

Acton on the Papacy

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Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics, Gertrude Himmelfarb. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952, bibliography, index, 258 + x.

Lord Acton: Historian of Liberty. Robert Schuettinger. LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1976, bibliography, index, appendix, 251 + xii.

Many have heard the aphorism, “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely,” though it is usually misquoted as “Power corrupts.” Few who have heard it, however, know who its author was: the nineteenth-century German and English historian, John Emerich Edward Dalberg, better known as Lord Acton. Fewer still realize that Acton used the aphorism in opposing the papacy, the monarchy of the Roman Catholic church.

Acton was arguably one of the greatest historians of the nineteenth century, though he never published a book. He was immensely learned, knew several languages, wrote prodigiously, and was a member of the Roman Catholic Church all his life. His criticisms of the papacy and the Roman Church are some of most damning ever leveled against those institutions, and they are virtually unknown today. Yet to anyone seriously concerned about religious and political freedom, Acton’s views on the Roman Church, his own church, in particular his condemnation of the papacy, ought to be of great interest. Unfortunately, contemporary theological correctness has a taboo against criticism of Catholicism.

Acton on the Inquisition

In an early essay, “The Protestant Theory of Persecution,” Acton opined that the Protestant theory of persecution was worse than the Catholic theory, though Catholic practice was more bloody. A few years later, after more study, the older Acton changed his mind, and condemned Catholic persecution as at least as bad in theory and far worse in practice. In 1867 Acton published many essays and reviews in the *Chronicle*, a short-lived weekly. One essay was

provoked by the announcement from Rome that on the 1,800th anniversary of the martyrdoms of the apostles Peter and Paul the infamous Spanish inquisitor, Pedro de Arbues, would be elevated to sainthood. In his essay, Acton revealed some of the common deceptions used by the Roman Church to deny the heinousness of the Inquisition. Acton refuted Joseph de Maistre's argument that the Inquisition was an instrument of the state and not of the Church; he exposed the lie that few or no heretics suffered under the Roman Inquisition; he demonstrated that Giordano Bruno was not the last of its victims.

Acton offered historical evidence to show that Pope Pius V and his adviser, Charles Borromeo, had both instigated and approved murder, and were later canonized as saints. Acton kept a notebook on the Inquisition in which he wrote:

[The] object of the Inquisition [was] not to combat sin - for the sin was not judged by it unless accompanied by [theological] error. Nor even to put down error. For it punished untimely and unseemly remarks the same as blasphemy. Only unity. This became an outward, fictitious, hypocritical unity. The gravest sin was pardoned, but it was death to deny the donation of Constantine. [The Donation of Constantine was a document forged in the eighth century in which the Roman Emperor Constantine willed the Western Roman Empire to the Pope. The Roman Church taught that the Donation was genuine, and the legal basis for the pope's civil authority, for centuries. - JR] So men learnt that outward submission must be given. All this [was] to promote authority more than faith. When ideas were punished more severely than actions - for all this time the Church was softening the criminal law, and saving men from the consequences of crime: - and the Donation was put on a level with God's own law - men understood that authority went before sincerity.

The papacy was designed for power and dominion over men; that was its purpose. And that was why Acton opposed it so vigorously.

Acton believed that the Inquisition was the institution by which the medieval papacy had to be condemned or acquitted. Just as a man charged with murder is judged for a single act, though he may be kind to his mother and a great philanthropist, so the papacy must be judged for the Inquisition. To Mandell Creighton, an Anglican priest, Acton wrote:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way, against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it... For many years my view of Catholic controversy has been governed by the following chain of reasoning: 1. A crime does not become a good deed by being committed for the good of a church. 2. The theorist who approves the act is no better than the culprit who commits it. 3. The divine or historian who defends the theorist incurs the same blame.... To commit murder is the mark of a moment, exceptional. To defend it is constant, and shows a more perverted conscience.

The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre

Acton turned his attention to other crimes of the Roman Church as well. Beginning on Sunday, August 24, 1572, tens of thousands of French Huguenots were massacred by the Catholics. Overnight, thousands were murdered, and the murders continued for several

months. The massacre began in Paris. The sign of the cross was everywhere, and the murders took on the air of a crusade, a holy war against the infidels. The banks of the Seine became a slaughterhouse. Men, women, children, and infants were stabbed or dragged by a rope around the neck to be thrown into the river. The murder, looting, and rape went on for days in Paris.

On Monday noon, a hawthorn bush in the Holy Innocents' churchyard bloomed. The Romanists regarded it as a miracle and a sign of God's approval for the massacre, for the bush ordinarily bloomed in May. They were incited to new heights of pious hatred. Over the next few days a statue wept, and there was a new star in the night sky. The Romanists understood all these things as signs from God.

