Vatican II: Did it accept Liberalism?

There is a perception that Vatican II erred by accepting a previously condemned version of liberalism. For example, Marcel Lefebvre (d.1991) even entitled a section in one of his books:

'Vatican II, The Triumph of Liberalism' (Against the Heresies, Chp.6).

Is this an accurate perception of Vatican II?

1. Liberalism(s)

Exploring the idea of liberalism is complicated, because there are different versions of liberalism. For example, economic or classical liberalism is not the same as political or philosophical liberalism.

Liberalism can even be viewed as just an attitude of openness to new ideas, an openness which can be contrasted with a conservatism which prefers older ideas or practices. In this sense St. John Henry Newman (d.1890) can sometimes be described as a 'liberal.' (See Newman and Liberalism).

The existence of different types of liberalism means that it is important to clarify precisely which version of Liberalism, the Church had rejected before Vatican II. We can see this in an 1888 encyclical by Pope Leo XIII where he stated:

'...The fundamental doctrine of rationalism is the supremacy of the human reason, which... proclaims its own independence, and constitutes itself the supreme principle and source and judge of truth. Hence, these followers of liberalism deny the existence of any divine authority to which obedience is due, and proclaim that every man is the law to himself... (Libertas, #15)

This text reveals two features of what the Church condemned as liberalism. The last sentence notes that Liberalism turns people into *laws unto themselves.* And the linkage between the first

and second sentences show that liberalism is essentially the demand for freedom to live a life which accords with a rationalist view of the supremacy of human reason.

That understanding of liberalism was widespread in the Nineteenth century. We can see it in a contemporaneous 1886 book which was explicitly approved by the Vatican. It stated that:

'(Liberalism) asserts the sovereignty of the individual… and enthrones rationalism in the seat of authority' (Liberalism is a sin, chp.3).

As liberalism is closely related to rationalism it means that if we are to understand what the Church rejected as liberalism, then it is important to be clear about what it understood as rationalism.

2. Rationalism

There are essentially two types of rationalism

1 Methodological rationalism

2 Principled rationalism

Methodological rationalism is essentially what we mean by the use of logic and argument. When people say that it is rational (given the meaning of the symbols) to conclude that 2+2=4, they are following the methodology of logic and argument. They are being *methodologically rational*.

With a very few exceptions, Christians have almost invariably accepted that they should be *methodologically rational.* This means (minimally) that Christians typically accept that they should avoid contradicting themselves, or making assertions which are contrary to evidence.

One of the clearest statements of a commitment to *methodological rationalism* is to be found in the teaching of Vatican I (1870). In Dei Filius the council stated:

'…the submission of our faith should be in accordance with reason…' (Chp 3, #3)

'there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason…' (Chp 4, #5)

Vatican I insisted that (apparent) contradictions can only arise when either faith is misunderstood, or when the evidence supplied by reason is misconstrued. The reason for the council's insistence on such a view is that it was committed to the *methodological rationalism* which rejected the acceptability of contradictions between faith and reason.

3. Principled Rationalism

When people reason logically they appeal to principles which constitute (or contribute to) premises within their arguments. When theologians argue, their principles tend to come from Scripture or Tradition.

When non-religious people argue, if they appeal to rationalism (*principled rationalism)* then they are claiming that the principles within arguments should be worked out and established by human minds (ie by 'reason alone'). A principle might happen to be shared with a religious person (like the idea that murder is unacceptable), but as long as that principle *can* be arrived at by a human mind working alone, and particularly by a mind working apart from religion, then it counts as a rationalist (*principled rationalist)* claim.

On the surface *principled rationalism* looks like it is the opposite to religion. But in practice people can hold their apparently-rational principles with a zeal which puts religions to shame. We see this occurring in some contemporary debates about gender Identity issues, where advocates of particular viewpoints can struggle to recognise the potential fallibility of their views. (For details, see Are there limits to what people can identify as?).

Christianity rejects *principled rationalism.* In 1864 Pius IX condemning the claim that:

> 'Human reason, without any reference whatsoever to God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, and of good and evil' (Syllabus of Errors, 1864, #3).

Vatican I (1870) repeated that rejection:

> 'Nor does the church forbid... (rational) studies to employ... (their) own proper principles and method:... but... (they must) not... go... beyond their proper limits (and) intrude upon what belongs to faith...' (Dei Filius Chp 4, #12)

One of the reasons why the Church is so insistent upon rejecting *principled rationalism* is that it is effectively claiming that Christianity is irrelevant to the determination of morality and truth.

To put it another way, the Church rejected *principled rationalism* because it was effectively manifesting as an alternative pseudo-religion, which was trying to replace Christian principles (from Scripture and Tradition) with its own principles (from human reason). And in doing so, it typically operated with an unacceptable illiberalism and intolerance. (For details see John Courtney Murray, 'How Liberal is Liberalism?' and Pope Benedict XVI on the tyranny of relativism)

4. Vatican II and Liberalism

If Vatican II erred by accepting a condemned liberalism, then we should expect to see evidence in council documents that it accepted the *principled rationalism,* which liberalism insisted upon having the freedom to pursue.

However, the documents of Vatican II show a rather different perspective. Commenting on human rights, for example, Vatican II stated:

> 'The Church... proclaims the rights of man... and greatly esteems the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere fostered. Yet these movements must be penetrated by the spirit of the gospel...' ([Gaudium et Spes](), #41).

