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CATHOLICISM AND LIBERALISM
Contributions to American Public Philosophy

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Contents

List of contributors
Preface

Introduction
R. Bruce Douglass

PART I HISTORICAL CONFLICTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

1 The failed encounter: the Catholic church and liberalism in the nineteenth century
   Peter Steinfels

2 American Catholics and liberalism, 1789–1960
   Philip Gleason

3 Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism
   Joseph A. Komonchak

4 Liberalism after the good times: the “end of history” in historical perspective
   R. Bruce Douglass

PART II NEW ENCOUNTERS AND THEORETICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

5 A communitarian reconstruction of human rights: contributions from Catholic tradition
   David Hollenbach
CHAPTER 3

Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism

Joseph A. Komonchak

The Second Vatican Council can be read as the event in which the Catholic church significantly reassessed modern society and culture and the attitudes and strategies it had adopted towards them in the previous century and a half. Those earlier attitudes and strategies had been founded in a consistent repudiation of an ideology and praxis summed up in the word “liberalism.”

“Liberalism” is, of course, notoriously difficult to define, and the history we are studying in this volume is in good part also a history of interpretations and evaluations of the word. But in the minds of most Catholic popes, bishops, and apologists over the last two centuries, it had a clear reference which may first be illuminated by the literally diabolical lineage they imagined for it. Liberalism had its origins in Satan’s “Non serviam” but only took on systematic form in the Lutheran revolt against the church’s authority and on behalf of free examination, in the naturalism of the Renaissance, in the Enlightenment’s repudiation of tradition, authority and community, in the secularization of the political sphere, in the possessive individualism of capitalist economics, and in the cultural anarchy produced by an unrestrained freedom of opinion, speech, and the press. Common to all these developments were an exaltation of the individual and a definition of freedom as exemption from external constraint.

If on this view the original sin that gave rise to liberalism was Satan’s and Adam’s rejection of God’s will, its modern triumph was accomplished by the emancipation of large areas of human life from the Lordship of Christ exercised through the teaching and laws of the church. The separation of church and state implied that political society can be organized and directed without being undergirded and legitimated by religious unity. Economic life ceased to be regulated by religious and moral norms and was now to be governed by its own laws, which could be expected to function automatically.

Philosophy became autonomous, defining itself by the absence of authority. Religion no longer had anything to do, then, with the spheres of politics, economics, and culture and now would find its sole place at the margins of society where it became a personal ornament of those so disposed. “Liberalism,” in the mind of this typical Catholicism, was the theoretical and practical system which denies religion significance for the public sphere. This liberalism was, therefore, rejected as “sin,” as “the rendez-vous of all heresies,” and, because it denied the need for Christ the Redeemer and the role of the church, “apostasy.”

It was this privatizing of religion that the church consistently opposed since the time when, so it was thought, it first displayed its true colors in the French Revolution. This is the common thread that runs, despite some important changes, through the actions of the popes from Pius VI’s repudiation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, to Gregory XVI’s condemnation of an emergent “liberal” Catholicism, Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors, Leo XIII’s repudiation of the liberal notion of church-state relations, Pius X’s battle-cry: “To restore all things in Christ,” Pius XI’s exaltation of the Kingship of Christ, down to Pius XII’s consecration of a sick world to the Queenship of Mary. God and Christ had been denied their rights in favor of “the rights of man,” and the task of the church in the modern world was to bring it back to the Redeemer and to his church.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the church constructed itself as a counter-society legitimated by the counter-culture of its basic faith. Central dogmas and devotions were articulated in such a way as to stress their anti-modern, anti-liberal meanings and implications. This counter-ideology was embodied in the structures of an alternate society. Catholic organizations and movements multiplied to insure that Catholics would primarily associate with one another, and, thus immunized from the contagion of liberalism, would be equipped to undertake the battle to restore Christ’s rights. These popular forms of association were designed to supply for the absence of the political support the church had once been able to count on. But while the church had grave reservations about the centralized, bureaucratized nation-state, it did not hesitate to borrow from it new ways of organizing its own political structure, as when a Code of canon law replaced the body of traditional case-law, and new ways of legitimating an increasingly centralized regime, as when the First
Vatican Council defined a universal primacy of the pope in terms of modern models of sovereignty. Most of the internal controversies in the Catholic church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have revolved around the accuracy and adequacy of this often undifferentiated, religiously motivated rejection of the modern liberal experiment. In most instances from Lamennais to Murray, those who suggested differentiations or accommodations were made to suffer for their efforts by those who had made their own Pius IX’s blanket condemnation of the proposition that “the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile and accommodate himself to progress, liberalism, and recent civilization.” 

