

# How the Popes Fought Modernity With 'Structures of Deceit'

*A Catholic Writer Attacks the Papacy*

**Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit**  
By Garry Wills  
Doubleday, 326 pages, \$25.

By ALLAN NADLER

**W**hen truth lies blatant on the doorstep, the instinct is to lock oneself in behind the door and never look out. This is nothing less than imprisonment in the dark, done in feigned service to the Light of the World," Garry Wills concludes the chapter titled "Toward the Holocaust" in his astonishing new book, "Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit." The person depicted as hiding in darkness from the truth is no less than Pope Pius IX, one of the "papal sinners" to whom Mr. Wills returns again and again in this blistering polemic against the Catholic Church. In this particular chapter, Pius IX is indicted for his stubbornness, cruelty and dishonesty in the affair surrounding the 1858 kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, a 6-year-old Jewish boy from

Bologna who had been baptized by his pious Catholic nanny. Pius's consistent refusal to return the boy to his parents, his anti-Semitic reaction to the worldwide outcry that ensued and his portrayal of himself as a victim of international Jewish hatred of Christianity are described by Mr. Wills in disturbing detail as but one episode in Pius's megalomaniacal war against truth and modernity. Although Mr. Wills is particularly resentful of the reactionary Pius IX, most of the subsequent popes, including the current one, fare little better in this bitter book. According to Mr. Wills, there are two major arenas of papal deceitfulness: Jews and sex.

The book's first section is called "Historical Dishonesties," and all four of its chapters are concerned with the Vatican's treatment of the

Jews and its recent evasions of the ugly historical record. Mr. Wills takes a particularly dim view of "We Remember," the long-awaited "apology" for the Holocaust issued in 1998 by Pope John Paul II. Far from being an adequate expression of remorse for the Vatican's failure to help Jews during the Holocaust, "We Remember" is considered by Mr. Willis to be a twisted, if artful, attempt at vindicating the church and absolving Pope Pius XII, whose reign coincided with the rise of fascism and World War II, of any wrongdoing. Aside from the brief reprieve provided by the papacy of John XXIII, from 1958 to 1963, the church's record on the Jews has been primarily one of covering up or rationalizing the sins of the past and thus becoming ever more enmeshed in what Mr. Wills calls "structures of deceit."

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Mr. Wills argues that the current pope not only lies about the Vatican's behavior during the Holocaust, he is involved in an elaborate scheme on the part of the church to co-opt

the Jews' greatest catastrophe. The canonization of Edith Stein as a "martyr" — a category of sainthood that requires sacrificing one's life for the Catholic faith — is characterized by Mr. Wills as a deliberately dishonest usurpation of the Holocaust. The Nazis clearly sent Stein to Auschwitz because of her Jewish lineage, not because of her adopted Catholic faith. Yet Pope John Paul II would not let that deter him in his drive to sanctify her. As Mr. Wills points out, Stein's canonization led to a veritable culture of Catholic Holocaust usurpation, from the establishment of the Carmelite convent in Auschwitz to the campaign by Polish Catholics to plant crosses there. The effects on Jewish-Catholic relations have been disastrous. As a consequence of what Mr. Wills describes as "a determination to find in Edith Stein a Catholic victim of the Holocaust, no matter what structures of deceit had to be

# A Blistering Attack on Papal Dishonesty

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deployed to bring that off," Stein — much of whose life was devoted to the study and practice of empathy — became something she had fought against her entire life: "a cause of offense to her people."

From the historical dishonesty of the church's relationship with the Jewish people, Mr. Wills goes on to consider a wide array of "doctrinal dishonesties," most of which have to do with sexuality. These include Paul VI's "disastrous" 1964 encyclical, which banned all forms of contraception; the exclusion of women from the priesthood; the insistence on priestly celibacy; the refusal to confront the widespread problem of pedophilia in the priesthood; the deliberate blindness to the growing number of gay priests, and the heartlessly doctrinaire approach to abortion. Mr. Wills provides detailed, scholarly refutations of each of these official doctrines from the perspective of a believing Catholic. His

