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**ENEMIES OR ALLIES: LIBERALISM AND CATHOLICISM  
IN LORD ACTON'S THOUGHT**

Acton—*“a man who started in life believing himself  
a sincere Catholic and a sincere Liberal;  
who therefore renounced everything in Catholicism which was not compatible  
with Liberty, and everything in Politics  
which was not compatible with Catholicity.”*<sup>1</sup>

Lord Acton is known mainly by his famous maxim that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Those who are more familiar with him know that he was a great nineteenth-century historian and political thinker, a passionate lover of liberty who, unfortunately, failed to complete his long-term project—the history of liberty—and thus became the “author” of “the greatest book that was never written.”<sup>2</sup> Specialists in Victorian England, the British Catholic press and the Catholic liberal movement of that epoch are further aware that Acton was a very pious Catholic and an ardent liberal, who spent much of his life on failed attempts to reconcile Catholicism and liberalism. Some of them are puzzled, as were Acton’s contemporaries, how a man of his enormous erudition and political wisdom could have dreamt about succeeding in such a Sisyphean task. Liberalism, after all, was a child of the Enlightenment, hostile to any religion in principle and Catholicism in particular. The Catholic Church, in turn, blemished by centuries-old alliance with the throne and frightened to death by the forces of modernity, was not open to compromises either. On the contrary, it succumbed to a besieged fortress mentality, rejected any “novelty” and demanded from the faithful unconditional obedience to

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<sup>1</sup> Acton to Lady Blennerhassett, Feb. 1879, [in:] *Selection from the Correspondence of the First Lord Acton*, ed. J. N. Figgis, R. V. Laurence, London 1917, p. 54, hereafter rendered as *Selected Correspondence*.

<sup>2</sup> M. Drew, *Acton, Gladstone and Others*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Port Washington 1968, p. 7.

the arbitrary power of its hierarchy. Liberalism and Catholicism were implacable enemies, like fire and water, barely tolerating one another and, ultimately, wishing to destroy each other. How then could a reasonable man have entertained the idea of reconciling two deadly enemies? Was Acton utterly unreasonable, or does the clue perhaps lie in his own notion of liberalism and Catholicism? The thesis of this article claims precisely this, that in Acton's view true liberalism and true Catholicism were not incompatible but supplementary and, therefore, could have been brought into a close alliance. The article will briefly review Acton's understanding of liberalism and Catholicism, as well as present his unsuccessful efforts at their reconciliation.

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Acton rejected the notion of liberalism founded on the concept of state of nature. Tracing "the rights of man"—mainly liberty and equality—to the original conditions that preceded civilization, was dogmatic and dangerous. As an abstract construct, the state of nature imposed arbitrary principles that were applicable to any people and totally ignored the laws, institutions and traditions of existing societies. It was as if history were abolished and, instead of dealing with real, living men and women, and their communities—the product of a slow, long and arduous process—the state of nature dealt with undifferentiated individuals, devoid of any particular characteristics, except for being human. The theory of natural rights was first put into practice in the French Revolution and brought disastrous effects on liberty. Abolishing the French past in the name of equality required a wholesale annihilation of the estates and institutions which personified inequality (the clergy, the nobility, the provinces, the Church and monarchy).<sup>3</sup>

The French Revolution's negative impact on continental liberalism also had a more lasting dimension in the area of constitutional law. Its first constitution (1791), created in the early, liberal phase of the Revolution, conceived omnipotent central authority which mirrored the absolute sovereignty of the people. This constitution was an attractive example for other European constitutions introduced throughout the nineteenth century, and the principles it espoused became a characteristic feature, a "brand mark" of continental liberalism. Liberty in this context meant parliamentary government, the right to vote, and certain civil freedoms, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Acton left no systematic exposition of his views on the state of nature, but only scattered remarks in various works. Cf. Lord Acton, *Nationality*, "Home and Foreign Review" 1, July 1862, p. 1–25, reprinted in J. E. Dalberg-Acton, *Selected Writing of Lord Acton*, ed. J. R. Fears, 3 vols., Indianapolis 1985–1988, Vol. 1, p. 411, 415; 428–429, hereafter referred to as SWLA; Lord Acton, *Review of Thomas Arnold's "Manual of English Literature"*, "Home and Foreign Review" 2, January 1865, p. 250–254, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 145, hereafter referred to as *Arnold's "Manual"*; Lord Acton, *Review of Thomas Arnold's "Public Life of Lord Macaulay"*, first published in "Home and Foreign Review" 2, January 1863, p. 257–260, reprinted in SWLA Vol. 1, p. 153–154, hereafter referred to as *Arnold's "Public Life"*; Lord Acton, *Mr. Goldwin Smith's "Irish History"*, "Rambler", n.s. 6, January 1862, p. 190–220, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 2, p. 76, 84; J. E. Dalberg-Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, ed. N. Figgis, R. Vere Laurence, London 1910, p. 96–97, 100–101.

freedom of the press, speech and association. However, the French original and its continental offspring did not safeguard legitimate secondary, intermediate authorities and institutions (local self-governments, the Church, professional and business organizations), and reduced citizenship to an act of voting every few years. Acton viewed this political order as sham-liberalism, the old absolutism put into modern wrapping and, worst, lethal for true citizenship, which always originates in genuine self-government.<sup>4</sup>

*Laissez-faire* economics, originally an integral part of nineteenth-century liberalism, did not arouse Acton's enthusiasm either. Though he admired Adam Smith, Acton did not accept the cold-hearted, "liberal" attitude towards the poor and destitute that were derivatives of the *laissez-faire* outlook. The belief that the best thing for the poor is not to be born and the second best thing is to die in childhood cannot be deemed as liberal; in fact, it fundamentally contradicts it. For liberalism cannot approve an extreme selfishness of the wealthy at the price of dire poverty for the poor. On the contrary, it imposes duty to take care of "the crippled child ... the idiot and the madman."<sup>5</sup> The utilitarian version of liberalism that gained currency around the mid-nineteenth century did not win Acton's approval either. The principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" opened the door for social engineering and for the rule of the elite, who know better than ordinary man and woman what is best for them. As such, utilitarianism is akin to Machiavelli's "intelligent" government, Louis XIV's *L'état c'est moi*, or the eighteenth-century "theory of the public good." Furthermore, the chief utilitarian rule contradicted Acton's most cherished principle, that the aim of government is liberty.<sup>6</sup> This last maxim brings us to Acton's own notion of liberalism.

