

Misinterpretations and Half-Truths

JAMES PEREIRO

Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit, by
Garry Wills, *New York: Doubleday,*
2000. 326 pp.

GARRY WILLS EVIDENTLY considers himself part of the long tradition of Christian iconography in which popes and bishops are thrown into hell in the company of murderers, heretics, fornicators and adulterers, sowers of discord, sodomites, and many other offenders. Wills seems to have done away with some of the traditional circles of hell, while enlarging those reserved for clerical sins, and in particular that of culpable distortion of the truth. Today's papal sin, Wills thinks, consists in having surrounded the papacy with structures of deceit from which it seems unable to extricate itself, in order to maintain the fiction that popes cannot err or deceive.

The first victim of such an effort, according to Wills, is the truth that frees. And Wills's list of freeing truths—kept from a church in sore need of their proclamation, if she is ever to come out of her present crisis—includes the following familiar items: contraception and abortion are right, and so is homosexuality; clerical celibacy should go; the priesthood should not be restricted to men—indeed, it should not be restricted to priests, “magicians of the eucharistic

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transformation.” The first two sections of *Papal Sin* try to unravel the “lies” imprisoning these “truths.”

The last two sections of the book are devoted to Acton, Newman, and Augustine, and to their efforts in defense of truth. Wills, an established historian with some fine works to his credit, holds Lord Acton in admiration on account of his historical scholarship and intellectual honesty. For Acton, the nineteenth century marked the dawn of scientific history, and he thought that the new scientific method could preserve history from contamination by prejudice or party spirit. This was a welcome development; for the historian, according to Acton, fulfils a vital mission in society, and his role within the Church is no less important. God's revelation is a historical fact, and it is history's role to glean revealed truth from the historical records that contain it.

Many of Acton's contemporaries did not share his optimism; few would profess it today. “Scientific history” has produced arguments without end. It has also proved how difficult it is to determine to which extent the reader hears the voice of the past speaking, or that of the historian, when the later interprets the fragmentary records of other times. And, when it came to interpreting God's revelation, the appeal from the authority of the Church to the authority of history demanded an act of faith that few were ready to make—even when it was supported by the historian's claim to semi-infallibility. Have historians been promised divine assistance in the exercise of their supreme magisterium? Is the act of faith to follow the meandering course of revisionism and counter-revisionism or to oscillate between the contrasting interpretations of the available records? Wills is not afflicted by these or similar scruples, even in the presence of the various hypotheses suggested by scriptural scholarship.

Paradoxically, the circle of Döllinger and Acton produced one of the best examples of how prejudiced and partial “scientific history” might be. Alarmed by the calls for the definition of papal infallibility on the eve of Vatican Council I, they set themselves the task of disproving it from church history. The fruit of their labours—*The Pope and the Council*, by “Janus”—is richly interwoven with misrepresentations and half-truths. Unfortunately, Wills shows himself to be a spiritual heir to “Janus.” For example, he mentions at the beginning of the book that few people are familiar with the fact that Acton’s famous statement “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely” had been written in criticism of a fellow historian’s book on the Renaissance popes: the author had let them literally get away with murder. What Wills does *not* say is that the historian in question was a Protestant, and Wills’s silence reinforces the intended message of his book.

The first section of *Papal Sin*, “Historical Dishonesties,” focuses on the historical treatment of the Jewish question and the Holocaust. Here Wills relies heavily on the scholarly non-credentials of Kenneth Woodward’s *Making Saints* (1990) and John Cornwell’s *Hitler’s Pope* (1999), and, on those authorities, he condemns Pius XII’s attitude to the Holocaust. In Wills’s court there is neither room for the defense nor leave to appeal. The twelve volumes of documents of the Holy See relative to World War II (published between 1965 and 1981) are not even mentioned; nor is the one-volume summary prepared by one of the historians involved in their publication. Wills, however, had already absolved himself in the Introduction from these sins of omission: The deceivers have deceived themselves, and they are sincere in their adherence to falsehood; their willed ignorance disqualifies them from serious exchanges with their peers; and so, pre-

sumably, their work does not need to be discussed—or even mentioned.

Christians may have much to regret in the history of their relations with the Jewish people, but this regret will have to be founded on a more dispassionate and solid scholarship than that of Cornwell or of Wills. The work of the joint Catholic-Jewish panel of historians is to be welcomed in this respect. Their study of the twelve volumes of documents—their original brief—still leaves unanswered questions and these require new archival research. It is to be hoped that, once the present round of accusations and counter-accusations is over, a formula may be found in order to make possible the continuation of this project.

Within the framework of Catholic-Jewish relations Wills quotes with relish a survey carried out by the University of Berkeley, which seemed to indicate that orthodox Christian beliefs are a powerful predictor of anti-semitism: the more a person subscribes to those beliefs the greater the anti-semitism. This is a truly damning connection—if it were true. It might come as a surprise, then, for Wills to discover that Cardinal Manning, defender of “ultra-orthodoxy” and of papal infallibility in Vatican I, was also as determined in his defense of the Jews, whom he sincerely praised for their human achievements and their promotion of charitable works.

