

1 Lord Acton's Example

The Roman Catholic — Lord Acton — Denounced 300 Year Old Murders by Popes

A true Christian must recognize and denounce a murder done by his church leader. It is virtue to admit it. It would be complicity to cover it up. It would be compounding the crime to make pathetic illegitimate excuses. Lord Acton gave us a noble example of how true Christians respond to evidence that their religious leaders are criminals, even if such crimes took place 300 years earlier. The taint and criminality does not fade with time.

In the 1860s, Lord Acton evaluated his Roman Catholic Church by the same measure that we here are attempting to do with Calvin and Servetus. We are aiming to promote a repentance from the Reformed Calvinists of today — the spiritual ancestors of Calvin.

Lord Acton in 1859 was the editor of a Roman Catholic monthly paper. When the Pope told him to shut it down, he obeyed. He was a good and faithful Catholic. However, Lord Acton continued to write articles critical of the papacy, and concluded the Roman Catholic Church was guilty of an unrepentant murder 300 years earlier when it killed as heretics the Huguenots in 1572. Acton said the Popes and all of Catholicism owed an apology and appropriate repentance. Acton said this episode also proved the papacy was certainly not infallible. It could only persuade by the force of Scripture, not by tradition or anyone's feelings of loyalty.

To that end, Acton revived the memory of this Huguenot massacre in an article published in 1869 in the *North British Review*. He concluded his book-long essay by saying that there was no evidence to absolve the Roman Church of ***premeditated murder***.¹ Acton argued that it was not only facts that condemned the papacy for this heinous crime, but the whole body of "casuistry" (phony excuses) developed by the church that made it an act of Christian duty and mercy to kill a heretic so that he might be removed from sin.²

Acton pointed out that only when the Roman Church could no longer rely upon force but had to make its case before public opinion that it sought to explain away the Huguenot murders. Yet, in doing so, the church resorted to lies. "The same motive which had justified the murder now promoted the lie," Acton wrote. A bodyguard of lies was fabricated to protect the papacy from guilt for this monstrous sin.³ Acton wrote:

The story is much more abominable than we all believed.... S. B. [St. Bartholomew's] ***is the greatest crime of modern times***. It was committed on principles professed by Rome. It was approved, sanctioned, and praised by the papacy. The Holy See went out of its way to signify to the world, by permanent and solemn acts, how entirely it admired a king who slaughtered his subjects treacherously, because they were Protestants. To proclaim forever that because a man is a Protestant it is a pious deed to cut his throat in the night....

1. His article entitled "Massacre of St. Bartholomew," was published in the *North British Review* in 1869, and later reprinted in Acton's work *History of Freedom* (MacMillan, 1907) at 101.

2. Thanks are given for the inspiration to this section to John Robbins, The Trinity Foundation (April 4, 2005), from his article at http://www.trinityfoundation.org/horror_show.php?id=33 (accessed 2/18/2008).

Acton said that for three centuries the Roman church's canon law had affirmed that the killing of an excommunicated person was not murder, and that allegiance need not be kept with heretical rulers. Legitimized murder and authorized treason were part of the Roman church's official teachings. As a result of such license for murder, Charles IX of France in killing the Huguenots was praised by the Catholic church as a good Catholic. Soon after the mass slaughter of innocents in their beds, Charles was highly praised by the pope for having killed so many of these Huguenots.

Acton contended that these acts of murder by the Roman church's leaders had discredited them as a source of reliable teachers.

Incidentally, another Roman Catholic critical of his church on this principle was Von Dollinger (1799-1890). This Bavarian was a Doctor of Theology and Professor of Canon Law at the Catholic Universities of Landshut and Munich. In a work praised by the famous Prime Minister of England, Gladstone, as "the weightiest and most worthy of documents," Von Dollinger wrote in 1869:

A man is not honest who accepts all the Papal decisions in questions of morality, for **they have often been distinctly immoral**; or who approves the conduct of the Popes in engrossing power, for **it was stained with perfidy and falsehood**; or who is ready to alter his convictions at their command, for his conscience is guided by no principle.¹

As thanks, Von Dollinger was publicly excommunicated by the Catholic Church in 1871.² Acton after studying the same materials upon which Dollinger relied likewise wrote:

The **papacy contrived murder and massacre on the largest and also on the most cruel and inhuman scale**. They were not only wholesale assassins but they made **the principle of assassination a law of the Christian Church** and a condition of salvation.... [The Papacy] is the fiend skulking behind the Crucifix.³

3. The effectiveness of these lies can be measured by looking at the duped writer of "St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Bartholomew's_Day_Massacre (2/18/2008). Apparently oblivious to Lord Acton's research, the author writes of the killings: "The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre (Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy in French) was a wave of Catholic **mob violence** against the Huguenots" and "From August to October, similar **apparently spontaneous massacres** of Huguenots took place in other towns, such as Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lyon, Bourges, Rouen, and Orléans."