"Liberty is not a means to an end. It is itself the highest political end," is perhaps the most celebrated statement of our author on liberty. This is the touchstone of how liberal the government is or how short it is from the ideal. A liberal government cannot deviate from recognition of liberty as its highest principle under the pain of losing its liberal character. This elevated position of liberty, according

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<sup>4</sup> Lord Acton, *Cavour*, "Rambler", n.s. 5, July 1861, p. 141–165, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 441–442; Lord Acton, *The Piedmontese Ultimatum to the Holy See*, first published in "Rambler", n.s. 6, January 1862, p. 277–281, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 463–462; *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p. 199; Lord Acton, *Report on Current Events, July 1860*, "Rambler", n.s., 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. 3, July 1860, p. 265–288, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 496–498.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Acton, *Sir Erskine May's "Democracy in Europe"*, first published in "Quarterly Review" 145, January 1878, p. 112–142, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 81, hereafter referred to as *Sir Erskine*; Lord Acton, *Lectures on Modern History*, ed. H. Trevor-Roper, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Cleveland–New York 1967, p. 43; Acton Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Additional Manuscripts 5399, p. 41, hereafter referred to as Add. Mss.

<sup>6</sup> Lord Acton, *The History of Freedom in Christianity*, first published as *The History of Freedom in Antiquity and the History of Freedom in Christianity, Two Addresses delivered to the members of the Bridgnorth Institute at the Agricultural Hall, May 28, 1877* by Lord Acton, Bridgnorth, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 37, 43 (hereafter referred to as *Freedom in Christianity*); Lord Acton, *The Roman Question*, "Rambler", n.s. 2, January 1860, p. 136–154, reprinted in Lord Acton, *Essays on Church and State*, ed. D. Woodruff, London 1952, p. 423; *Report on Current Events, July 1860*, p. 496–497; *Sir Erskine*, p. 81; Lord Acton, *Colonies*, "Rambler", 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. 6, March 1862, p. 391–400, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 180; Lord Acton, *Nationality*, "Home and Foreign Review" 1, July 1862, p. 1–25, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 424.

to Acton, originates in God's will. Liberty is a providential idea, enjoying divine care, destined to grow and mature in time. Although a fallen nature of humankind prevents us from achieving perfect freedom, it is, on the other hand, never entirely effaceable. Because of divine sanction, the world's history revolves around freedom. Liberty is an axis of human progress and brings unity "indeed ... the only unity" to our past and, by extension, to our future, which otherwise would have been haphazard and without purpose.<sup>7</sup>

While liberty enjoys the highest protection conceivable, "up in heaven," down on earth it originates at the lowest and smallest level of human organization, i.e., in a parish, a village, a town or a county. Freedom and citizenship—the two things that go hand in hand—are not gifts coming from above, or fruits of an abstract theory, but the results of the mundane efforts of men and women to organize their local community, resolve their basic problems and decide how to run their daily life. In other words, freedom and citizenship begins in self-government. Acton is unequivocal in this respect and virtually equates liberty and self-government. Wherever self-ruling communities rise, freedom thrives, and as long as some forms of self-government persist, liberty and citizenship are not entirely erased, even in the worst circumstances, such as, for example, a municipal self-government in the late Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, liberty and citizenship do not end in self-government, but extend to larger and higher layers of public authority, from regional to national government.

To be liberal in the Actonian sense, national government must be well balanced through the division of powers, be based on a fairly widespread franchise, respect all legitimate secondary (partial) authorities and the rights of various minorities, and observe freedoms that are typical for any liberal order. Such a regime must also safeguard national tradition and develop through a process of organic growth, responding to concrete needs and challenges. Any sudden reforms, especially when based on abstract principles (such as equality, for example), lead to enslavement rather than liberty. In this respect, Acton did not differ from Burke, "the teacher of his youth" and "of mankind." He did not condemn a violent change in principle, though. If a regime is autocratic, and its long tradition of despotism does not bode well for peaceful reform, then a revolution could be necessary. Such was the case of the *ancien régime* in France.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lord Acton, *The History of Freedom in Antiquity*, SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 5–7, 22–23, hereafter referred to as *Freedom in Antiquity*; *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p. 33; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 26–27, 194–195; Add Mss. 5658; J. Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, New York–London 1903, p. 396–397.

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Goldwin Smith's "Irish History", p. 85; *Report on Current Events, July 1860*, p. 497; Lord Acton, *The American Commonwealth*. By James Bryce, first published in "English Historical Review" 1889, No. 4, p. 388–396, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 399; Lord Acton, *The Protestant Theory of Persecution*, first published in "Rambler", n.s. 6, March 1862, p. 318–351, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 2, p. 99; Lord Acton, *Venn's Life of St. Francis Xavier*, "Home and Foreign Review" 2, January 1863, p. 188–189; *Sir Erskine*, p. 68; Add. Mss. 4870, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Acton did not present his ideal of liberalism in one essay but left many scattered remarks, criticizing continental liberalism and praising Anglo-American liberalism. Recreating his ideal requires, therefore, a careful comparison and analysis of many passages in his writing, especially on the Whigs in England and on America. See Acton to Lady Blennerhassett, February 1879, p. 54; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 207–208, 295; *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p. 25–26, 33, 36–37, 97; *Arnold's "Manual"*, p. 145; Lord Acton, *Political Causes of the*

Unlike Burke, Acton welcomed the French Revolution, even if he abhorred its outcomes. Our author rejected any arbitrary element in a liberal regime except one: higher law. A liberal order worthy of the name must have a constitutional law immune to sudden change of opinion. Of divine origins at first, natural law (first propounded by the Stoics and later perfected by St. Thomas) underwent a process of progressive secularization in the early modern period and, finally, it acquired in the eighteenth century the form of “the inalienable rights of man.” Such a fundamental law is indispensable to prevent, or at least restrain, arbitrary power in any form of government. It is of particular importance in regimes based on popular sovereignty, in which it plays the role of the last bastion against tyranny of the majority. Athenian democracy is the best example of how democracy without higher law can tyrannize minorities and ultimately, usher its own destruction.<sup>10</sup>

The last central element in Acton’s ideal of liberal regime is freedom of conscience. Conscience is a voice of God in us, dictating to us what our duties are. Since for Acton liberty means the right to do what one ought to (not what one fancies), freedom of conscience becomes crucial: while natural law provides us with a general guidance of what is right or wrong, conscience helps us to face everyday particular problems and challenges, and to do what we ought. Recognition of freedom of conscience, a cornerstone of individual liberty, is also for him a sign of the coming of liberal age. A regime may still have various shortcomings, such as severely limited franchise and slavery, but with the recognition of higher law, freedom of conscience, respect for national tradition, genuine self-government and limited authority, it enjoys mature liberty. Furthermore, self-regulating principles built-in in its order will in time remedy any deficiency.<sup>11</sup> According to Acton, England after the Glorious Revolution and colonial America on the eve of the Revolution achieved such early stages of mature liberty.