It would be the Second Vatican Council that would permit the most dramatic and important challenge to the apocalyptic reading of the modern world that occasioned and legitimated the modern Roman Catholic counter-culture. I propose in this essay to discuss how the Council’s engagement with liberalism challenged the attitudes and strategies of this sub-culture, to explore the historical and methodological issues that were at stake in the conciliar debate, and to reflect on their continued relevance today.

VATICAN II

The first major challenge came in a famous passage in the opening address of Pope John XXIII. The Pope complained that he often encountered people around him who could see nothing but calamity and ruin in the modern era, who believed things were always becoming worse, as if the end of the world were near. They spoke as if in the past everything had been advantageous to the church, ignoring the degree to which the protection and favor of the state were often purchased at the loss of the church’s freedom. In a dramatic statement, Pope John flatly declared his disagreement with “these prophets of doom.”

The pope’s sharp words were a repudiation of the idealized picture of medieval Christendom which some were still using as the criterion by which to assess and repudiate the developments that mark the modern era. It is likely that the pope was referring to the authors of the doctrinal texts that had been prepared over the previous two years for discussion and, it was expected, rapid approval by the bishops at the Council. With the exception of the draft on the Liturgy, these documents were a concise reaffirmation of the positions and strategies adopted by the church, under Roman direction, for the previous century and a half. They had been composed under the direction of officials of the Roman Curia who also occupied key roles in the preparatory commissions.

Behind the theological texts, there lay a view of modern social, political, and cultural developments that was expressed most clearly and succinctly by the Holy Office, two years earlier, when it indicated what challenges and threats the Council should address. In the introduction to its proposal, it described the errors which, although condemned by Vatican I, were reviving and threatening to subvert Christianity. Philosophical rationalism, theological emanationism, and political liberalism were now taking on new forms: naturalism, atheist humanism, evolutionism, relativism, indifferentism, materialism, Marxism, laicism, immanentism. The doctrinal texts produced during the following two years by and large reflected this negative assessment of modern society and culture.

It was this “almost neurotic denial of all that was new” that Pope John was criticizing in his opening remarks. Where the preparatory texts saw calamity and ruin, the pope insisted could be found opportunity for the Gospel, “a new order of human relations,” the challenge of fulfilling “God’s higher and inscrutable designs.” He therefore proposed that the Council undertake a different task from the simple repetition of what had been taught before, for which a Council was not necessary. The Council instead should undertake a twofold task: a renewed exploration of the church’s biblical and traditional patrimony and a simultaneous review of the “new conditions and forms of life introduced into the modern world.”

Two slogans at the time encapsulated the two projects: ressourcement and aggiornamento.

In a speech delivered only a month before the Council opened, Pope John had proposed a distinction which was taken up by others and became an easy and perhaps over-simplified way of describing the Council’s work: the distinction between the church ad intra and the church ad extra. Some people have even used the distinction to sort out the conciliar documents, with such texts as the documents on the Liturgy, the church, and Divine Revelation falling under the first rubric, while the texts on Religious Freedom, Non-Christian Religions, and the church in the Modern World are placed under the second. Tensions both at the Council and since have led some to harden the obvious differences in the two kinds of texts, and a choice
judgments and evaluations about the problems created by modern developments, but the attitude of “solidarity,” “respectful affection,” and “dialogue” which the Council chose to adopt towards the modern world (GS 3) required a prior effort to understand and evaluate its distinctive character.

A similar effort is visible in the Council's description of the modern understanding of freedom as autonomy and self-responsibility, giving birth to “a new humanism, for which man is primarily defined by his responsibility for his brothers and for history” (GS 55). It also led the Council, in responding to the widespread belief that religion endangers rightful human autonomy, not only to reject the idea that autonomy must mean disregarding our relation to the Creator but also to insist on the legitimate meaning of the word:

If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves have their own laws and values which are gradually to be discovered, exploited and ordered by man, then it is entirely legitimate to demand it, and this is something which not only is claimed by men of our day but agrees also with the Creator's will. For by the very nature of creation, all things are endowed with their own solidity, truth, and goodness, their own laws and order. For that reason methodical research in all branches of knowledge, if it is carried out in a truly scientific way and in accord with moral norms, will never really conflict with faith, since profane realities and the things of faith have their origin from the same God... That is why we must deplore certain attitudes, which sometimes have been present among Christians because of a failure to perceive the rightful autonomy of science, attitudes which have occasioned conflicts and controversies that have led many to think that faith and science are opposed to one another. 11