Principled rationalism insisted that ideas should come form human minds (alone). Vatican II rejected that idea, insisting that ideas must also be 'penetrated by the spirit of the gospel.'

At the heart of *principled rationalism* is the assumption that people can, and should be able to divide their minds, advocating religious principles in religious contexts, but advocating purely rational principles (*principled rationalism*) which come from their own minds, in non-religious contexts. Using particularly forthright language Vatican II utterly rejected that view as one of the 'more serious errors of our age:'

> 'Nor... are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age' ([Gaudium et Spes](), #43).

Pope Leo XIII condemned liberalism because it made each person a 'law to himself' with no divine authority to temper thoughts and actions in non-religious contexts. Vatican II agreed in rejecting precisely that version of liberalism.

5 . Post Vatican II Church Teaching

If Vatican II had changed Church teaching about liberalism, we should expect to see *principled rationalism* promoted in Church documents after the council, allowing Christians to sometimes draw up their own principles, independently of Church teaching. On the contrary the Church has continued to reject that idea.

In 2002 Pope John Paul II approved a document which stated:

> '...There cannot be two parallel lives in the.. existence (of Catholics): on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual life', with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social responsibilities, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture...' ([The Participation of Catholics in Political Life](), #6).

Pope Benedict XVI echoed similar ideas in 2009, when he stated:

'Denying the right to...bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development...' ([Caritas in Veritate](), #56).

Perhaps the clearest example of how the *principled rationalism* of liberalism manifests in the modern world, is to be found in controversies over how politicians vote. For example, a politician might claim to be Catholic in a religious context, such as receiving communion; while also acting against Church teaching in non-religious contexts, such as voting for abortion. (For details see [Eucharistic denial over abortion]()).

It is that kind of liberalism which was rejected by Leo XIII in the nineteenth century. And it is precisely that kind of liberalism which was rejected by Vatican II, and which continued to be rejected after Vatican II.

6. Liberalism and Religious Freedom

Despite the clarity of Vatican II's rejection of what Leo XIII condemned as liberalism, people may say that Vatican II promoted liberalism because it promoted religious freedom, and religious freedom was previously rejected by the Church as an example of liberalism.

On the surface this can seem like a plausible argument. The 1864 [Syllabus of Errors]() does indeed list claims about religious freedom in its section on liberalism. For example, it condemned the claim that:

> '...it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship' ([Syllabus, #77](), See also claim #78 and #79).

However, it is logically fallacious to construct an argument from the fact that Liberalism (the antecedent) approves of religious freedom (the consequent) to then claim that Vatican II's endorsement of religious freedom is an endorsement of liberalism. That kind of reasoning falls victim to the [fallacy of affirming the consequent](). (For details of that fallacy see [Did Vatican II endorse Indifferentism?]()).

We can also see that there is a significant difference between what the Syllabus of Errors described as religious freedom, and what Vatican II actually approved. The Syllabus condemned the idea that people should be free FROM religion, in order to be able to come up with their own ideas from human reason alone (ie *principled rationalism*). Vatican II agreed in rejecting *principled rationalism*, and so what it was approving with religious freedom was the idea that people should be free FOR religion. (See [Religious Freedom: Did Vatican II change Church doctrine?]()).

What this means is that Vatican II's position on religious freedom cannot be cited as evidence for the separate claim that Vatican II approved of liberalism.

7. The Fallacy of Equivocation

One of the problems of discussing Liberalism is that the word 'liberal' can have many different meanings. (See section 1). When words can have different meanings then arguments involving those words can easily fall into the fallacy of Equivocation.

That fallacy occurs when an argument depends upon a word having different meanings. Consider the following argument:

1) Bats are manufactured

2) Manufactured objects do not have mothers

3) Bats do not have mothers.

This is an uncontroversial argument about *sports* bats. But it would be completely wrong as an argument about the animals which are bats. If a person used the word 'bat' in its sport sense, in order to establish the premise (ie the first line) and then tried to draw a conclusion about animal bats in the third line, then the fallacy of equivocation would occur and the argument would be wrong.

Some of the arguments that Vatican II accepted a condemned liberalism follow a similar structure to the argument about bats. For example:

1) Approving of new ideas is liberalism

2) Vatican II approved of new ideas

3 Therefore Vatican II was guilty of the error of liberalism

Vatican II may indeed have been 'liberal' in the sense of approving of some new ideas, but that does not mean Vatican II was liberal in the sense of the word which was previously condemned by pope Pius IX and pope Leo XIII. To jump from a perception that Vatican II was liberal (in one sense) to the conclusion that it accepted the condemned idea of liberalism, is to fall victim to the fallacy of equivocation.

8. Conclusion

Words like 'liberal' and 'liberalism' can have different senses. In some senses, 'liberalism' has been condemned by the Church. In other senses, theologians like John Henry Newman can be called liberal and their liberalism is compatible with their also being canonised saints.

When people accuse Vatican II of being committed to a previously condemned version of liberalism, it is important to be clear about precisely what was condemned, and about exactly what Vatican II said. Clarifying those matters shows that Vatican II did not in fact accept the condemned version of liberalism. On the contrary, it was absolutely explicit in re-rejecting that condemned liberalism as 'one of the most serious errors of our age.' Church teaching after Vatican II has continued to reject that condemned version of liberalism.

This means that it is not accurate to accuse Vatican II of accepting a previously condemned version of liberalism.