Since liberty is a providential idea, all who appreciate freedom and attend its growth are in some sense “liberals.” Thus liberalism in a broad sense reaches back to antiquity, to ancient Israel and Greece, and continues on its mission throughout ages. Liberalism in a strict sense, however, began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, at first in the struggle against the Stuarts and later in the organic development of English constitutionalism. Acton traced it to the Whigs, especially to its more conservative current that included such lawyers and politicians as

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*American Revolution*, “Rambler”, n.s. 5, May 1861, p. 17–61 reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 225–229, hereafter referred to as *Political Causes*; Lord Acton, *The Civil War in America: Its Place in History*, a lecture delivered on January 18, 1866 at the Literary and Scientific Institution, Bridgnorth, published in the “Bridgnorth Journal”, January 20, 1866, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 265–265, hereafter referred to as *The Civil War in America*; *Sir Erskine*, p. 73, 84; *Nationality*, p. 424–429, 431–432; Acton to Mary Gladstone, April 24, 1881, [in:] *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary, Daughter of the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone*, ed. H. Paul, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1913), p. 71–74; Add. Mss. 4945. Cf. chapters nine and ten of my forthcoming book *The Long and Winding Road: Lord Acton’s Study of Liberty*.

<sup>10</sup> *Freedom in Antiquity*, p. 8, 11–15; *Sir Erskine*, p. 63; *Arnold’s “Manual”*, p. 145; *Arnold’s “Public Life”*, p. 153; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 25, 197–198, 208, 289.

<sup>11</sup> *Freedom in Antiquity*, p. 7, 24–25; *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 47; *Sir Erskine*, p. 58, 64, 70–72; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 25–26, 28, 42, 152, 161, 192–193, 197–198, 292–293.

John Selden (1584–1654), Baron John Somers (1651–1716), Lord William Pitt the Elder (1708–1778), Lord Charles Pratt (1714–1794) and Edmund Burke, before he switched to the Tories. He barely included John Milton and John Locke into the English current of liberalism because of their appeal to abstract principles. Genuine liberalism also had its roots in colonial America; in fact, a model of polity founded on self-ruling communities.<sup>12</sup> Since the colonies enjoyed liberal charters and self-government, safeguarded religious liberty based on freedom of conscience rather than on toleration, recognized the superiority of natural law (visible especially on the eve of the American Revolution, when the colonists appealed to the heavens against English “oppression”) and built up their order bottom up, they met nearly perfectly most of the Actonian requirements for liberty and true liberalism. Except for tolerating slavery, the early American Republic was the closest to Acton’s idea of a liberal regime. Its constitution applied all separations of powers, classical (*forma mixta*) and modern (Montesquieu), and invented federalism (a new form of division of authority between national and state governments), as well as balanced each branch of government against another. Anglo-American liberalism was thus the closest to Acton’s ideal, while continental liberalism, founded on abstract principles, was essentially illiberal, the side-effect and mirror of continental absolutism.<sup>13</sup>

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Originally our author had a similarly haughty view of the Catholic Church and its mission. Christianity, for him, was naturally the only true religion, while the Catholic Church was its best emanation. Christ’s command: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22: 21; Mark 12: 17) brought a revolutionary change in the relation between the secular and spiritual spheres, even if this change required centuries to have a full impact. First, the maxim rejected the unity of the state and the Church (“the Church and State in one,” as Acton terms it) that was typical in antiquity, Second, it demanded autonomy in spiritual life. The power of the state does not extend to the relationship of the individual with God. In this, the individual and religious groups are free, and civil authority has no right to interfere. For a despotic state and imperial power in Rome that was a new and subversive idea. Third, it endowed political authority with a divine sanction, a legitimacy to act in its own sphere. Another important factor brought by Christianity into state-church relations was the buildup of a power-

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<sup>12</sup> *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 188–221; *Sir Erskine*, p. 72; *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p. 26, 29; *Arnold’s “Manual”*, p. 145; *Arnold’s Public Life*, p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> *Colonies*, p. 180, 183, 184, 186; *Sir Erskine*, p. 72–75, 82, 84; *Protestant Theory of Persecution*, p. 131; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 25, 189–192, 289–293, 295; *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p. 21, 23–24, 33–37, 97; *Political Causes*, p. 225–229; *The Civil War in America*, p. 264–265; *Reports on the Civil War in America*, first printed in “Rambler”, September 1861, p. 424–432, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 288; Acton to Lady Blennerhassett, May 1887, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 277, 280.

ful, hierarchical Church organization, which preserved its independence from the state. The sheer presence of such an organization, however loyal (even subservient) to civil authority, was a challenge for a despotic state. All these factors—as well as the Christian message of love and the Church’s mission centered on the ordinary people, not the privileged—put the new religion on the side of freedom and on a collision course with the power of the ancient state. As a passionate supporter of liberty, Acton did not fail to appreciate the positive role played by Christianity in the history of liberty in antiquity.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned, the full implications of the new religion were felt not immediately but only in the long term. The new Church was overawed with the might of the Roman Empire, “too powerful to be resisted and too corrupt to be converted.” Christians, therefore, avoided the state, claiming to be citizens of another “commonwealth.” This attitude did not safeguard them against waves of persecution and even attempts at annihilation. Persecution was not, however, the worst thing that had happened to the Church and Christianity. After the emancipation of Christianity and the Church’s entrance into the Empire’s establishment, it was the Empire that corrupted the Church, rather than the Church that transformed and uplifted the Empire. The Church was harnessed into state service and gradually succumbed to a position of “a gilded crutch of absolutism.” This tradition of state-church relations survived and flourished in the Byzantine Empire, and, later, passed on to the Russian Orthodox Church. The West avoided that calamity, by undergoing a civilizational catastrophe, the collapse of the Western Empire and the purgatory of Germanic domination. From the point of view of liberty, Acton claims, this was a salutary development: the despotic tradition of imperial Rome was crushed, the power of newly established kingdoms was much weaker, while the Church won independence and a much stronger position vis-à-vis civil authority.<sup>15</sup> Unlike in the East, the Church became a rival of the state, claiming at first autonomy and, in due time, even superiority over secular power.