Only after this fundamental distinction did the Council then address the concrete history of human activity, interpreting it theologically in terms of the age-old dialectic of sin and grace and offering the central Christian message of redemption by which “all human activities, which are daily endangered by pride and inordinate self-love, are to be purified by the cross and resurrection of Christ and brought to their perfection” (GS 37). Human activity is not obliterated by the grace of the Gospel, but purified and fulfilled in Christ. As Gaudium et Spes says later, “The fact that the same God is both Savior and Creator, Lord of human history and of the history of salvation, does not mean that in this divine order the autonomy of the creature and particularly of man is taken away; on the contrary, this autonomy is restored to its dignity and confirmed in it” (GS 41).
The pertinence of this fundamental methodology to the discussion of liberalism should be apparent. The modern church’s repudiation of liberalism opposed an ideal of freedom and autonomy which rested on a belief that one must choose between freedom and order, autonomy and creaturehood. This led, on the one hand, to Feuerbach’s famous cry, “To enrich man, one must impoverish God,” and, on the other, to the not uncommon Catholic habit of counterposing “the rights of God” to “the rights of man.” The result was the cul-de-sac in which “Enlightenment” was considered by some to require emancipation from religion and modernity was thought by others to be nothing but “apostasy.” The only way out of that dead-end was to start making distinctions which both sides had often been unwilling to make.

On the Council’s part, this resulted in a much more positive appreciation of the driving principles of modernity than had been common before. The church not only had something to teach and to give the modern world; it had something to learn and to receive as well (GS 40–45). The distinctive forces and principles of the modern achievement could be acknowledged, not simply as an unfortunate present condition, but as ways in which the human race has begun more effectively to assume its God-given self-responsibility: “Far from considering the conquests of man’s genius and courage to be opposed to God’s power as if he set himself up as a rival to the Creator God, Christians ought to be convinced that the achievements of the human race are a sign of God’s greatness and the fulfillment of his mysterious design” (GS 34).

This does not mean that the Council found nothing to criticize. In fact, Gaudium et Spes pointed out in many places the imbalances, injustices, and anxieties that modern developments had produced. As its distinctive response, the church offered its central teachings about God, Christ, and human persons—a Christologically centered humanism. This humanism can fully respect today’s impetus towards human self-responsibility and self-realization, while identifying and responding to the evils that attend this impetus by proclaiming the message about Christ, sin, and redemption. In this broad and deep Christian humanism, the adjective does not cancel out the noun, as too often happened in “Catholic catastrophism.” Nor does the noun exile the adjective, as too often occurred in doctrinaire liberalism.

On the foundations articulated in the first four chapters of Gaudium et Spes, the Council went on to speak about particular spheres of the modern world: marriage and the family, the world of culture, economic and social life, the political community, and the international community. In each sphere it attempted to articulate the encounter between fundamental Catholic beliefs and values and the specific conditions of modern life.

Perhaps most pertinent to our interests are the sections on economics and politics. The Council’s statements on both spheres were governed by the general principle articulated in GS 43: “One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives.” These chapters were aimed at the individualistic morality that often underlies this split, the danger that modern differentiations of human life will consign religion to the sphere of the private and the intimate. If this is part of what is considered to constitute liberalism, then the Council clearly repudiates it, as, for example, when it insists on the pertinence to the field of economics of basic Christian truths and values (GS 63–72).

If political liberalism is taken to mean the assumption that the ordered life of society can do without those truths and values, the Council clearly opposed that also. The Council believed it possible to provide a religious legitimation for modern developments toward constitutional democracy (GS 73–75). But, given the modern Catholic attitude towards the question of church–state relations, it is quite striking that the Council did not deal with this issue in terms of institutional relationships. There is only the very quiet repetition of the traditional thesis: “The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields” (GS 76). Traditionally, this sentence prefaced a long and detailed analysis of the juridical relations that ought to exist between the two “perfect societies.”12 The Council, however, was content to speak simply of the need for the two communities to cooperate, with the church’s contribution deriving from her preaching of her distinctive message: “By preaching the truth of the Gospel and by clarifying all the spheres of human activity through its teaching and the witness of the faithful, the Church respects and promotes the political freedom and responsibility of citizens.” But if, in turn, the church makes use of temporal realities to accomplish its purpose, there is one that it would no longer count on: “It never places its hopes in any privileges accorded to it by civil authority; indeed, it will give up the exercise of certain legitimately acquired rights whenever it becomes clear that
their use will compromise the sincerity of its witness or whenever new circumstances require another arrangement.” (GS 76). If not a formal or complete rejection of the policy of concordats, this statement notably relativized an important practice of the Catholic church over the last two centuries. The church’s effort to influence modern society would no longer be tied to or considered to coincide with its relationship with the state. This new stance was spelled out in more detail and consequence in the Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom.