polemic against the Vatican's teachings is rooted in a thorough re-examination of the biblical texts on which they are supposedly based and aims to demonstrate that the church's

such as contraception and priestly celibacy, especially when that intransigence clearly widens the rift between the theology of the Vatican and the actual beliefs and practices of the vast majority of Catholics worldwide. Mr. Wills blames this trend on the pope he despises most, Pius IX. Pius was a man beleaguered by modernity, forced by the unification of the Italian states first to abandon Rome and ultimately to retreat to the Vatican, where he was "sealed" in 1870. Pius's response to the scientific and political developments of his day could hardly have been more reactionary. Rather than contend theologically with the radical changes confronting him, Pius raised his ramparts against the world, first by issuing the "Syllabus of Errors," and finally by declaring himself infallible. Mr. Wills particularly resents the doctrine of papal infallibility, viewing it as the source of most of the errors

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*Mr. Wills's polemic is rooted in the biblical texts the Vatican supposedly upholds.*

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insistence on upholding its traditions has more to do with refusing to admit error than with an honest reading of scripture.

Mr. Wills asks why the Catholic Church in modern times has become so intransigent on issues

and lies he documents. The legacy of Pius IX is the sequestering of both papacy and priesthood from the people, the inability to adapt to modern times and the compulsion to distort history and theology in order to maintain the immaculateness of the church.

Mr. Wills has written an important critique of the "infallible" papacy. He offers a compelling narrative of the sad development of Catholic orthodoxy in modern times and concludes with a passionate plea for renewed dedication to religious truth, based primarily on the writings of St. Augustine. Nonetheless, in his zeal to reform the church and cleanse it of its deceitfulness, Mr. Wills is often unfair. For example, his criticisms of the Vatican's recent writings and activities regarding the Jews, while generally well founded, completely ignore the many positive achievements of the papacy of John Paul II. Though deeply conservative and concerned with preserving the reputation of earlier popes, John Paul did manage to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel. He was the first pope to refer in any way to the historic crimes of Catholic believers against the Jews. Published in the immediate aftermath of the pope's watershed visit to Israel, which included tearful prayers at Yad Vashem and the Western Wall, Mr. Wills's polemic against this pope seems, to this Jew at least, too harsh and unforgiving.

That same harshness is often present in Mr. Wills's treatment of the church's doctrinal positions. His argument with the continued insistence on priestly celibacy reflects this imbalance. He maintains that the Western church's tradition of priestly celibacy was not entrenched until the fifth century and that the Gospels do not provide any compelling evidence that it is scripturally mandated. He then critically reviews the arguments presented in Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical "Priestly Celibacy," only to conclude his critique with this intemperate attack on the pope's intellectual honesty: "This parody of exegesis shows a profound disrespect for the revealed word itself. New Testament passages are twisted — omitted, distorted, perverted — to make them mean whatever the Pope wants them to mean." This point of view, he writes, transforms faithful Catholic priests into "intellectual eunuchs" who will "swallow anything — even disrespect for the Bible — in the name of respect for the papacy."

Unfortunately, Mr. Wills's indignation here, as elsewhere in this book, compromises his own judgment and intellectual honesty. He confuses forced biblical interpretations, aimed at upholding centuries-old traditions, with deliberate dishonesty. When the popes' reading of scripture is at odds with his own, Mr. Wills immediately hurls the accusation of deceit. But the truth he demands of his church is not nearly as simple and unambiguous as he might like. In Catholicism, truth is a mystery and the church is the embodiment of the mystical truth of Christ. It is a good thing that Mr. Wills did not write his book about the history of Jewish Bible interpretation. For, as any yeshiva student knows, the plain sense of the Torah often has little, if anything, to do with the way rabbinic Judaism is actually practiced. Religious customs and time-sanctified traditions have a life of their own and are often only retroactively justified by finding biblical proof-texts in their support. Whether Mr. Wills likes it or not, that is the organic way in which all scriptural religions have developed. Ironically, Mr. Wills's repeated insistence on perfect adherence to a literal biblical and Gospel "truth" occasionally makes him more of a fundamentalist than the church he so harshly condemns.