

Lord Acton **A Frustrated Liberal Catholic**

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At the age of ten we find John Acton writing to his mother from boarding school and reporting on his academic progress:

I am a perfect linguist (he wrote), knowing perfectly – that is, so as to be able to speak them – English, French, German, and can almost speak Latin. I can speak a few words of Chinese, Greek, Italian, Spanish and Irish. I also know Chemistry, Astronomy, Mechanics and many other sciences, but do not know botany.¹

While making due allowance for youthful exaggeration we can at least conclude that the young boy had a remarkable enthusiasm for learning. So much did this remain a permanent characteristic of his life that it was generally admitted by his associates of later years that he was the most learned man they ever knew.

That Acton was a prodigy of learning is beyond dispute but was he anything more? Most of us remember him as the one who coined what is now a hackneyed phrase: “all power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Some of us perhaps would be hard pressed to recall much more about him. Yet such discerning critics as the late Professor Laski and in our own day Professor Butterfield judged that he was one of the two or three most perceptive historical observers of the 19th century. Laski maintained that there were two essentially liberal thinkers in the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Acton.

John Dalberg Acton was born at Naples in 1834. His father was of English descent and owned a large English estate. His grandfather, General Acton, was an adventurer who succeeded in winning the affections of the Queen of Naples and eventually became the Prime Minister of Naples. His mother, Countess Marie de Dalberg, belonged to the South German aristocracy. At the age of three, upon the death of his father, the infant John Acton was brought to his inherited estates at Aldenham in England.

In 1840 the widowed Lady Acton married Lord Leveson, later the second Earl Granville, a rising politician who became foreign minister under Lord John Russell and Gladstone.

In 1843, at the age of nine, Acton went to Oscott College then directed by

¹ *Selections From the Correspondence of the First Lord Acton*, edited by Figgis and Lawrence (London, 1917), pp. 1-2.

Doctor Nicholas Wiseman, the future Cardinal. The boy proved an exceptional student and his parents hoped that he would go on to Cambridge, the *Alma Mater* of his uncle, Cardinal Acton. But three Cambridge Colleges refused him on account of his religion. Fifty years later when he was invited back as Regius Professor of Modern History, in his inaugural address he recalled his earlier rejection.

Unable to gain admission to an English University he went to the University of Munich. His mother was a close friend of Dr. Ignatius Döllinger, professor of theology at the University of Munich. Döllinger at this time was recognized as the leading Catholic scholar of Germany. Acton resided with Döllinger and his studies were carefully supervised by his priest mentor. A remarkably close bond was established between the priest and his brilliant student, an attachment which in spite of later critical strains was to remain close for the remainder of their lives.

In the 1850's Munich was the intellectual centre of the Catholic world. The Munich Circle, composed of a group of devoted Catholic scholars, was recognized as the most advanced Catholic circle in Europe. German universities in general were intensely alive and Munich was no exception. Through Döllinger, Acton came into contact with many of the best scholars of Germany. During vacations Acton travelled with Döllinger through Germany, Italy, France and in this formative period made friends with the leading intellectuals of Europe.

Under Döllinger's inspiration Acton was fired with a passion for liberalism and the scientific study of history. A strong liberal Catholic movement had developed particularly in France following the French Revolution. Chateaubriand, de Maistre, Bonald, Lamennais, Montalembert, Lacordaire, had eloquently presented to a sceptical generation a vigorous Catholicism as the best guarantee for the development of a free society. De Maistre, and Lamennais in particular looked to a strong Papacy as the only ultimate safeguard against state absolutism. The French liberal Catholic movement which showed such promise in the 1820's and early 1830's was struck a serious blow by the condemnation of Lamennais and his ultimate defection. Still, not a single disciple followed Lamennais out of the Church.

The leadership of the Liberal Church movement passed to the Germans. While the French movement relied heavily on enthusiasm and rhetoric Germans looked to scientific scholarship as their principle weapon. Critical scholars would restore liberty and Christ to the world. In this work the role of the historian would be pre-eminent.

German historians led by Von Ranke had worked out a more scientific approach to the study of history attempting to rid it of bias and prejudice. Acton came to believe passionately in history as a science. He saw no reason why competent historians should ever differ on the correct interpretation of history. However, he would be the first to admit that there were few competent historians.