Dignitatis Humanae

It was over the text of Dignitatis Humanae that the contest between liberalism and Catholicism was most dramatically fought at the Council. The Declaration on Religious Freedom remains the trump card played by those who accuse the Council of departing from Catholic truth and of capitulating to liberalism, by which, of course, they mean the evil archetype condemned by Council authorities and apologists in the previous century. The evaluation of the Council’s stance very much depends on whether this ideal-type represents all that can be meant by the word “liberalism.”

The Declaration formally committed the Catholic church to the principle of religious freedom in modern society. It first defined this freedom negatively as “freedom from coercion in civil society” (DH 1). The civil right was then said to rest on the dignity of human persons who, if they are obliged to pursue truth and especially religious truth, cannot do so if they do not enjoy both “psychological freedom and immunity from external coercion” (DH 2). The truth can only be discovered by free inquiry and only acknowledged by free acts of faith. And this search and discovery transcend the sphere of the state’s proper authority: “Civil authority, whose proper purpose is to care for the common temporal good, should acknowledge and favor the religious life of citizens, but it must be said to exceed its limits if it presumes to direct or to impede religious acts” (DH 3). The right to public exercise belongs to all religious groups and must be acknowledged and defended by civil authority. And, “if, because of the circumstances of a particular people, special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional organization of a society, the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom must be recognized and respected as well” (DH 6).

Even this brief summary indicates how in this text, as Archbishop Lefebvre was later bitterly to complain, the Council abandoned the ideal of the confessional state. Lefebvre sees in this act something close to an apostate capitulation to liberalism because he, first, identifies the latter with secularism, indifferentism, and relativism and, second, maintains that the only appropriate response to these threats is the confessional state. For Lefebvre, freedom does not rest on human dignity; freedom and human dignity itself rest ultimately on the possession of the truth: “The truth shall make you free.” That is why it is intolerable to him that the one true religious community should be placed on a par with false religious communities. For him liberalism can only mean indifference to rival truth-claims in religion, while respect for the truth of Christianity implies the possibility and desirability of a Catholic state. For Lefebvre, therefore, Dignitatis Humanae was a major departure from the consistent and definitive anti-liberalism of modern Roman Catholicism.14

But in fact Dignitatis Humanae does not surrender the Catholic church’s claim to be the true religion, and neither it nor any other conciliar document maintains that religion is a matter of indifference to the life of civil society. In that respect, the Council makes no concessions to doctrinaire liberalism. But the Council does adopt the modern political tradition of constitutional separation of church and state and its attendant guarantee of religious freedom to all persons and all religious groups. In that respect, the Council does accept the solution to the question of church and state often identified as political liberalism.

Historical and methodological presuppositions

Two sets of developments, one historical and one methodological, permitted the Council to adopt its more nuanced attitude toward liberal modernity. The historical development was largely the work of John Courtney Murray, who in the two decades before the Council attempted to introduce some distinctions into the massive repudiation of liberalism characteristic of modern Catholicism.15 Murray argued that the liberalism so defined and so rejected was a distinctively continental (i.e., European) ideology. From it he distinguished an Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition whose roots he found in the medieval tradition and whose distinction between the duo genera of societies, the church and the civil order, was quite compatible with the Catholic insistence on the public significance and necessity of religion.
Continental liberalism, on the other hand, was the heir of the absolutism of the ancien régime and understood the separation of church and state to imply the irrelevance of religion to the public order and the sole right of the state to control all aspects of public life. For Murray, the church was correct in repudiating this ideology and practice, but it failed to take note of the quite different philosophy underlying the liberal tradition that inspired the American political experiment.  