The prolonged struggle that took place in the high Middle Ages between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, and the Church and state in general, was crucial for the development of liberty in the West. This struggle was, as it were, the medieval form of the division of powers, preventing each side from gaining the upper hand. “To that conflict of four hundred years, we owe the rise of civil liberties,” Acton stressed. Because both sides needed any support they could muster, they

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<sup>14</sup> *Freedom in Antiquity*, p. 27–28; *Sir Erskine*, p. 69; *Mr. Goldwin Smith’s “Irish History”*, p. 83; Lord Acton, *Political Thoughts on the Church*, first published in “Rambler”, n.s. 11, January 1859, p. 30–49, reprinted in *SWLA*, Vol. 3, p. 29, 31; Add. Mss. 5605, p. 47. Cf. G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago 1962, p. 42–43, 136.

<sup>15</sup> *Freedom in Antiquity*, p. 27; *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 30, 32; *Political Thoughts on the Church*, p. 26–28; *Venn’s Life of St. Francis Xavier*, p. 187; *Mr. Goldwin Smith’s “Irish History”*, p. 77–78; Lord Acton, *The States of the Church*, first published in “Rambler” n.s. 2, March 1860, p. 291–323, reprinted in *Essays on Church and State*, p. 89–92; Add. Mss. 5006, p. 78.

called the nations to their aid. The towns of Italy and Germany won their franchises, France got her States-General and England her Parliament ... and as long as [the conflict] lasted it prevented the rise of divine right.

Inequality and privilege were essential characteristics of the medieval notion of liberty, though, and Acton sees it as a fundamental weakness of freedom in that period. Still, the Middle Ages produced limited royal authority, allowed for urban and provincial self-government and guaranteed civic freedom in the form of estate and corporate privileges.<sup>16</sup> Acton views all these developments as a part of a liberal (or proto-liberal) tradition within Western Civilization.

Early modern Europe did not continue medieval achievements in the area of freedom. A convergence of several trends—the Renaissance, Machiavelli's teaching, the rise of the modern nation-state and the Reformation—reversed the processes that began in the Middle Ages. The Renaissance secularized the spirit of the age, thereby weakening the Church; Machiavelli “released government from the restraint of law” and contributed to the rapid growth of royal power, and, finally, Luther subordinated the Church to civil authority. The re-emergence of “the Church and State in one” run parallel to the reappearance of the ancient state, “the greatest force on earth, bound by no code, a law to itself.”<sup>17</sup> This principle applied equally to the new Protestant states as to the old Catholic countries. The Church ceased to be a counterbalance to civil authority and became “a useful ornament about the throne of absolute sovereigns.” The Byzantine-Muscovite pattern of church-state relations and absolute central authority triumphed in the West as well.<sup>18</sup> With few exceptions (the Netherlands, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Swiss cantons), continental Europe succumbed to absolutism.

What saved liberty in the West from extinction was the religious fervor, if not fanaticism, of “the weak,” as Acton says, the ordinary men and women who were ready to do and sacrifice everything for the sake of their faith. When the main Churches failed (both Catholic and Protestant) and deserted their mission, Protestant sects stepped in and propped up the faltering freedom. On the European continent they lost, and their struggle did not increase religious freedom or tole-

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<sup>16</sup> *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 33–37; *Sir Erskine*, p. 69–70; *States of the Church*, p. 108–112; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 86, 119; Lord Acton, *Döllinger on the Temporal Power*, first published in “Rambler”, n.s. 6, November 1861, p. 1–62, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 3, p. 84–85; Lord Acton, *The Political System of the Popes*, first published in “Rambler”, n.s. 1, January 1860, p. 154–165; 3, May 1860, p. 27–38; 4, January 1861, p. 183–193, reprinted in *Essays on Church and State*, p. 127, 153; Acton to Simpson, March 20, 1861, [in:] *The Correspondence of Lord Acton and Richard Simpson*, ed. J. L. Altholz, D. McElrath, 3 vols., Cambridge 1971–1975, Vol. 2, p. 136; Add. Mss. 4940, p. 293; 49–79, p. 218; 49–80, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Lectures on Modern History*, 19–20, 42–43, 62, 66–67, 74, 78, 85–87; *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 37; Add. Mss. 4982, p. 136; 4960, p. 319.

<sup>18</sup> *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 115, 124, 127, 129, 176–188; *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 38–39, 43; *Political Thoughts on the Church*, p. 32; *Roman Question*, p. 146; *Nationality*, p. 416–417; *Protestant Theory of Persecution*, p. 100; *Report on Current Events, July 1860*, p. 496–497; Lord Acton, *Hefele's Life of Ximenes*, first published in “Rambler”, n.s. 3, July 1860, p. 158–170, reprinted in *Essays on Church and State*, p. 383–384, 394; Add. Mass 4428 p. 43; Add. Mss. 4959, p. 209.



ration. But in England and, especially, in the American colonies, they succeeded beyond any expectation, shaping the future course of liberty in the West. In the former, they were the driving force behind the Puritan Reformation that aborted the Stuarts' attempts at absolute power and contributed to the emergence of constitutional monarchy. In the latter, religious dissenters decisively influenced the shape of grass-roots democracy and promoted (though after some hesitation) religious liberty, and the separation of Church and state.<sup>19</sup> Thus, by inciting anti-establishment revolt in England and by laying the foundations for American self-government and civic freedom, the sects were the distant ancestors of the genuine liberalism of the Anglo-American type, which Acton himself professed.

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In 1857, after studies in Munich (1850–1854) and a series of foreign travels, the young Acton finally settled in his family estate in Aldenham, located on England's border with Wales. He was then twenty-three, and full of great plans and hopes for impacting the position of Catholics in England and for reconciling the Church with modern science and liberalism. In Munich, he had studied under the tutorship of Father Professor Ignaz von Döllinger, a Bavarian theologian and Church historian. The four years he spent with Döllinger imbued him with a liberalism of the kind espoused by Burke and Tocqueville, and with a love of history. They also convinced him of the urgent need for rapprochement between the Church and liberalism. The professor probably strengthened his pupil's natural piety, which Acton had acquired at home, and certainly shaped his work habits—studying at least one book a day remained Acton's practice until his death. A cumulative effect of his upbringing and education made our writer a liberal of a singular kind, one who passionately loved freedom, appreciated the role of the Church in the history of liberty and abhorred a doctrinaire brand of liberalism.<sup>20</sup> The Catholic Church in England and its faithful (discriminated against and pushed into a ghetto-like life) as well as the Catholic Church in general (compromised by humiliating service for the absolute state and assaulted by the forces of modernity), seemed as if they needed assistance, and Acton was eager to come to their "rescue." His self-imposed mission at that time was: to rediscover and expose the liberating tradition of the Church; to purify it from the superfluous and absolutist offshoots that stained the Church in the early

<sup>19</sup> *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 41, 46–47; *Sir Erskine*, p. 58; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 24–25, 47, 60, 136, 152, 188–198; *Nationality*, p. 410; *Döllinger on the Temporal Power*, p. 84, 91; Lord Acton, *Secret History of Charles II*, first published in "Home and Foreign Review" 1, July 1862, p. 146–174, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 2, p. 162. See also footnotes no. 12 and 13.