The Pope, Gregory XIII, reacted immediately to the holocaust: He delivered a complimentary speech, and commended the King of France, Charles IX, who "has also displayed before our Most Holy Master and this entire assembly the most splendid virtues which can shine in the exercise of power." The Pope commissioned a mural in honor of the great occasion; he ordered salutes fired for Charles; he had a commemorative seal struck; and in a horrible blasphemy he ordered a special *Te Deum* sung. Less than two years later, at the age of 24, King Charles died in extreme pain with blood oozing from his pores. His last words were pleas to God for pardon for the murders.

The massacre was a matter of controversy in 1868 when Acton wrote an essay in the *North British Review*. He concluded his long essay by saying that there was no evidence to absolve the Roman Church of premeditated murder. Acton argued that it was not only facts that condemned the papacy for this heinous crime, but the whole body of casuistry developed by the church that made it an act of Christian duty and mercy to kill a heretic so that he might be removed from sin. Acton pointed out that only when the Roman Church could no longer rely on force but had to make its case before public opinion did it seek to explain away its murders. "The same motive which had justified the murder now promoted the lie," he wrote. A bodyguard of lies was fabricated to protect the papacy from guilt for this monstrous sin. Acton wrote:

The story is much more abominable than we all believed.... S. B. [St. Bartholomew's] is the greatest crime of modern times. It was committed on principles professed by Rome. It was approved, sanctioned, and praised by the papacy. The Holy See went out of its way to signify to the world, by permanent and solemn acts, how entirely it admired a king who slaughtered his subjects treacherously, because they were Protestants. To proclaim forever that because a man is a Protestant it is a pious deed to cut his throat in the night....

For three centuries the Roman church's canon law had affirmed that the killing of an excommunicated person was not murder, and that allegiance need not be kept with heretical rulers. Murder and treason were part of the Roman church's official teachings. Charles IX was acting as a good Catholic, and he was highly praised by the pope for his murders.

The Infallibility of the Pope

In 1867 Pope Pius IX summoned a general council of the Roman Church to be held in Rome in 1870. It was the first general council of the Roman Church since the sixteenth century Council of Trent, at which the schismatic Roman Church had condemned all the truths of the Reformation. This time the Pope was determined to establish himself as the infallible sovereign of the Roman Church.

Acton thought that the time of the council would be better spent abolishing many of the "reforms" made by the Council of Trent, reforms which had perpetuated in the Roman Church a spirit of intolerant absolutism, and "austere immorality." He opposed the doctrine of papal infallibility, because, as an historian, he knew the popes were not infallible. Acton wrote:

A man is not honest who accepts all the Papal decisions in questions of morality, for they have often been

distinctly immoral; or who approves the conduct of the Popes in engrossing power, for it was stained with perfidy and falsehood; or who is ready to alter his convictions at their command, for his conscience is guided by no principle.

The Vatican Council itself was a travesty. The 700,000 residents of the Roman states were represented by 62 bishops constituting half to two-thirds of every committee. The 1,700,000 Polish Catholics were represented by one bishop, who was not chosen for a single commission; four Neapolitan and Sicilian bishops outvoted the bishops of Paris, Cologne, and Chambray, representing 4,700,000 Catholics. Not to take any chances at losing, however, the papacy demanded that debates be conducted in Latin, condemning, writes Himmelfarb, nine-tenths of the bishops to silence and the rest to confusion. The pope refused the bishops permission to examine the stenographic reports of their own speeches; he prohibited meetings of 20 or more bishops outside the council; he strictly censored literature, imprisoned and threatened recalcitrant bishops, and continued the time-honored tradition of the Roman post office of opening letters suspected of heresy or error. It was declared to be a mortal sin to communicate anything that occurred in the Council. But all was not threats. The pope used promises of titles, positions, and benefices to aid his cause as well.

Despite these attempts to rig the council, opposition to the notion of papal infallibility continued. Further steps were necessary. Debate was cut off, minority speakers interrupted, and the rules of order and debate were skewed to favor those who favored infallibility. The final text was rushed through the council without any debate at all.

Acton was in Rome at the time of the Council, and being a stalwart opponent of absolute power, he feared assassination by the

Jesuits. He referred to them as “that great ecclesiastical polypus, with its thousand feelers and arms.” He published an open letter to an anonymous German bishop in 1870 in which he condemned the Vatican Council as “a conspiracy against divine truth and law” and the doctrine of papal infallibility as a “soul destroying error.” He warned Prime Minister Gladstone: “We have to meet an organized conspiracy to establish a power which would be the most formidable enemy of liberty as well as science throughout the world.”

