

Venice, by Garry Wills

reviewed by [Ronald Goetz](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

To understand a deeply religious culture, one must study how its theological assumptions are at play in all its aspects--its art, music literature, politics and economics--to say nothing of its self-understanding. This conviction makes Garry Wills a most interesting historian.

By contrast, much secular history seems to be written on the assumption that religion, particularly the Christian religion, is the self-deluded mythological rationale by which less enlightened cultures justify their materialistic aggressiveness and the social structures they devise to rationalize the privilege of the elite.

In his remarkable study of the rise and decline of the Venetian empire, Wills is certainly not naïve about its political, economic and military ruthlessness. He consistently draws a clear connection between the Venetians's lofty theological self-understanding and their crass self-interest. Yet he is also fully aware that no era, and certainly no empire, can achieve such rectitude, such consistency between what it says and does, as to be immune to deconstructive analyses revealing its hypocrisies.

However, there are limits to the usefulness of such ever-suspicious analyses. What one wants to know about a culture or era is not just that it was peopled by sinners, but also how it achieved greatness, as Venice certainly did. Not only did its art, architecture, literature and thought bring riches to the world, but the city itself, even in its decline, even now when it is sinking into the sea, is a visual miracle, incomparable in its mystery and beauty.

Wills credits the enormous accomplishments of the Venetian empire to its sense of exceptionalism. "The whole myth of Venice is simply exceptionalism writ large. According to it, Venetians were the favorites of Christ, Mary and Saint Mark. Their city's birth was miraculous."

Wills observes that because America's sense of exceptionalism is under attack from within and without, Venice's claim to exceptionalism "proves a special problem for

Americans." However, he does not offer a blanket condemnation of all empires. The establishment of "one code of law for a scramble of feuding ethnic groups is not always a bad trade. The Roman Empire had that to recommend it."

Wills sees as a "tempering element" to Venetian exceptionalism the fact that, unlike America, it had "no missionary sense that it should spread its values to other people." Yet in a world in which one power bloc or another rules and in which we have witnessed the likes of Hitler and Stalin, one wonders whether even American exceptionalism might not have something to recommend it.