<sup>20</sup> The most up-to-date biography of Acton is Rolland Hill's *Lord Acton* (London 2000). Of a different nature is the old, but still current, intellectual biography of Acton by G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics*, first ed. in 1952. On Acton's intellectual development, see R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 29–31; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 19–24, 69–73; R. L. Schuettinger, *Lord Acton: Historian of Liberty*, La Salle 1976, p. 26–28; O. Chadwick, *Acton and History*, Cambridge 2002, p. 12–13; D. Mathew, *Lord Acton and His Times*, Alabama 1968, p. 19.

modern period; to assist in putting the Church back on its natural tracks of supporting truth and freedom; and, finally, to educate English Catholics.<sup>21</sup>

To achieve his ends, Acton founded, co-financed, edited and contributed as a writer to several journals that voiced lay Catholic and liberal opinion. In chronological order, they were as follows: the bimonthly *Rambler* (1858–1862); the quarterly *Home and Foreign Review* (1862–1864); the weekly *Chronicle* (1867–1868), and finally the quarterly *North British Review* (1869–1871). The last journal coincided with Acton's impassioned but futile activity behind the scenes of the First Vatican Council.

While he sincerely loved his Church and believed in its power of liberating man and woman from political oppression and in teaching them their moral obligations, Acton minced no words if he noticed the Church's deviating from its mission, or still worse, its denial. Furthermore, he firmly upheld that true religion (of course, for him Catholicism was such) and its Church have nothing to fear from the truth, in both exact and social sciences. In history, which was Acton's main field, that meant historical truth (as allowed by research and knowledge), without the slightest attempt at covering up the bad cards in Church history. He was uncompromising in general and, in that which he considered to be historical truth, in particular. Thus, although his writing at the beginning of his editorial work started with what resembled church apologetics, by the end of this activity—after he had, on the one hand, uncovered numerous skeletons in church closets and seen the Church's intolerance and clinging to the old, arbitrary ways, and on the other hand, met with a stone wall of denials and accusations thrown at him—he came to the conclusion that the Catholic Church as an institution was utterly rotten. It seemed to him that the hierarchical Church had betrayed its mission on a wholesale scale, shown no will to mend its ways and, worse, insisted on continuing its current course.

In his early writing in *Rambler* Acton underlined Christianity's and the Church's positive role in the advance of liberty, both in theory and in practice, i.e., how freedom was understood and how it grew in history. To what has been said in this article so far, we can add that in terms of theory, he stressed the crucial position of conscience for religious as well as civil liberty.

The Christian notion of conscience imperatively demands a corresponding measure of personal liberty. The feeling of duty and responsibility to God is the only arbiter of a Christian's actions. With this no human authority can be permitted to interfere. ... The Church cannot tolerate any species of government in which this right is not recognised.<sup>22</sup>

Though the Church itself was slow in comprehending the full implications of freedom of conscience—and Acton would point this out in his later writing—in antiquity and the Middle Ages this meant autonomy in the religious sphere, built

<sup>21</sup> G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 35; O. Chadwick, *Acton and History*, p. 11; D. Mathew, *Lord Acton*, p. 122–123; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> *Political Thoughts on the Church*, p. 29; cf. *Protestant Theory of Persecution*, p. 130.

ding up a church structure independent of political authority and strengthening the institution of the papacy. Whatever imperfections of this understanding of freedom and of the policies which the Church pursued, the end result was beneficial for liberty:

The Church has succeeded in producing the kind of liberty she exacts for her children only in those States which she has herself created or transformed. Real freedom has been known in no State that did not pass through her mediaeval action. The history of the Middle Ages is the history of the gradual emancipation of man from every species of servitude, in proportion as the influence of religion became more penetrating and more universal. The Church could never abandon that principle of liberty by which she conquered pagan Rome.<sup>23</sup>

Acton would later revise some aspects of his early very positive evaluation of the Church's role in antiquity and the Middle Ages (especially with regards to religious persecution), but he would not change his overall assessment. As far as liberty, progress and civilization are concerned, the balance sheet of the Church's mission until the early modern period was unequivocally positive, and no other force could rival its merits in this respect.

Initially, Acton also defended the Catholic Church's record during the Reformation and the rise of absolutism. The main villain was Luther, who subordinated religion and the Church to state authority. This weakened not only Protestant churches vis-à-vis civil authority, but undermined the position of the Catholic Church in countries that remained Catholic. For the example of the German princes—who fattened their treasuries with Church riches and won arbitrary power due to support of Protestant Churches—was followed by Catholic rulers.<sup>24</sup> The original impulse of accommodating the Church to absolutism was thus supplied by Protestantism, while the Church was only a victim:

In modern times the absolute monarchy in Catholic countries has been, next to the Reformation, the greatest and most formidable enemy of the Church. For here she again lost in great measure her natural influence. In France, Spain, and Germany, by Gallicanism, Josephinism, and the Inquisition, she came to be reduced to a state of dependence, the more fatal and deplorable that the clergy were often instrumental in maintaining it. All these phenomena were simply an adaptation of Catholicism to a political system incompatible with it in its integrity; an artifice to accommodate the Church to the requirements of absolute government, and to furnish absolute princes with a resource which was elsewhere supplied by Protestantism.<sup>25</sup>

In his apologetics, the young Acton went as far as absolving the Church from persecuting religious dissenters in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, and condemning only the Protestant persecution. The medieval order had

<sup>23</sup> *Political Thoughts on the Church*, p. 29–30. Acton presented similar views in two other lengthy articles written in that early period: *The States of the Church*, “Rambler” n.s. 2, March 1860, p. 291–323 and *The Political System of the Popes*, “Rambler” n.s. 2, January 1860, p. 154–165; 3, May 1860, p. 27–38 and 4, January 1861, p. 183–193, reprinted in *Essays on Church and State*, p. 86–158.