The methodological development that enabled the Council to adopt its attitude toward the modern world was obscured during its debates, particularly in the early sessions. The bishops and theologians who constituted the “progressive” majority at the Council came together initially because of a common opposition to the faction that had dominated the preparation of the Council and that wished to see it do nothing more than ratify the attitudes and strategies of the previous century and a half. For a time, and particularly when dealing with questions about the church’s internal life, this group formed a united body that was generally successful in breaking open the tight system into which Catholic Christianity had been stuffed before. But when the Council began to consider other questions and to undertake a consideration of what attitudes and strategies might take the place of the counter-modern sub-society, it began to become apparent that there were serious differences among the “progressives” themselves, not least of all over questions of theological method.  

At the risk of considerable over-simplification, one of these tensions might be described in terms of the traditional opposition thought to exist between “Augustinians” and “Thomists.” (I prescind here from the question of how fair this contrast is to either Augustine or Thomas.) Two questions characterize the presence of this tension at the Council. The first might be put in this way: Granted that we can no longer be content with the anti-modern neurosis of recent Roman Catholicism, what attitude should the church adopt before the modern world? And, if we are to look to our past for examples of the church’s engagement with contemporary culture, which is most pertinent to our day: the great Patristic enterprise which led to the creation of the Christian intellectual and cultural world, or the great Thomist effort to meet, confidently and discriminatingly, the challenge to that world represented in the medieval period by the introduction of Aristotelian philosophy and Arab science? Is the modern challenge more like one than the other? Or, perhaps, does it have features so distinctive that neither past cultural engagement provides useful lessons?  

The second question concerns the method of critical engagement with the modern world, the theological epistemology one brings to bear. The typically Augustinian approach works with a sharp and unmediated distinction between sin and grace, natural reason and faith. The natural world appears to have no solidity or substance except as a sign pointing beyond itself to the spiritual and supernatural. The dramatic contest between sin and grace monopolizes attention, distracting it away from the natural, or rather subsuming the natural under the religious categories so that, on the one hand, we are natura fiti irae and, on the other, our “true” nature is only recognized in the supernatural.  

The typically Thomist approach, in contrast, effects a theoretical differentiation of the natural, not in order to deny that the drama of sin and grace is the only real drama of human history but in order to promote a more accurate understanding of it. “Nature,” if you will, theoretically mediates the practical drama. It has its own solidity or substance, its own laws, its created autonomy. Sin is what falls short of or contradicts nature, and grace is what heals and transcendently fulfills nature. This permits one at once to differentiate the genuine limitations of nature without having to label them as sinful and to affirm the power of grace as the fulfillment and not the destruction of nature. This is why St. Thomas could embrace the new world opened to Christian culture by Aristotle’s philosophy and by Arab science without believing, as many Augustinians did at the time, that this was a profanation of the sacred because it implied that an understanding of nature was possible in other than religious terms.  

Two examples illustrate this: the ideas of freedom and of human intelligence. Typically an Augustinian will ask only about the uses to which freedom is being put and deal exclusively with the alternatives of freedom for the Lord or freedom for the self.  

The typical Thomist will not deny that in fact these are the only two practical alternatives, but will seek also to understand freedom in its own structure and dynamics as these are displayed both in the sinner and in the one in love with God, and will use this understanding to show why the latter is the fulfillment of the inner dynamics of freedom while the former is its contradiction.  

Similarly, Augustine’s explanation of how a person comes to know
spiritual truth, that is, truth beyond the sensibly given, appeals to divine illumination. Only God’s direct enlightenment can bring the human mind beyond the sensible and transitory to the intelligible and eternal. St. Thomas, in contrast, domesticated the Augustinian illumination by speaking of the light of agent intellect as the created generative principle of understanding and judgment in each knower. For St. Thomas this light was also a participation in the uncreated Light of God’s mind, but it was a created power, resident in each individual and making the human knower the active cogent in understanding and judging rather than the simply passive recipient that the knower appeared to be in the Augustinian view.

From this digression we can perhaps better appreciate what was at stake in the debates that took place late in the Council, particularly in connection with *Gaudium et Spes.* The principal influence on the text came from French and Belgian bishops and theologians who might be called typically Thomist in orientation. Their text showed the Thomist effort to make distinctions, to try to identify the generative principles of the modern world, to understand them in and for themselves, only then to apply the categories of sin and grace to their development, and in doing this to be careful not to confuse nature and sin.