Acton and Newman

One of the nineteenth century’s prominent converts to Romanism was John Henry Newman. He is still admired today by many Protestants, tired of their trek through the wilderness, who remember the grandeur of Rome. Acton disagreed: He considered Newman a member of what he called “a very grotesque company of professing Christians.” Newman, Acton thought, had no idea of truth or right apart from expediency. Of Newman, Acton wrote:

He defended the *Syllabus [of Errors]*, a document issued by Pius IX in 1864], and the *Syllabus* justified all those atrocities [of the Inquisition]. Pius the Fifth held that it was sound Catholic doctrine that any man may stab a heretic condemned by Rome, and that every man is a heretic who attacks papal prerogatives. Borromeo wrote a letter for the purpose of causing a few Protestants to be murdered. Newman is an avowed admirer of Saint Pius and Saint Charles [Borromeo], and of the pontiffs who canonized them. This, and the like of this, is the reason for my deep aversion for [Newman].

The Roman Church

The Roman Church, thought Acton, abrogated every precept of morality, and men had become demons in the service of religion. After studying the history of the popes, Acton wrote:

The papacy contrived murder and massacre on the largest and also on the most cruel and inhuman scale. They were not only wholesale assassins but they made the principle of assassination a law of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation.... [The Papacy] is the fiend skulking behind the Crucifix.

Conclusion

Both Protestants and Catholics have largely ignored Acton's thought on the papacy in this ecumenical century. He was and is an anomaly: too anti-Catholic to be a good Catholic; too Catholic to be a Protestant. Much of his career was spent protesting the crimes of the papacy and opposing the tendency toward greater centralization within his church. He brought his powerful intellect and immense learning to bear on the question, but he could not thwart the absolutists within the church. They remain in control of the Roman Church today.

The reason Acton failed is that he did not have a sufficiently profound understanding of the issues. Three hundred years earlier another German had withstood the pope and won. Luther went far deeper than Acton in his condemnation of Rome: By the grace of God Luther understood that the problem with the Roman Church was not primarily in its immorality, egregious though it was, nor even in the church's casuistical defense of its immorality. The fatal problem was its theology. Many before and after him have protested the immorality of Rome, but only Luther's blows struck home, for he knew that the Gospel is the power of God.

Luther challenged the pope on the issue of authority, asserting that the Bible alone, and neither church, pope, council, nor tradition, is the source of truth. No man or group of men can add to or subtract from the Bible. No man or group can bind the conscience of a Christian. Liberty of conscience was a result of the Reformation.

Further, just as there is one source of authority, so there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ. Each

believer can approach God directly, through Christ. The Roman Church's apparatus of confession, penance, absolution, and hierarchies of priests was worse than useless. Each man could approach God through one mediator; the hierarchies were human institutions, without divine authority, designed to enslave men. Luther continued his cleansing of the church; There was one source of authority, the Bible; one mediator, Christ; and one instrument of salvation, faith.

Luther challenged the pope on the matter of justification, asserting that the just shall live by faith alone, not by works. That faith and our salvation were granted by grace alone, not because of any works that we have done or might do, but because of the finished work of Christ for us. It was therefore possible to be assured of Heaven, not held in suspense by a corrupt Church hoping to win contributions and obedience from frightened and obsequious members.

At the end of the twentieth century, we ought to learn from Luther: Protesting the immorality of the church or the world will not have any lasting effect. The central problem with both is not moral, but theological. It is the Gospel alone that has the power to dispel the darkness that is enveloping the globe. Luther rediscovered the Gospel in the sixteenth century; or, more accurately, the Gospel discovered Luther. The results were revolutionary, just as they had been in the first century.

Acton was a very brave man to do what he did, but he accomplished little. The papacy remains; the pope still claims to be infallible; the purpose of the Roman Church remains dominion over men. One wonders what might have been the outcome if Acton and his circle of friends within the Roman Church had been enlightened by the Holy Spirit as Luther was. Perhaps another Reformation might have occurred, and the beast struck a wound from which it could never recover.

Christians ought to realize that historically the greatest enemies of Christianity have been false religions. Christ and the apostles were killed by false religionists. The growth of false religions will pose the most serious threats to the church in the next century, should Christ not return to Earth before then.

We cannot meet those threats with denunciations of immorality, nor invocations of God's law, no matter how firmly delivered or richly deserved. Our message must be the Gospel that has turned the world upside down twice. Nothing more is needed; nothing less will do.

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