

The Wisdom of Lord Acton

David Lee discusses the case of papal infallibility.

Sir John Acton¹ was born in 1834 a scion of the Whig aristocracy with a country house in Shropshire, yet he was not a typical English gentleman. He was born in Naples and had a host of continental forebears, many of whom were of noble blood; he was fluent in German, French, Italian and English. In those days because he was a Roman Catholic he could not attend Oxford University. He was educated in Germany under the tutelage of Döllinger² and he became one of the leading scholars of his day, ending his career as the Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge University. He is remembered as one of the most illustrious holders of that office.

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and absolute power
corrupts absolutely.**

In the General Election of 1869 he lost his seat as a Liberal Member of Parliament. Within days the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, wrote to offer him a peerage and he became Lord Acton. His remit was that he would go to Rome and represent informally the interests of the British government to the bishops attending the Vatican Council. In the years following the Risorgimento³ and the fall of the Papal States it dawned on Pope Pius IX that he could no longer be a worldly monarch, and in order to establish his unchallengeable rule of the Catholic Church he planned that the Vatican Council of 1870 would proclaim the dogma of Papal Infallibility. Gladstone's intention was that while Acton would not be able to prevent the proclamation, at least he would be able to raise awareness of the possible political consequences.

A number of liberal Catholics left the Church as a result of the proclamation, including Döllinger, who helped to found the Old Catholic

Church. Acton remained a faithful Catholic to the end of his life. While he did not dispute the right of the Pope and the Council to declare the dogma of Infallibility, he pointed out that there were two areas of concern about the possible political consequences. The one that troubled his friend Gladstone was that Papal Infallibility might result in Roman Catholics in Great Britain being obliged to forswear their oaths of obedience and loyalty to the British Crown. This, of course, had happened during the reign of Elizabeth I, when Catholics were urged to betray the state and assassinate the Queen. In the years since the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 the Liberals had tried hard to remove the impediments to Roman Catholics so that they could take a full part in British society. Gladstone's fear was that all this would be undermined by the proclamation of Papal Infallibility. It was, in part, due to Acton that this outcome was avoided; however it earned him Cardinal Manning's undying hostility.

The second point was the possible retrospective application of Infallibility to legitimate the behaviour of, for example, the Borgia Popes. Such a possibility impelled Acton to question the moral basis of the policies and actions of the Catholic Church. It was an issue affecting thinking not only in the Catholic Church. For example Mandell Creighton, one of the leading scholars of the Church of England, who later became the Bishop of London, had published a three-volume study of the Renaissance popes, in which he appeared to suggest that because of their great office and heavy responsibilities they should be judged less harshly for their moral imperfections. It was in response to this that Acton wrote a letter to Creighton⁴ containing what was to become his most famous dictum.

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 the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to

make up for the want of legal responsibility. **All 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 certainty of corruption by full authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.

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To Lord Acton upholding the truth was the paramount moral imperative. The idea that it was justifiable to distort the truth, to condone unjust actions and decisions, in order to save the Church from scandal or disrepute, was totally unacceptable.

We should not make the mistake of supposing that this is an issue of the 19th century only. In recent times we have seen the same problem in relation to such things as the attempted justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the M.P.s expenses scandal in 2010 and the covering up of the crimes of paedophilic priests. In each of these cases the inference was that we should judge these decisions less harshly because of the position and responsibilities of the offenders. This is exactly the thing that Lord Acton teaches us to resist.

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Papal Infallibility is the quintessential example of naive realism. It apparently rests on belief in the objective existence of a God who is Lord of all knowledge and all wisdom, with whom the Pope, and the Pope alone, has a direct relationship. Every act of infallible judgement is an exercise in absolute power. Failure to examine and reject the notion of such a God results in moral blindness. As I pointed out in a previous article⁵ such belief carries with it the conviction that the judgements made are absolute and unchallengeable.



Lord Acton

NOTES

1. **John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton**, 1st Baron Acton, KCVO, DL (10 January 1834 – 19 June 1902), known as Sir John Dalberg-Acton, 8th Baronet from 1837 to 1869 and usually referred to simply as Lord Acton.
2. **Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger** (February 28, 1799 – January 14, 1890) was a German theologian, Catholic priest and church historian who in 1870 rejected the dogma of papal infallibility.
3. **Italian unification** (Italian: *il Risorgimento*, or 'The Resurgence') was the political and social movement that agglomerated different states of the Italian peninsula into the single state of Italy in the 19th century.
4. **Mandell Creighton** (5 July 1843 – 14 January 1901) was an English historian and a bishop of the Church of England. A scholar of the Renaissance papacy, Creighton was the first occupant of the Dixie Chair of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Cambridge, a professorship that was established around the time that the study of history was emerging as an independent academic discipline
5. See 'The Spyglass' in edition No.98 of *Sofia*.

The Venerable David S Lee was the Archdeacon of Llandaff until his retirement in 1997.