At a certain point in the discussion, a group of German bishops and theologians accused the text of indulging in a naturalism and “naive optimism.” In typically Augustinian fashion, some of them read the Thomist distinctions as separations or at best juxtapositions of philosophy and theology, making Christianity a second world simply attached to the natural or reduced to the role of sacralizing contemporary progress. They felt that the reality of sin was being underemphasized both in the general anthropology and in the concrete analysis of the modern world. They asked for a stronger emphasis on the theology of the cross as symbolizing the necessity of conversion before the distinctive features of modernity could be welcomed. This was the same sort of criticism which St. Thomas received from the Augustinians in the thirteenth century; it was also a prominent element in the critique of the baroque Scholasticism that had hardened Thomas’s distinction into a separation. For some critics, the changes made in the final text of *Gaudium et Spes* were not enough to prevent its being accused of a naturalistic semi-Pelagianism or of naive optimism, which a larger dose of Augustinianism might have prevented.

THE RECEPTION OF THE COUNCIL

The twenty-five years since the Council closed have seen such dramatic developments in both church and modern society as to make the discussion of Catholicism and liberalism during this period so complex as to prohibit analysis or evaluation in a single essay. I wish to focus the question by exploring the continued relevance of the distinction Murray made between the broad liberal tradition he believed not only to be compatible with fundamental Catholic beliefs and values but in part to be inspired by them and the doctrinaire liberalism whose exclusion of religion from public consequence he believed to be radically incompatible with Catholicism, both philosophically and theologically.

There is a certain validity in seeing this as a distinction between liberal political structures, which the church can accept, and a liberal ideology, which it must repudiate. The establishment of constitutional democracy and the guaranteeing of civil rights, after all, are not minor achievements. In general, Catholics since the Council have been unreserved in their adherence to them. Popes since the Council have powerfully endorsed democratic constitutional government, generalized religious freedom, and human rights as criteria of political justice. Several concordats have been revised and brought into accord with *Dignitatis Humanae.* Some years ago, it is true, concern over outrageous economic inequalities led a few theologians to dismiss questions of political rights as either irrelevant to or trivial in comparison with questions of economic rights; but this flirtation with Marxist ideas was largely confined to countries with little experience of liberal democracy and has lately been almost universally abandoned. Only in marginal figures like Archbishop Lefebvre has the Council’s surrender of the ideal of the confessional state been severely criticized. In that sense one could say that the Council’s acceptance of the political structures of the broad liberal tradition has been echoed in the larger Catholic body. In principle church-state relationships are no longer a theoretical problem, and we appear to be at the end of the long era of constitutional controversy over the question of the confessional state.

The question that remains cannot be left at the level of formal constitutional structures. After the question of church-state relationships—the question of the confessional state—is settled, there remains the question of the relation between church and society. If freedom is
the operative word in both questions, settling the question of freedom as immunity from coercion must raise the question of the uses to which freedom is put. Here too the point is to follow the Council in insisting that the church must have a role in the definition and constitution of what Murray called “the spiritual substance of society.”

The question of truth and genuine value thus returns even more acutely. The issue is whether the construction of society is possible simply on the basis of a formal notion of freedom, as “freedom from,” which leaves in suspense or perhaps even considers unresolvable the question of “freedom for.” This is the question not only of the purposes for which freedom of conscience is being used, but also of the cultural, ethical, and even religious presuppositions which underlie the very choice of a liberal political order. Put most simply, does the constitutional indifference of the state imply substantive cultural indifference to questions of truth and value?

It is perhaps at this point that the real problem of the church with liberalism lies: the question of genuine values cannot be avoided, nor that of the foundation of these rights. Even in the midst of Vatican II’s acceptance of the liberal political solution, there persists a view of the foundations of rights which differs from that of classical political liberalism. Rights do not belong to isolated individuals, pre-political monads, for whom society is a later, man-made artifact. Rights adhere in persons living in communities. Strictly speaking, a monad has no rights, for there is no one to respect them. Embodiment in society is precisely the origin of rights, and this embodiment is prior to and explains the construction of a political order to secure them. On this point the Council did not make any concession to liberal philosophy.

At least on Murray’s reading of the history and the theories, then, the confrontation with liberalism raised issues deeper than those of formal structure. Behind the broader liberal tradition which he defended there also lay a set of ideas about the relationship between these political structures and the truths and values contained in what he called “the public consensus.” This consensus was so basic to the political arrangement that without it the structures could not achieve their desired ends. It included the central conviction that religious and moral principles were constitutive elements of the spiritual substance of human society. The Council’s endorsement of the broad liberal tradition, then, was legitimate not simply because it included a repudiation of the liberal ideology, but also because and to the degree that it also continued to insist on the public relevance of religion enshrined in the broad tradition.