When it comes to theology, Wills looks for guidance to Newman and Augustine. But this does not prevent him from ignoring fundamental aspects of Newman’s thought, and in particular his doctrines of tradition and development. Acton himself did not subscribe to Newman’s theory of development, and feared that it could be used to justify the definition of infallibility. As a matter of fact, Newman had used it in 1845 in precisely that way: The powers and roles of Pope and bishops, although divinely bestowed, had been more or less dormant, and, in the course

of time, first the power of the bishop displayed itself, and then the power of the Pope, as circumstances demanded their exercise. In 1868 Newman surprised his friend Flanagan with the confession that he had always held, as a matter of theological opinion, the infallibility of the Pope, although he considered its definition premature and inopportune. However, Newman's description of the Infallibilists as the "aggressive party" ignored the fact that both Infallibilists and Inopportunist used some questionable tactics to promote their aims. Acton, for example, tried to recruit the British and other governments to exert external pressure on the Council to prevent the definition. Besides, it can hardly be considered a sin on the part of the majority not to allow themselves to be dictated by a minority which did not even dispute the truth of the doctrine in question.

Wills's book becomes hard reading when it comes to the "Modern Dishonesties"—subjects like contraception, women priests, celibacy, homosexuality. The author thinks that all of these are bound eventually to become part of Catholic doctrine, and if they have not yet been accepted it is simply because of the perverse influence of those intent on preserving the lie which Wills is intent on unmasking. Unfortunately, the level of the argument is such that it requires considerable endurance to go through it without putting the book away in despair. One example may suffice. When dealing with women and the priesthood Wills concedes that the apostles were all men. However, are we to say that all priests must be converted Jews? Are they all to speak Aramaic? Women were censored out of the Last Supper, as unworthy to be at the creation of the Mass; every ministry was exercised by men and women in the early Church, and therefore Paul's pastoral letters, with their requirement that bishops be men, must necessarily be post-Pauline; and so

on.

The limitations of Wills's book (which include some glaring historical errors) would make it easy to dismiss it outright. It would be a mistake, nevertheless, not to address some of the issues he raises. In his introduction Wills points to what he considers the dilemma of many priests: "How can one be in service to others, yet peddle to them 'religious truths' whose truthfulness rings so obviously hollow?" He sees their silence as honesty; in a good number of cases it might perhaps be more correct to speak of ignorance and confusion, either imposed or self-inflicted. Catholic theologians may share part of the blame: some have undermined the foundations of dogmatic truth, while others have tried to defend the indefensible, or to defend truths with inadequate arguments which did not reach the mark. The sixteenth-century Spanish Dominican and theologian Melchior Cano shook his head at those he saw working strenu-

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ously to defend, as proper and certain demonstrations, reasons which St Thomas presented merely to explain the faith congruently or to clarify a particular teaching by analogy. St. Thomas himself described as “enemies of the faith” those attempts at demonstration by untenable arguments, providing unbelievers with an occasion for laughing at Christians and thinking that these were their reasons for believing the things of faith.

Wills would not have escaped Aquinas’s or Cano’s criticism. *Inter Insigniores*, the document on women and the priesthood, tried to explain why Christ ordained only men. It must be granted that Christ must have had a reason; even more, it must have been a very good one not to confer the sacrament of holy orders on the holiest person who has ever been on earth, his mother; and *Inter Insigniores* tried to offer possible arguments to explain why he might have acted so. Wills attacks those arguments as if they were the very foundations of the doctrine.

In a similar vein, Wills dwells at length on the fact that different arguments may be used at different times to support a given doctrine, whether this be women and the priesthood or contraception. This, however, is something to be expected, as each particular generation strives to understand the contents of the faith, and of Christian morality, handed down to them. Their arguments, inevitably, are marked by the particular ideas of the period; some arguments will prove their worth against the test of time, while others will be left behind with the conceptions on which they were based. The doctrine in question was not born of those arguments, nor does it depend on them for its existence or validation. As Newman put it, the act of faith springs from a different source: “I believe whatever has been and whatever shall be defined as revelation by the Church who is the organ of the revelation.”

Clearly these words do not answer Wills’s basic question: What is the church Newman is talking about? Wills’s own answer can be perceived from among the muddled mass of argument. There was a time when Wills, and those who shared his ideas, took hope in the expectation of the “last word” of the church’s magisterium on contraception, women priests and the like. But that “last word” seemed never to arrive, as declaration after declaration reaffirmed traditional doctrine. Eventually, they lost hope in the magisterium and discovered that their hopes had been misplaced all the while. The church’s magisterium was imprisoned in structures of deceit from which it could not break out. Hope is in the people: “We are the Church,” *Vox populi vox Dei*. And here, Wills, as is so often the case, is partly right and mostly wrong. Vatican II affirmed that the whole body of the faithful cannot err when they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. And it added that this *sensus fidelium* is to be found in the whole community of the faithful—priest, religious, and laity—not just in one of the elements of the people of God separate from the others.

Wills’s model for the Catholic Church seems to be one in which the congregation provides for its own ministers, and is the source of their and the bishops’ authority; where doctrine is defined by majority vote, and where opinion polls are the encyclicals of the new Church’s magisterium. Wills has no doubts about their soundness, as they seem to teach most of the articles of his creed or agenda. But this is not a new agenda; it was drawn long ago by the prophets of a new dawn of truth and freedom for the Catholic Church, after the darkness and Babylonian captivity of almost two millennia. It remains that, an agenda. The frustration and the anger of those who feel denied entrance into the “Promised Land” show through the pages of this book.