Acton returned to England in 1857 at the age of twenty-three to begin his

life's work. His chosen task was to bring enlightenment to his fellow Catholics in England. They had to be made aware of what was going on in the continental intellectual world. Acton had developed a special interest in the science of politics and he believed he had many good things to offer those Catholics who were interested in a Christian theory of politics.

While in Germany Acton had followed with keen interest Newman's efforts to establish a Catholic University in Ireland. He had carefully studied Newman's University lectures and saw in them the same bold spirit of enquiry that so impressed him with German scholars. By 1857, however, it was evident that Newman's efforts in Dublin were not to meet with much success. Thereupon Acton attempted to stir up interest in founding a Catholic University in England, but he met with little support from those he approached, Newman included. Newman's Irish experience had convinced him that, given the existing conditions, a real Catholic University was an impossibility; Catholic parents were not prepared for one, and Catholic bishops would never permit one.

Acton, eager for a platform, joined Richard Simpson, a scholarly and outspoken convert, in conducting a controversial Catholic review, the *Rambler*, which later was altered somewhat and re-named the *Home and Foreign Review*.

From 1858 until 1864 Acton occupied himself almost wholly with journalism. This was his most productive period. He wrote articles on a wide variety of historical topics, and outlined what he believed was the true Catholic approach to politics. Complete freedom of enquiry and expression, in all matters not solemnly defined by the Church, was his principle of operation – (a hazardous principle for a Catholic intellectual in any age but particularly so in the critical atmosphere of the 1860's).

In politics he was a supporter of the liberal party and served as a member of parliament for several years. The British Constitutional system was hailed as the most Catholic of political systems. Edmund Burke was presented as the greatest English political prophet and the truest guide for Catholics. Each number of the *Rambler* and the *Home and Foreign* carried a comprehensive review of important books published on the continent. Acton wrote most of the reviews.

Competent scholars have judged that the *Home and Foreign* surpassed all other 19th century English reviews in critical excellence. "Perhaps in no organ of criticism in this country, was there so much knowledge, so much play of mind,"² commented Matthew Arnold. Yet this high-class review received little support from Catholics, either lay or clerical. It was too critical. It disturbed too many prejudices. Many Anglicans considered it an organ of German rationalism. Catholic bishops were terrified by it. Even Newman grew afraid of contributing to it.

In analysing the Review today one finds it difficult to fully comprehend the reason for the hostility it generated. Its primary fault in the minds of most of its

² Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (London, 1928), p. 20.

critics seemed to have been its failure to use an apologetic approach. Instead of defending the policy of the Church in the present and past centuries it seemed only to provide more ammunition to Protestants for attacking the Church.

Alternating between despondency and enthusiasm Acton and Simpson continued their work despite almost constant criticism and no great support from any quarter. The high point of their campaign was reached in the autumn of 1863. Two important Catholic congresses were held at Malines in Belgium and at Munich. At the first gathering the great French Catholic champion Montalembert, in two eloquent speeches, defended complete toleration, and separation of Church and State as the only working formulas for Catholic statesmen. In Munich a group of Catholic scholars, led by Döllinger, in effect claimed complete freedom for Catholic intellectuals and denied the authority of Roman Congregations (including the congregation of the Index) to control their investigations. Acton gave glowing reports of both congresses in the *Home and Foreign*. It was suggested that a golden age had arrived for progressive Catholics. At least, it seemed Catholic Europe was about to come to terms with the modern age of freedom and scholarship!

Acton was brought down to earth again with a rude shock. Rome had no intentions of surrendering leadership of the Church to German scholars. Neither was it prepared to accept Montalembert's plea for a free Church in a free State. After all (Roman authorities could argue) was this not the very slogan presently being used by Cavour to despoil the Church in Italy. Pius IX, with short-term justification, might well ask how he, as a Christian leader, could come to terms with a movement which left the Church in ruins. What had the French Revolution and all the liberal revolutions it spawned, brought to the Church but new troubles and anxieties! Had he not naively tried in the early years of his pontificate to be a liberal Pope, and had not liberal leaders like Mazzini and Garibaldi turned on him and chased him out of Rome. Was not Cavour in the name of Victor Emmanuel now basely engaged in swallowing up the papal states, the sacred temporal inheritance entrusted to the Papacy for the good of the Church.