Thus the more acute question concerns the substance of the societies now organized on the liberal premise, what Bruce Douglass in his essay for this volume calls “the cultural foundations of our public life.” In the early 1950s, in the midst of the controversy caused by his views, Murray complained about the inability of even his Catholic opponents to distinguish between the continental ideology and the American “proposition” and about their consequent reduction of the question of church and society to the question of church and state. Not so oddly, doctrinaire liberals suffered from the same inability and made the same mistake. And, if, as it sometimes seems, the same faults return today when questions about the spiritual substance of our society are again confused with the question of church and state, it may be because something close to doctrinaire liberalism has largely replaced the consensus which underlay the original American experiment.

Murray was always addressing two audiences, Catholic intransigents and doctrinaire liberals. If in the end he succeeded in confuting the Catholic opposition, he was far less successful with his secularist opponents. In one of his early essays Murray noted that some people were beginning to abandon “the original principles of American constitutionalism” and to justify the separation of church and state with a theory similar to nineteenth-century doctrinaire liberalism. By the time, seven years later, when he put together his book, We Hold These Truths, this trend had reached the point that it became a chief target of his argument. The substance of society had been evacuated as the broad religious and moral principles which had once directed and legitimated it were replaced by a consensus which had now only one tenet: “an agreement to disagree.”

When Murray argued that “no society in history has ever achieved and maintained an identity and a vigor in action unless it has had some substance, unless it has been sustained and directed by some body of substantive beliefs,” he was met by an appeal to the “free society,” for which a purely procedural consensus could suffice:

It involves no agreement on the premises and purposes of political life and legal institutions; it is solely an agreement with regard to the method of making decisions and getting things done, whatever the things may be. The substance of American society is our “democratic institutions,” conceived as
purely formal categories. These institutions have no content; they are simply channels through which any kind of content may flow. In the end, the only life-or-death question for American society is that it should live or die under punctilious regard for correct democratic procedures.  

Murray regarded these views as the return in democratic form of the same monism that the church had earlier resisted when it appeared in absolutist and Jacobin forms. Its rejection of the public pertinence of substantive beliefs was being assisted by a spreading sense that basic philosophical and moral differences were not publicly adjudicable, because faith in reason was collapsing and people were coming to regard them as merely matters of personal decision. The result was “the contemporary idolatry of the democratic process”:

What is urged is a monism, not so much of the political order itself, as of a political technique. The proposition is that all the issues of human life—intellectual, religious, and moral issues as well as formally political issues—are to be regarded as, or resolved into, political issues and are to be settled by the single omnicompetent political technique of majority vote.

In Murray’s view, this procedural monism surrendered belief in transcendent norms, attainable by reason, for passing judgment on civil politics. These transcendent norms defined the distinction of realms which Christianity had contributed to Western political thought.

If there is any truth to these observations on American society and if, as I would be tempted to argue, the tendencies Murray identified have grown and spread even more in the subsequent thirty years, then the question arises whether the debate has not returned to the central issue which in the last century set Catholicism and liberalism over against one another. Only the basic issue is now much more clearly seen to be, not the indifferentism and laicism of the state, but the indifferentism and laicism of society. Murray did not regret that the state was now considered incompetent to judge among rival religious claims. He did regret that, increasingly, the society was coming to believe that religion and morality were realms in which truth-questions either do not arise or are not capable of being publicly debated and resolved. His endorsement of “the lay state” was never an acceptance of a lay, that is, secularized, society.

This perspective sheds considerable light on recent discussions of the relationship of church and society. One senses, for example, that

the sudden intervention of some Protestant fundamentalists in the social and political arenas was prompted by a rather belated recognition that the United States had ceased to be a society in which Christian beliefs and values are respected and honored. A year or so ago, many people were astonished to read that the Supreme Court had once taken it for granted that the United States is a “religious people,” even a Christian one. Richard John Neuhaus’s “naked public square” in many ways describes the substantive vacuum which Murray had predicted.

