

Lord Acton's Famous Remark

By Sydney E. Ahlstrom

"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Lord Acton

NEW HAVEN, Conn.—As the moral and political crisis of the American nation wears on, and as the economic dimensions of our tribulations have deepened, Lord Acton's famous words on power and corruption have been repeated frequently in private conversations and public discussions.

Very seldom, however, is this statement quoted precisely or credited to Lord Acton, who in 1895 was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University. Probably very few who find his pronouncement so appropriate to our predicament are aware of the unusual circumstances that occasioned its formulation.

Lord Acton was no stranger to power. His paternal grandfather was prime minister of the Kingdom of Naples and his maternal grandfather was the Bavarian Duke of Dalberg. His stepfather, Lord Granville, was British Ambassador to France.

The words first appeared in a letter that John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton wrote in 1887 to Mandell Creighton, who was then a professor at Cambridge University and editor of the "English Historical Review" but later became Bishop of London.

Professor Creighton had recently published the third and fourth volumes of his history, "The Papacy in the Reformation Epoch." This work deals in a conciliatory manner with the scandal-ridden papal court of the Renaissance. Lord Acton, who was a Roman Catholic layman with a long record of criticizing the authoritarianism of the Catholic hierarchy, was profoundly displeased with the work's method and tone. And he put his views on record in a lengthy book review

for the "English Historical Review."

Professor Creighton, he said, "prefers the larger public that take history in the shape of literature, to scholars whose souls are vexed with the insolubility of problems. . . . He is not striving to prove a case, or burrowing towards a conclusion, but wishes to pass through scenes of raging controversy and passion with a serene curiosity, a divided judgment, and a pair of white gloves."

When Professor Creighton, in turn, asked for an explanation of Lord Acton's surprisingly hostile judgments, he received in reply a long letter in which Lord Acton not only exposed the grounds of his lifelong commitment to the idea of liberty but his hostility to censorship, intimidation, and all denials of intellectual freedom.

He speaks directly to the responsibilities of both journalists and historians. The main passage of this letter, containing the famous axiom, deserves extended quotation.

"What amazes and disables me is that you speak of the Papacy not as exercising just severity, but as not exercising any severity. . . . You ignore, you even deny, at least implicitly, the existence of the torture chamber and the stake. . . . The same thing is the case with Sixtus IV and the Spanish Inquisition. . . . In what sense is the Pope not responsible for the Constitution by which he established the new Tribunal? . . . The person who authorizes the act shares the guilt of the person who commits it. . . . If the thing be criminal, then the authority permitting it bears the guilt. Whether Sixtus is infamous or not depends on our view of persecution and absolutism. Whether he is responsible or not depends on the ordinary evidence of history. . . . Upon these two points we differ widely; still more widely with regard to the principle by which you undertake to judge men.

"You say that people in authority are not to be snubbed or sneered at

from our pinnacle of conscious rectitude. I really don't know whether you exempt them because of their rank, or of their success and power, or of their date. . . . I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King, unlike other men, with a favoured presumption that they did no wrong.

"If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. . . . The inflexible integrity of the moral code is to me the secret of the authority, the dignity, the utility of history. If we may debase it for the sake of a man's influence, of his religion, of his party, of the good cause which prospers his credit and suffers by his disgrace, then History ceases to be a science, an arbiter of controversy, a guide to the wanderer. . . . It serves where it ought to reign, and it serves the worst cause better than the purest."

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