which Msgr. Kelly has written about, and several shorter pieces from distinguished academics and a letter and tribute from the now deceased John Cardinal O’Connor.

Some years ago (1983), Msgr. Kelly published The New Biblical Theorists: Raymond Brown and Beyond in which he took issue with exegetes whose exclusive reliance on the historical critical method had cast doubt in the minds of the faithful on many key doctrines of the Faith and their biblical