

Author puts some great minds to work

SAINTS VS. SCOUNDRELS: Debating Life's Greatest Questions

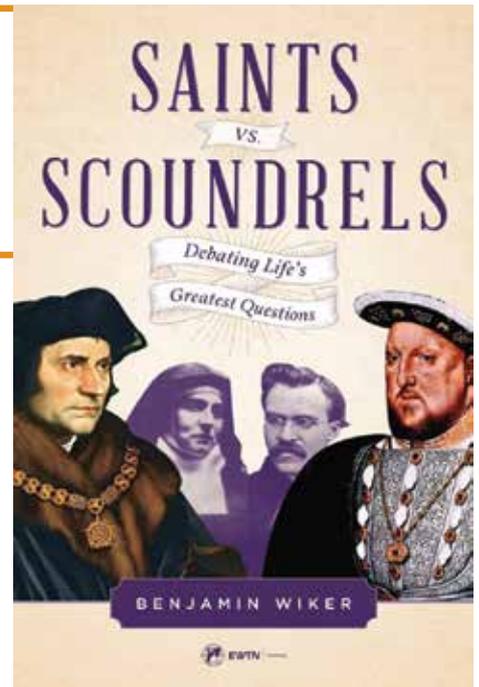
by Benjamin Wiker

EWTN Publishing, Irondale, Alabama

Paperback: 288 pages

Price: AUD\$39.95

Reviewed by Michael E. Daniel



Many people have converted to Catholicism because they have recognised that the Catholic Church is able to offer a meaningful and cogent response to the deep questions of life. However, throughout its history, but particularly in the last few centuries, many voices have been raised challenging the claims of Christianity.

The author, Benjamin Wiker, holds a PhD in Theological Ethics, and is the author of numerous books, including *10 Books That Screwed Up the World: And Five Others That Didn't Help* (2008) and co-author of *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God* (2008).

Wiker begins this volume by wondering what would happen if some of the Church's greatest thinkers entered into debate with some of the greatest critics of Catholic Christianity whose writings and thought have had a profound influence on modern culture. This book is based on a television series on EWTN in the United States; however, in book form, Wiker goes into greater depth in exploring certain ideas.

The first pair Wiker has engaging in a hypothetical debate is St Augustine and Rousseau. Much of Rousseau's thought and writings, in particular his *Confessions*, were written to counter the ideas of Augustine.

Rousseau denies belief in original sin by contending that humans in their natural state were virtuous; however, external social influences have made them bad. In their natural state, humans did not generally live in families as we

understand them, with men and women coupling only for reproduction. Rousseau also contended that morality is essentially what the ruling class believes to be right and wrong, and, that in a given society, the ruling class uses morality as a means of controlling and oppressing the population.

Wiker's Augustine challenges Rousseau by arguing that, as a result of original sin, human wrongdoing cannot be attributed only to external factors and forces. Instead, in understanding why humans act badly, one must begin by looking at humans themselves.

Furthermore, Wiker asserts that much of Rousseau's morality was the product of his upbringing, which he used to justify or validate his own self-centred behaviour. Having been abandoned by his widower father at a very young age, Rousseau in turn did not allow his partner to raise their children, but had them sent to a foundling institution, which had a reputation for high rates of mortality.

The next pair is St Francis and Machiavelli. Central to Machiavelli's thought is the idea that the end justifies the means; that is, one may do whatever it takes to gain and maintain power. Not surprisingly, the Machiavelli Wiker envisages has nothing but contempt for Francis of Assisi, who shunned power and prestige, instead imitating the humility of Jesus.

Another interesting debate is that between Nietzsche and Edith Stein. Nietzsche regarded Judaism and Christianity as purveyors of what he dubbed "slave morality", in which the good is

equated with otherworldliness, charity, and with their insistence on the care of the marginalised and vulnerable, and their ethics of service.

Nietzsche believed that "slave morality" was responsible for the problems inherent in Western civilisation. He wanted a return to "master morality", characterised by strength, wealth, and power. One can easily see the uses groups such as the Nazis made of this ideology, with Edith Stein being numbered among their victims.