With three blows Rome proceeded to shatter the liberal Catholic movement. Montalembert was politely reminded that his notions on toleration and separation of Church and State, were identical with those put forth by Lamennais in the 1830's and condemned by Gregory XVI. In a brief, addressed to the Archbishop of Munich, the Pope pointedly reminded German scholars that they were obliged to follow directives from the Holy See, and were not free to follow their own line in theological and philosophical investigations. This was followed by the *pièce de résistance*, the *Syllabus of Errors*. In curt, uncompromising terms, the principles underlying liberal Catholicism were condemned as erroneous (at least it appeared so to the plain reader).

Liberal Catholics from the time of de Maistre had looked to a strong Papacy as the ultimate guarantee against absolutism. All the leading liberal Catholics up to the early 1860's were ultramontane. But now the very authority they extolled as being a guarantee of liberty was restricting their freedom of action.

Acton saw no alternative to ending the *Home and Foreign Review*. He could not accept the principles advocated by the Papacy and he felt it would be a scandal to continue a Catholic review in open opposition to Rome. At the very time when Acton was voluntarily imposing silence on himself, Newman, ironically, was feverishly answering Kingsley's charge that Catholic clergy were indifferent to truth for its own sake.

As the 1860's moved on the advisability of convening an Ecumenical Council was widely discussed. It was a time of growing crisis within the Church. Many urgent questions awaited answers. Christianity in its traditional formulations was under heavy attack from rationalist critics. The rapid development of the natural sciences presented its own peculiar problems. The question of liberty and authority within the context of the modern liberal state demanded clarification.

Liberal Catholics looked at the prospect of a General Council with cautious optimism. But in the popular press of the day, whenever the possibility of an Ecumenical Council was discussed, the question of a definition of Papal Infallibility invariably arose. In reading English and continental journals one might justly conclude that the Council, which was finally announced in 1867, was to decide only one question: "Was the Pope Infallible?" Only the ultramontanes seemed to be certain as to what exactly was meant by the Infallibility. "When the Pope thinks, it is God who is thinking in him," proclaimed the *Civiltà Catholica*, a semi-official publication.³ The Liberal Catholics took alarm at the extravagant statements of the ultramontanes. It seemed to them that the Pope was to be elevated to a sort of Delphian oracle. There is no evidence that a single leading Liberal Catholic challenged the thesis that the Pope as head of the Church was in some way or other under divine guidance and therefore to some degree infallible, but they bitterly opposed the extravagances of the ultramontanes. Since 1863 the liberals felt that the Pope was asserting his authority too much and that it would be disastrous if his authority were to be stressed still more by a decree of infallibility. They were supported in their opposition by the French Gallicans who for their own peculiar reasons did not wish to see the authority of the Pope increased.

In September 1869, Acton went to Rome for the Council and played a leading role in rallying opposition to a definition of infallibility. His long reports to Döllinger, describing in careful detail what went on inside and outside the secret sessions of the Council, formed the main basis of the celebrated *Letters from Rome* appearing regularly in the Augsburg Gazette, under the pseudonym "Quirinus." He carried on another important correspondence with William Gladstone urging Gladstone to exert political pressure against the ultramontane program. Ironically, it was Gladstone's intimate friend of earlier years, Archbishop Manning, who led the majority group in pressing successfully for a definition.

³ Quoted by D. C. Bulter, *The Vatican Council* (London, 1930), p. 77.

On July 18, 1870, the dogma of Papal infallibility was solemnly defined in the Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*. In the previous month a despondent Acton had left Rome acknowledging that the neo-ultramontanes had triumphed. Shortly after the passing of the Constitution, the opening of the Franco-Prussian war and the withdrawal of the French garrison in Rome led to an indefinite suspension of the Vatican Council. Acton resigned himself to living out the remainder of his life as a member of a Church with whose current policy he violently disagreed.

What had Acton hoped to see achieved by the Vatican Council I? In the light of the present Council this poses a fascinating question for the modern observer.