<sup>24</sup> *Protestant Theory of Persecution*, p. 101–115; *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 107–108; *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> *Political Thoughts on the Church*, p. 32.

religious foundation (faith and the Church were inherently linked with state law and administration) and therefore required the preservation of religious unity. Differences in this respect aroused natural suspicions and often led to persecutions. In these circumstances, toleration was based on privilege, not right, and extended to small religious minorities, such as the Jewish and Muslim ones, who were outside of the Christian and political community. The Catholic persecution was therefore motivated by practical considerations of maintaining the existing political and social order, and religious unity. This was even more so because medieval heretics were also social revolutionaries that undermined the existing regime. Furthermore, it was the state rather than the Church which initiated and executed religious persecution, while the Church played a moderating role in this process and itself fell victim to state policies. For the state took advantage of the persecution to increase its power vis-à-vis spiritual authority and, ultimately, used its might to weaken the Church. The Protestant persecution was entirely different, according to our author. First, it aimed not at maintaining the existing order but at changing it and, second, driven by doctrinal considerations, it pursued dogmatic purity and made the state responsible for the suppression of errors.<sup>26</sup> Convergence of these two factors made the Protestant persecution particularly “aggressive and wholly unlimited.” It contributed to the emergence of a political order that was “worse than the Byzantine system,” and of spiritual power that was more arbitrary than the pope’s. For while the Byzantine emperors and the popes could use their authority only to enforce the existing faith, the Protestant princes possessed “the power to command and to alter ... religion” and acquired “a corresponding absolutism in the civil order.”<sup>27</sup>

Acton did not change his acute judgment of Luther and Protestantism, in general. Until his old age, he held the view that, next to Machiavelli, they were the decisive contributing factors for the rise of absolutism. However, his perspective on Catholic responsibility for the emergence of “a studied philosophy of crime” (as runs one of the most striking of his definitions of absolutism), evolved a great deal, from absolving the Church from this sin to blaming it as a co-culprit.<sup>28</sup> Catholic culpability derives from two approaches, profoundly un-Christian in essence: first, that evil acts are admissible for the sake of religion and, second, that the pope enjoys unlimited power in the Church and ought to have strong, if not arbitrary, authority in the secular domain. Acton branded this attitude and policy as “ultramontanism” and made of the ultramontanists his principal enemies.<sup>29</sup>

The beginning of the conflict between the liberal Acton and the Church authorities was not entirely of his own making. Prior to his joining *Rambler*, the jour-

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<sup>26</sup> Döllinger on the Temporal Power, p. 87; *Protestant Theory of Persecution*, p. 99–100, 106–115, 130–131.

<sup>27</sup> Döllinger on the Temporal Power, p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Freedom in Christianity*, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Acton’s remarks on ultramontanism are ubiquitous in his writing. I provide just a few examples: Lord Acton, *Review of Félix’s Le Progrès par le Christianisme*, “*Rambler*” n.s., 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., 10 July 1858, p. 70–72, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 5–6; Acton to William E. Gladstone, undated [probably 1976], *Selected Correspondence*, p. 41–42; Acton to Lady Blennerhassett, February 1879, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 54–56. Cf. *Ultramontanism*, “Home and Foreign Review” 3, July 1863, p. 162–206, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 3, p. 149–194.

nal ceased to be an organ of Anglican converts (the Oxford Movement), and began to voice the opinion of liberal Catholicism. Its interim editor Richard Simpson (1820–1876) refocused the *Rambler's* attention to biblical research (including Protestant scholarship), scientific criticism of creationism, the development of Church dogmas in history (stressing the role of tradition over scholasticism) and continental (especially French) liberal Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> Acton's "guilt" was that he did not change this line after he became co-owner and co-editor, but fully supported it. A short period of editorship by John Henry Newman, the leader of the Oxford Movement, did not help either. The straw that broke the camel's back was Acton's review of Döllinger's book on temporal power of the pope. Following his professor, Acton pointed out that the papacy did not control any territory for the seven first centuries of its existence and that it could survive without it in modern times. The article published in 1861, when the pope was in danger of losing the rest of the Papal States for the sake of the new Italian state, was bound to provoke a strong reaction in the English hierarchy. To avoid Church censure *Rambler* was closed down.<sup>31</sup>

The new journal, *Home and Foreign Review*, was new only in name. In fact, it preserved the editors (Acton and, informally, Simpson), collaborators and the defiant line of its predecessor. And it was censured by the English primate Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman and by other bishops as soon as it appeared. In Wiseman's words, the new journal spread lies about him but, more importantly, like its predecessor (*Rambler*) it displayed "the absence of all reserve or reverence in its treatment of persons or of things deemed sacred" and showed "habitual preference of uncatholic to catholic instincts ... tendencies and motives."<sup>32</sup> The journal's response was respectful in form, but remained unrepentant in its content. Prepared on the basis of Acton's instructions, it reiterated the editors' view that true faith has nothing to fear from science, even if science and politics have different interests than religion. Authority must defend freedom of conscience, even if heresy could be its outcome, while science must serve the truth even if its results seemingly undermine faith. Principles should never be sacrificed for what appears as expediency, for otherwise, by false protection, the Church could be corrupted. Besides, science and learning are now not hostile to religion as they used to be in the "unscrupulous falsehood of the eighteenth century" (the Enlightenment). Similar theses were published a few months later in a lengthy article titled "Ultramontanism."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See J. L. Altholz, *The Liberal Catholic Movement in England: The "Rambler" and its Contributors, 1848–1864*, London 1962, p. 25–44, 63–82, and passim.

<sup>31</sup> Lord Acton, *Döllinger on the Temporal Power*, "Rambler" n.s., 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 6, November 1861, p. 1–62, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 1, p. 67–127. See also J. L. Altholz, *Liberal Catholic Movement*, p. 164–165, 181–186; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> Wiseman's pastoral letter quoted in R. Simpson, T. F. Wetherell, *Cardinal Wiseman and "The Home and Foreign Review"*, "Home and Foreign Review" 1, October 1862, p. 501–520, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 3, p. 131. See also J. R. Fears, *The Essays in This Volume*, SWLA, Vol. 3, p. xxii–xxiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Cardinal Wiseman and "The Home and Foreign Review"*, p. 128–148; *Ultramontanism*, p. 149–194.