One of the more amusing dialogues is that between Ayn Rand and Flannery O'Connor. Ayn Rand advocated, particularly through her popular novels such as *Atlas Shrugged*, the notion of ethical egoism, and for this reason she has been dubbed the mastermind of the philosophy of selfishness.

Critics have argued that if everyone acted on their own self-interest, the result would be that the stronger and more influential people would ignore the needs and rights of weaker people. Indeed, as Wiker notes, Ayn Rand's living out her philosophy of self-interest brought misery to those nearest to her.

One common theme that emerges through the critiques of the "scoundrels" is the notion that avoidance of pain and suffering are a core element of their philosophical systems. By contrast, as Wiker underscores, central to Christianity is the acceptance of the reality of suffering, and the cross of Christ.

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a *Strange Land*. The other blind spot in Chaput's analysis, as I see it, is a subtle tendency to downgrade the significance of the corruption and unfaithfulness so typical today among the leadership class of the Church.

The informed Catholic will know that these days all is not well within the walls of the Church. They will know that there is a struggle for the soul of the faith going on within these walls, and that the struggle is probably far graver than we know. As the ongoing sex-abuse scandal has made apparent, these are problems endemic in both the local and universal Church that touch the deepest aspects of faith.

But, as long as the Church is in such disarray, we don't have much hope of doing anything "out there", let alone keeping the faith ourselves. Sheep are lost without their flock and without their shepherds.

Chaput gives some acknowledgement of these problems, but it tends to be rather perfunctory, and he seems to place his hope on the individual overcoming ecclesial incompetence and corruption by sheer dint of will and moral effort. But without a thick community, and without faithful leadership, most individuals will be like sheep led to the slaughter.

And so, Chaput's following words about the importance of telling the truth, directed to those living in secular culture, apply better – I think – to the ruling class of which Chaput himself is a member:

"It's easier to accept lies by invoking a misguided alibi of tolerance and mutual respect than to live outside the cone of public approval ... Many of us are happy to live with half-truths and ambiguity rather than risk being cut out of the herd. The culture of lies thrives on our own complicity, lack of courage, and self-deception."

My critical comments should not

detract from what is otherwise an admirable book well worth reading. But I do really believe that we are fast approaching a point where even stronger forms of truth telling will be required. We probably need another St Catherine of Siena. We are well overdue for a Jordan Peterson "clean your own damn room first" moment; and, as we are now discovering in our Australian context, if we don't clean it ourselves, the world will happily take it away from us entirely.

So, read *Strangers in a Strange Land*. But, as you do so, consider the possibility that the most pressing problem we may in fact be facing today is not how to be a stranger in a strange secular land, but how seriously to follow Christ as a stranger in one's own Church. **NW**

Until recently, Dr Conor Sweeney was a lecturer at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family. His latest book is entitled *Abiding the Long Defeat: How to Evangelize Like a Hobbit in a Disenchanted Age*.

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For example, Thomas More was executed under Henry VIII for refusing to support Henry's break with Rome and marriage to Anne Boleyn. Similarly, Edith Stein united her suffering and death at the hands of the Nazis with Christ's passion.

Given the author's Catholic worldview, it comes as no surprise that the Catholic thinker in each case wins their respec-

tive debate. The debates vary in quality, the highlights being the Nietzsche/Stein and Augustine/Rousseau debates.

One of the chief strengths of this work is that Wiker is able to summarise and explain what are often complex arguments put forward by the various thinkers analysed, so as to make it intelligible to and accessible for the average reader. This is particularly true of the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose writings can be difficult to understand.

Through the debates and Wiker's reflections, readers can see the essentially corrosive influence that the secular thinkers or "scoundrels" have had on Western civilisation. However, some of the scripting of the actions – and in some instances antics – of the characters detracts from the quality of the debates between them, as it shifts the focus away from the ideas being debated. **NW**

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