In Acton's view the Vatican Council had a unique opportunity in radically altered times to revitalize the Church. In the Council of Trent, he observed, jealousy and antagonism had prevailed.⁴ The Church, to defend herself against the Protestant reformers, threw herself into the hands of the State. The Inquisition was sharpened. The Index was established to control literature. Absolutism was promoted in Catholic countries and revolution in Protestant ones. Trent legislated "for actual war-separation-exclusion-ignorance."⁵ It impressed on the Church "the stamp of an intolerant age, and perpetuated by its decrees the spirit of an austere immorality."⁶ But three centuries had so changed the world that "the maxims with which the Church resisted the Reformation" had become "her weakness and her reproach"; and that which arrested her weakness at the time of the Reformation now arrested her progress.⁷ "The Vatican Council was the first sufficient occasion which Catholicism had enjoyed to reform, remodel, and adapt the work of Trent."⁸ By 1870 the battles of the Reformation were over. Mixed religions were accepted, toleration was an established fact, literature was no longer effectively controlled, freedom of enquiry was claimed by scholars as their right, politics was freed from control by confessional interests. The very things which Trent had opposed were now capable of becoming the allies, "the unfailing support of the Church."

The hope of reform within the Church and of ultimate reconciliation with Protestants lay "in the open acknowledgment of the faults and vices" in the old system. The time had come "to abandon the unjust claims and to acknowledge the just accusations."⁹

A confession of faults would result in barriers falling and in an internal strengthening of the Church. Instead of arguing like lawyers with Protestants, conceding nothing and making use of every polemical artifice, Catholics should be prepared to sit down amicably with them and together seek the truth.¹⁰ Acton

⁴ Cambridge University Library, add. mss. 5542.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power*, (London, 1956), pp. 276-277.

⁷ Cambridge University Library, add. mss. 5542.

⁸ Cambridge University Library.

⁹ Cambridge University Library, add. mss. 5542.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

cited the program of reform outlined by a knowledgeable Bohemian priest as the type of reform desired by many.¹¹ In this program the Council was exhorted to restrict centralization, to reduce the office of the Holy See to the ancient limits of its primacy, to restore to the Episcopate the prerogatives which have been confiscated by Rome, to abolish the temporal government, which is the prop of hierarchical despotism, to revise the matrimonial discipline, to suppress many religious orders and the solemn vows for all, to modify the absolute rule of celibacy for the clergy, to admit the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, to allow a larger share to the laity in the management of ecclesiastical affairs, to encourage the education of the clergy at universities, and to renounce the claims of medieval theocracy, which are fruitful of suspicion between Church and State.

In Acton's view the aspiration under which all advocates of reform seemed to unite was "that those customs should be changed which were connected with arbitrary power in the Church." Acton throughout his life was preoccupied with the relationship between power and corruption. To him any power or authority not restricted by carefully worked out checks and balances constituted a threat to freedom. He was deeply conscious of the Christian dogma of original sin. None of us who has seen the monstrous abuses of power so much a part of modern totalitarian movements can claim that his concern was unwarranted.

Acton maintained that the opponents to reform at the Vatican Council seized on Papal Infallibility to make of it a protective shield against the unsettling movements of thought current in the 19th century. Fearful and often unable to meet the challenges of the new age they sought to throw themselves more on some absolute, final tribunal. They feared particularly the historical tendency to make fluid what was thought to have been settled and to re-examine and re-evaluate what was believed to have been beyond question.¹² (Do we not have here expressed the basic difference between the Conservative and the Liberal in every age?)

Following the Vatican Council Acton gradually drifted into isolation from the active Catholic community. There seemed no field for his superb talents in the direct service of the Church. Reluctantly and painfully he gave up hope of influencing the policy of a Church which (as he had publicly proclaimed in 1874) was dearer to him than life itself. In the twilight of his life a belated recognition came to him from non-Catholic quarters when he was named Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University.

On June 19, 1902, John Acton died. Sixty years after his death another John, from the throne of Peter, announced the end of a 400 years' siege. The windows of the Church were thrown open and a new reforming Vatican Council was convened. Catholic scholars who live in these exhilarating days of Christian renewal must acknowledge a debt to the pioneer work of frustrated intellectual giants like John Dalberg Acton.

¹¹ *Essays on Freedom and Power*, p. 279.

¹² *Essays on Freedom and Power*, p. 279.