The *Home and Foreign Review* defended scholarly freedom not only in the sciences and history but also in theology, which enraged Church authorities even more. In January 1864 Acton enthusiastically reported on the proceedings of the Congress of Catholic theologians and biblical scholars held in Munich at end of September, 1863. Döllinger, who presided over the Congress, stressed that theologians cannot rely exclusively on scholastic reasoning but should include biblical criticism and historical development of Church dogmas. Christianity is not only a revealed religion, but history as well. This argument was in line with the doctrine of development, which both Newman and Döllinger advocated, and which assumed that Christian dogmas were not fixed once and for all, but their understanding evolved in history.<sup>34</sup> Although Acton could not know it, by the time he published his article, the ideas of scholarly liberty of Catholic scholars were already condemned by Rome. A papal brief addressed to the Archbishop of Munich, sent in December 1863 but published only in March 1864, left no doubt in this respect. Since the papal brief contradicted the basic premise of Catholic liberalism and the line of the *Home and Foreign Review*, and since submitting to Church censorship was not an option for Acton, the editors decided to close the journal down. Acton's "Conflicts with Rome," published in the final issue of the journal, attempted to justify that decision. He once more put forward the basic premises of Catholic liberalism that science and genuine scholarly research cannot contradict religious truth; that errors result from either suppression of truth or separation of science and religion; and that true religion must not be afraid of scientific, free inquiry.<sup>35</sup> The papal brief was still not the worst blow that Catholic liberals suffered from Rome at that time. The Encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the *Syllabus Errorum* published in December 1864 brought a definite end to any prospect for reconciliation between the Catholic Church and nineteenth-century liberalism. Liberalism, progress and modern civilization were listed among errors which the pope rejected.<sup>36</sup>

The last two journals which Acton co-financed and supported by his writing could no longer be deemed as his attempts at reconciliation between the Church and liberalism. Rather, they were his efforts to preserve liberal thinking within Catholicism and to fight illiberal trends within the Church. To avoid ecclesiastical censorship, both journals did not claim to be Catholic, but were secular with close links to the English liberals. The first, the *Chronicle*, was founded three years after the collapse of its predecessor, as if Acton had needed some time to recover from the state of shock resulting from the papal Encyclical of 1864. The *Chronicle* was a short-lived enterprise, closed down less than a year after its foundation. The

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<sup>34</sup> Lord Acton, *The Munich Congress*, "Home and Foreign Review" 7, January 1864, p. 209–244, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 3, p. 195–233. Cf. J. L. Altholz, *The Liberal Catholic Movement*, p. 220–221; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 23; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Lord Acton, *Conflicts with Rome*, "Home and Foreign Review" 4, April 1864, p. 667–696, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 3, p. 234–259.

<sup>36</sup> *Syllabus Errorum* quoted by J. L. Altholz, *Liberal Catholic Movement*, p. 231; see also p. 232–235; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 60–66; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 174.

reasons for its failure were small readership—the journal was too Catholic for liberals and too liberal for Catholics—and the default of its potential sponsors, who did not keep their promise of financing it. The *North British Review* lasted somewhat longer owing to the funds provided by the Liberal Party—its last issue was published in January 1871.<sup>37</sup> For Acton it was a forum to write on foreign politics and to fight against the dogma of papal infallibility.

As said before, Acton's view of the Church and of its role in the history of liberty underwent a profound change. The full extent of this alteration is seen only in his later writing, during and after the First Vatican Council, but already in the late 1860s we see the first signs in Acton's production that illustrate this process. An article titled "Fra Polo Sarpì," published in 1867 in the *Chronicle*, gave him a pretext to attack the early modern papacy for its thirst for earthly power, for corrupting the Church and for aborting the true reform at the Council of Trent. Since Rome's intrigues prevented the Council from limiting the pope's authority and the Church's ambition for political power, "the only remaining force by which they could be permanently curbed was the State." In other words, Acton charged the Church rather than the state for the growth of absolutism and no longer considered it to be a victim of arbitrary royal power. Furthermore, he dismissed de Maistre's view that responsibility for the Spanish Inquisition rests only on the state and that the Roman Inquisition was, by comparison, a nearly innocuous institution. This was not true, according to our historian. Finally, he charged two saints, Pius V and Charles Borromeo, with believing that "the murder of a heretic was ... a meritorious action." If Acton's first two claims show the change of his attitude towards his Church, the third clearly displays a bias against it, since his last accusation was untrue and caused him some embarrassment.<sup>38</sup> The same attitude is exhibited by Acton in "The Massacre of St. Bartholomew," an article on the murder of thousands of the French Huguenots in 1572. Acton went out of his way to prove that the massacre was a premeditated act, sanctioned *ex post* (if not beforehand) by Rome. Herbert Butterfield later proved that he broke the basic rules of a historian's craft in composing this article.<sup>39</sup> The bias was unquestionable. It was as if Acton switched from apologetics to denigrating the Church. It must be added, however, that this bias did not remain a permanent feature of his writing. By the late 1870s, he regained a more balanced view of the Church's role in history, as his two essays on liberty—"The History of Freedom in Antiquity" and "The History of Freedom in Christianity"—show.

<sup>37</sup> J. L. Altholtz, *Liberal Catholic Movement*, p. 238–239; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 154–156; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 63–66; R. L. Schuettinger, *Lord Acton*, p. 66–67.

<sup>38</sup> Lord Acton, *Fra Polo Sarpì*, "Chronicle", March 30, 1867, p. 14–17, reprinted in *Essays on Church and State*, p. 253, 256, 258–259. Accusations against St. Pius V and St. Charles Borromeo led to a storm of protests, including that of Newman. Acton himself admitted he confused Pius IV with Pius V, while his assertions thoroughly rest on the unproven claims of the Italian historian Cesare Cantù. Cf. J. L. Altholtz, *The Liberal Catholic Movement*, p. 237; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 65; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 183–184.

<sup>39</sup> Lord Acton, *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew*, "North British Review" 51, October 1869, p. 30–70, reprinted in SWLA, Vol. 2, p. 198–240. Cf. H. Butterfield, *Man on his Past*, first published 1955, Cambridge 1979, p. 171–201; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 66–68; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 184–185.

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The liberal ideas propounded by our writer and his work as an editor, historian and writer were not well received by the Catholic Church in England. Cardinal Wiseman and his successor Archbishop Henry E. Manning concerned themselves mainly with the restoration of the Catholic episcopate, the protection of the Irish Catholics and the integration of three streams of Catholics in Great Britain: the old English Catholics, the new intellectually minded converts gathered around the Oxford Movement and the discriminated Irish. In relation to these formidable tasks, Acton's preoccupation with liberty, liberalism, truth, history and progress seemed esoteric, if not idiosyncratic. Originally viewed as one of the Church's privileged sons, who would defend it against English anti-Catholic prejudice and discrimination, Acton was increasingly seen as a nuisance and, finally, as a traitor of the Catholic cause. The conflict became particularly acute during and after the First Vatican Council, when Acton barely avoided ecclesiastical excommunication. For he did not only openly side with the anti-infallibilists, but also became the most prominent figure among the laity actively opposing the dogma of papal infallibility.