Just as it was important for Calvinists to shift blame from Calvin to Servetus or others, the *Wikipedia* writer is only aware apparently of three theories of culprits in advance, but none of them mention Acton's evidence dug up from papal records of the pope's nuncio and cardinal as the direct orchestrators! The *Wikipedia* writers notes Janine Garrisson's theory that it was Catherine de Medici and her Catholic advisers who were the principal culprits, as if the hand of the pope was distant and uninvolved. The second theory is by Thierry Wanegffelen that the member of the royal family with the most responsibility in this affair was the Duke of Anjou. However, nowhere in this article is mention of the most famous piece of all time: Acton's *St. Bartholomew's Massacre*. The obfuscation continues, much like the obfuscation of the responsibility of Calvin for Servetus' death.

1. Von Janus [Pseud. for J.J.I. Dollinger], "The Pope and the Council," *The North British Review* (N.Y.: Oct. 1869) Vol. 1, 67, at 70 (translation and reprint attributed to Von Janus, *Der Papst und Das Council* (Leipzig, 1869).) This was "supposed at first to be by Acton," but in fact Von Janus was actually J.J.I. Dollinger, proven by Gladstone's letter of October 10, 1869 to Dollinger. See William Gladstone, *The Gladstone Diaries* (ed. H.C.G. Matthew)(Oxford University Press, 1982) Vol. VII at 144-145. Gladstone explained that he suffered "indignation" to whatever "curtails and disfigures within her borders the common inheritance of the Christian faith." *Id.*, at 145. His next letter urges E.B. Pusey to read this *Pope and the Council*, as it "profoundly struck" him. *Id.* In the article on "Johann Dollinger," in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913) V:98, it acknowledges he wrote *Papst*.

2. "Johann Dollinger," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913) Vol. 5 at 94.

As Lord Acton (along with Dollinger) tried faithfully to correct his church, while always remaining a Catholic, he wrote his famous letter dated April, 1887, to Bishop Mandell Creighton. In it, Acton made his most famous pronouncement about the papacy:

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

As the *Encyclopedia* points out, “Most people who quote Lord Acton’s Dictum are unaware that it refers to Papal power and was made by a Catholic, albeit not an unquestioning one.”¹

The most stunning observation, however, was Acton’s feelings towards those Catholics who ***connive to condone these acts of murder out of loyalty to the pope***. He said this is not mere error, but crime itself — the approval of murder after-the-fact.

What made these conniving excuses more deplorable is that these were men who professed religion. Acton said it made their crime by ratification also sacrilegious. ***Their consciences became warped due to a desire to defend the indefensible***. This insightful statement, which applies with equal force to a dozen Calvinist-inspired accounts of the Servetus trial, should pique the conscience of every loyalist of Calvin. It is no good to find pathetic excuses for Calvin’s conduct rather than to “renounce” him as Acton said he was compelled to do of the Papacy itself. He says:

Was it better to renounce the papacy out of horror for its acts, or to condone the acts out of reverence for the papacy? The Papal party preferred the latter alternative. It appeared to me that such men are ***infamous in the last degree***. I did not accuse them of error, as I might impute it to Grotius or Channing, but ***of crime***. I thought that a person who imitated them for political or other motives worthy of death. But those whose motive was religious seemed to me worse than the others, because that which is in others the last resource of conversion is with them the source of guilt. The ***spring of repentance is broken, the conscience is not only weakened but warped***. Their prayers and sacrifices appeared to me the most awful sacrilege.²

Acton called his fellow Catholics to repent rather than distort their beliefs to accept the intolerable. Calvinists who have bent the truth repeatedly to exonerate the inexorable have fallen prey to the same “weakened” and “warped” conscience. It is time to repent from this compounding sin, and denounce Calvin as the murderer he indubitably was.

3. John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *Selections from the Correspondence of the First Lord Acton* (Longman’s Gree, 1917) at 55 (letter of 1879).

1. See “John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton,” *Wikipedia* (2/18/2008).

2. John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *Selections from the Correspondence of the First Lord Acton* (Longman’s Gree, 1917) at 55.