

## Glaube, Gewissen Freiheit: Lord Acton und die religiösen Grundlagen der liberalen Gesellschaft

**Christoph Böhr, Philipp W. Hildmann, and Johann Christian Koecke (Editors)**

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In the sixth in this collection of sixteen essays, Johann Christian Koecke writes, “Among the people who put their thoughts down on paper there are three types: those whose writings overshadow their lives and personalities; those whose lives overshadow their writings; and those whose lives and writings can only be understood if one interprets each in the light of the other.” (All translations in this review are made by the reviewer.) John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton, according to Koecke, belongs to the third category.

This book on Acton’s life and thought—titled *Faith, Conscience, Freedom: Lord Acton and the Religious Foundations of the Liberal Society*—illustrates the truth of that claim. Each of the contributions to this volume interweaves analysis of Acton’s thought with accounts from Acton’s life to illustrate how Acton the man illuminates Acton the thinker, writer, and scholar, and *vice versa*. Taken together, the essays give us a portrait of a man who, though a product of his time, transcended his time. Almost all of the authors stress the following themes: Acton the committed and pious liberal Catholic; Acton the political thinker; and perhaps most of all, Acton the historian of freedom.

As alluded to above, however, the theme of Acton the man underlies all of the others. One of the contributors characterizes Acton as a *Mensch zwischen den Stühlen*, a vivid German idiom that literally means “a person between the chairs.” The expression translates roughly as “between a rock and a hard place,” but conjures the image of a man “caught in the middle without a place to sit.” Acton was *zwischen den Stühlen* in many ways. He was a liberal yet also a pious and loyal Catholic at a time in which the Church was asserting its authority in opposition to liberal thought. He lived much of his life in England and held an English peerage. He was thus a prominent Catholic in the most Protestant of the large countries in Europe.

Acton the man was also shaped by interaction with many others, and this book includes plenty of insights into Acton’s relationships with people such as the British Prime Minister William Gladstone; Acton’s professor and mentor, the German theologian and historian Ignaz von Döllinger (who separated from the Vatican over the doctrine of papal infallibility); the British theologian and convert to Catholicism John Henry Newman; and the German Romantic poet and novelist Joseph von Eichendorff. Philipp W. Hildmann’s essay concentrates especially on the Catholic intellectual circles in Munich that influenced Acton as a young man, on Acton’s meeting with Eichendorff in Berlin, and on Acton’s break later in life with Ignaz von Döllinger. The book’s first essay, by Horst Möller, puts Acton the man—and Acton the thinker—into historical context, examining the evolution of the idea of religious freedom in both conservatism and liberalism from the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century, and showing how that served as the intellectual backdrop to what

was perhaps the central conflict of Acton's life: his opposition to papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1869–1870.

That brings us to Acton the liberal Catholic. A constant theme of the book is the interplay between Acton's commitment to freedom and his profound Catholic piety. The book brings out two aspects of this interplay especially well: (1) how Acton grounded freedom in Christian truth and (2) how Acton as a committed Catholic opposed papal infallibility. Acton's grounding of freedom in truth was rooted in his belief in the authority of conscience. For Acton, liberty was the right to do what one ought; it was grounded not in an autonomy liberating the individual from all outside claims but in the individual's being bound by his conscience. The essayists in this book elaborate this from many perspectives. Clemens Schneider delves into Acton's assertion that "liberty is the reign of conscience" (207). How is that so? Human beings are bound not by other people, but by divine law and natural law. The conscience is the instrument whereby the divine law is rendered accessible. It is the "voice of God, who comes down to dwell in our souls" (208). Thus, the authority of conscience, rooted not in subjective feeling but in objective truth, grounds the right to individual liberty, and rests on the divine law, which is, implicitly, above all human authority, including papal authority.

Christoph Böhr expounds on the topic of conscience rooted in truth: "Conscience is the counselor of truth—the one and only truth—not the proclamation of a mood, an opinion or a state of being" (267). The doctrine of papal infallibility, in Acton's view, subordinated individual conscience to papal authority, in line with Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864, which characterized freedom of conscience as an "insane folly." Another essay, by Dominik Burkard, shows how John Henry Newman's thought—Newman referred to conscience as the "authoritative oracle"—intersected with Acton's and compares and contrasts how the two men, animated by similar ideas, dealt with the challenge posed by the First Vatican Council and papal infallibility.

However, Acton the pious Catholic was also a political thinker, an aspect of the man that is also illustrated by the infallibility issue. As Böhr points out, Acton saw Pius XI's declaration of infallibility as primarily a political assertion, not as a theological claim. Connecting Acton's view of the political with his most famous statement ("Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely"), one could say that Acton understood politics to a large extent as the corrupting pursuit of power. As Lothar L. Kettenacker explains in his essay, Acton was referring in this famous statement to the papacy—both to the exercise of papal power during the time of the Reformation and to the assertion of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council. More than anything, as this volume makes clear, Acton saw papal infallibility as a power grab—a corrupting assertion of the Church's power over the state and over the "authoritative oracle" of the individual conscience. Böhr discusses how Acton believed that truth, conscience, and freedom are all inevitably subordinated in the pursuit of power. This was why, for Acton, the assertion of infallibility was not as much an error as a sin.

The theme to which the book dedicates the most emphasis is probably the theme of Acton the historian of freedom. The book has much to say on this topic that draws on and

supplements the themes of Acton the Catholic, Acton the politician, and Acton the scholar. Hans Otto Seitschek shows how Acton's view of freedom, "rooted in God, who is truth" (57), enabled Acton the historian to bring to light the essence of freedom as that which allows the human individual to develop his potential as an image bearer of God and servant of truth by uncovering and analyzing its contingent historical manifestations in the ancient and classical worlds and in medieval European "Christendom." Winfried Becker argues that Acton's dedication to truth and freedom enabled him to combine rigorous scholarship with a commitment to "the unconditional validity of moral standards in the discipline of history." Samuel Gregg explains how Acton's belief in divine providence informed his historiography of freedom and how his Christian faith informed his view of the purpose of the study of history. Because he believed in providence, Acton was convinced that freedom was destined to play a central role in history. Because Acton believed in objective morality and objective truth, he was protected both from historical positivism—the attempt to turn history into a purely empirical science—and from allowing his historical scholarship to be distorted by subjective religious presuppositions. The purpose of the study of history, for Acton, was largely to teach and learn the moral difference between the "ought" and the "ought not" (256).

This book is an enlightening overview of Acton's life and the influence of his thought, and it grapples profoundly with his most important ideas. It is engagingly written, intellectually rigorous, and informative. It might have been even better if the contributors had taken a more distanced stance toward Acton. The exposition and analysis of Acton's thought is well done but is pursued almost exclusively from a perspective of implicit approval. The book's greatest shortcoming is perhaps the lack of detailed critical analysis of how Acton managed to reconcile his commitment to freedom, individual conscience, and truthfulness with his decision to stay in the Catholic Church despite its embrace of papal infallibility, a doctrine that, by Acton's own account, posed such a threat to freedom, conscience, and truthfulness. The greatest value of the book is its careful and articulate elucidation of fundamental concepts that are widely misunderstood or neglected in our profoundly relativistic postmodern age: freedom, truth, conscience, and faith.

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