The longest-reigning pope in history, Pius IX (1846–1878), began his office as a liberal, supporting Italian unification as well as liberalizing the Papal States, of which he was the sovereign. However, the Spring of Nations (1848) on the Italian peninsula became such a painful experience for the pope that it radically changed him. Italian nationalism, originally anti-Austrian, gradually turned against Italian rulers, who were viewed as an obstacle to unification. As a result, Pius had to flee from Rome and spent nearly two years in exile, residing in Gaeta, a border town in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. His return to Rome was not natural either (1849), for Pius owed it only to the French bayonets. These events turned the pope against nationalism and the forces of modernity in general. Maintaining his arbitrary rule in the Church appeared to him the best course in an unfriendly world. The time seemed not opportune for reforms and, if the pope entertained any, they went in the opposite direction to that postulated by the liberal Catholics. No one concerned himself in Rome with such matters as to whether liberty was essential for Christianity, whether (true) liberalism was a twine of Christianity in the secular sphere, or if science confirms rather than denies revelation. It was the ultramontanists, not the Acton-like liberals, who had gained the ear of the pope. The Encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the *Syllabus Errorum* illustrated this well. But the Church document which shocked liberal Catholics so much was not the last word of the pope as far as his grip on the Church is concerned. As of the mid-1860s, the Roman Curia increasingly began to work on the idea of a new dogma on papal infallibility and attempted to win the Catholic opinion to its side. When in June 1868 Pius IX finally called on the bishops for the next General Council to be open in December 1869, the great majority of the ecclesiastics were already in favor of the new dogma.



For Acton the notion of papal infallibility was an anathema. He understood it broadly, just as the ultramontanists meant it—whatever the pope says and does is infallible. This would make the pontiff a superhuman, while the authority he exercised would be unlimited and superior to any civil government. Such an elevation of the pope fundamentally contradicts liberty, but the matter would be still worse if infallibility were projected into the past. This would have made all previous popes infallible, a notion that defies reason, since history knows popes that were extremely corrupt and held heretical opinions. Acton, a pious Catholic at heart, could not watch idly as his beloved Church departed even more from the spirit of true Catholicism. He moved to Rome in November 1869, a month before the Council began its deliberations, and stayed there for seven months, i.e., as long as his cause was not entirely lost. His apartment became the focal point of the minority bishops who opposed the dogma, and the multilingual Acton served as a link among the disorganized delegates. In his feverish efforts, he also tried to enlist his friend, Prime Minister William Gladstone, to his cause and, by leaking confidential information from the Council to the press, he attempted to put pressure on the pope through public opinion. All this, however, was in vain, and the Council voted in favor of the new dogma. In the words of the English Foreign Minister Lord Clarendon, Pius IX “has stood alone against all the representation of the Catholic powers and all the opposition bishops plus Acton, who is worth them all put together,” but, nevertheless, he won.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the new dogma did not receive the meaning which the historian feared so much, but acquired the narrow, innocuous scope that the pope is infallible only when he speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, i.e., on very rare occasions, as subsequent Church history proved.

The Vatican Council was a traumatic experience for Acton. He wrote very little for the next quarter of century, failing to complete his most cherished project—the history of liberty—and no longer entertained any hopes for Catholic-liberal rapprochement. Only once, in 1874, did he become involved in a public controversy concerning the Church when, in reaction to Gladstone’s pamphlet questioning the loyalty of the Catholics, he wrote four open letters to the editors of *The Times*. He dismissed the charges that papal infallibility casts a doubt on the loyalty of the Catholics to civil authority. The new dogma did not change anything in this respect and, for that matter, in the scope and strength of papal authority. Even without infallibility, the popes had enjoyed immense power and, theoretically, could have deposed any “prince.” England therefore has nothing to fear as far as its Catholic subjects are concerned. The letter also gave Acton an opportunity to expose more bad cards in Church history. The aftermath of these publications was Acton’s serious trouble with Archbishop Manning, who took this opportunity to extract from him a clear statement as to whether he adhered to the new Vatican decrees or not. Since Döllinger was excommunicated for his refusal to accept the new

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<sup>40</sup> Earl Clarendon quoted by R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 223; see also p. 221–222; O. Chadwick, *Acton and History*, p. 90–102; G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton*, p. 106–107, 111–113.

dogma, the matter was serious. Acton used all his (in)famous skills in making his language as enigmatic and abstruse as he could, in order to avoid an explicit declaration. Since Acton's bishop found it satisfactory, Manning had to give up, and put the matter to rest. No longer involved in any controversy, Acton's reputation as a lapsed Catholic gradually dissipated and, two decades later, especially after Manning's death (1892), he was once more viewed as a distinguished Catholic, of whom his Church could be proud.

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Had liberalism and the Catholic Church been as Acton wanted them to be, his efforts at bringing them closer would have probably been superfluous, for liberalism and the Church would have been natural allies in the cause of liberty in any case. But since in the nineteenth century they were as they were—liberalism inimical to religion and the Catholic Church as a matter of principle, and the Church fearing free inquiry and viewing liberalism as one of the main culprits of Christianity's predicaments—they remained irreconcilable enemies, and no effort on Acton's part could have changed this. Furthermore, neither did liberalism respect grass-roots democracy and local political tradition that grow organically, nor was Catholicism a religion of love, hostile to arbitrary power and Machiavellian politics. On the contrary, they were the very opposite of Acton's ideals. For his misconceptions Acton paid a high price: misunderstanding on the part of his fellow liberals, threat of excommunication from his beloved Church, and long silence, including on his most cherished project—the history of liberty.

But if today, more than hundred years after Acton's death, we asked the question which of the two forces, Catholicism or liberalism, has evolved more towards the ideals that Acton held dear and renounced its mistakes made in the past? Which has no objection to free scientific inquiry and seeks freedom of conscience? Which of them is now more open to genuine reconciliation and serves the common good? What would have our answer been to such questions? Would it be liberalism, with its disdain for any authority and extreme relativism, yet still aiming at reshaping individuals into its mould, by force if necessary? Or Catholicism, no longer self-assured and repudiating temporal powers, yet still insisting on a universal ethical code and demanding from individuals to do their moral duty?