Murray’s distinction also illumines recent statements of the church’s social teaching. Recent popes have addressed the problem of the Western social consensus in their severe critiques of consumerism and materialism. Long before Gorbachev began to speak of “a common European home,” John Paul II was trying to evoke the substantive beliefs and values that marked “the common Christian roots of Europe.” Cardinal Ratzinger’s analysis of the condition of the post-conciliar church includes an indictment of Catholics’ surrender to the culture of “the tertiary bourgeoisie,” an invocation of a post-modern “return to the sacred” aroused by the spiritual vacuity of modern society, and an argument that the proper point of insertion of the church is not a “political theology” but a “political ethic,” that is, the mediation of the moral principles on which a genuine democracy must be built. Finally, there are the difficulties encountered by the US bishops in their efforts to claim a voice in the public debates on war and economics and in their efforts to define the public responsibilities of Catholics on the issue of abortion.

The latter incidents are perhaps particularly illustrative of the contemporary debate. The descriptive language often heard in the debates is here especially revealing, as, for example, when the bishops are said to have been “liberal” in their pastoral letters on nuclear weapons and on economic justice, whereas on the abortion issue several of them are considered by many to be quite anti-liberal, an accusation which arises not solely out of legitimate concerns about methods but also out of substantive ideas about a “liberal” society.

But it can be argued that in both cases the bishops were making the same fundamental effort. They were trying, that is, to address, to shape, to evoke a societal consensus on the moral issues involved. This is an effort which is quite compatible with Murray’s broad liberal tradition, which acknowledged the need for a basic public consensus that the state could neither guarantee nor do without. It is not
compatible with classic continental liberalism, whose individualism and indifferentism either saw no need for a public consensus on religious roles or denied religion a role in shaping it. Nor is it compatible with a procedural monism which resolves all issues into political issues for which the sole determining rule is majority-vote.

But behind this procedural monism and partly explaining the differing assessments of the legitimacy of the bishops’ interventions often lie sets of substantive assumptions which deny them a right to a “prophetic” voice in one or the other of the two cases. One group will deny them a right to address issues of military or economic policy but concede it on matters of family morality; the other group will welcome them into the first arena but, accepting the reduction of the issue of abortion to a matter of “choice,” “privacy,” and “reproductive freedom,” will see in their actions here an illegitimate intrusion into public morality and invoke the spectre of an attack upon the separation of church and state.

The US bishops’ task has been rendered more difficult because of the loss of a common belief that a public consensus on anything more substantial than democratic procedures is either possible or desirable. The bishops argue, of course, that their intervention into the public debates is not based solely on confessional religious principles but can be justified by appeals to moral principles presumably held generally throughout the society. But in neither case do they seem to have convinced anyone not already in agreement with their particular conclusions. It may be that the chief problem which they face and which they have not been notably successful in addressing is a widespread belief that no ethical, much less religious, beliefs or values are more than the products of personal choice.

That this may be the case is indicated by the similarity between contemporary controversies over American culture, which pit individualists over and against communitarians or relativists over and against defenders of a public reason, and the confrontation between doctrinaire liberals and Catholics in the last two centuries. Atomistic and possessive individualism is precisely what Catholic apologists considered to be the original sin of the liberal ideology. That societies could be constructed around a consensus that is no longer substantive but merely procedural was what they meant when they accused liberals of relativism and indifferentism. When they condemned the liberal project as a modern form of Pelagianism, they were giving a theological interpretation of what they took to be the liberal claim that the procedures and structures of democracy could by themselves guarantee the construction of a just and genuinely free society.

What is the relevance of all this for an assessment of Vatican II’s confrontation with liberal modernity? It seems to me to make it far more difficult to be content with simplifying interpretations, for these are defined by a refusal or reluctance to make distinctions. Those who see the Council’s achievement as a naïve capitulation to modernity often fail to distinguish not only between the particular social form Catholicism adopted in the last century and a half and the permanent essence of the church but also between the liberal political structures of modern democracies and the liberal ideology which often legitimates them. Those who celebrate the Council as a long-overdue accommodation to modernity often focus on its acceptance of many of the liberal structures of the day but ignore or play down the Council’s insistence on the substantive relevance of religion to society. If the one group tends to demonize modernity, the other tends to defy it; and it is not hard to see why they encourage one another’s simplicities. I would myself continue to insist that the key is still St. Thomas’s general methodological injunction: “Distinguendum est!” and its more particular embodiment in the attempt to elaborate a basic social anthropology for which human nature and the dynamics of its individual and social self-constitution are respected for what they are, a dynamic structure which is neither utterly corrupted by sin nor rendered superfluous by grace.

This is not to say that the Council represents a completely adequate solution to our questions today. The Council defined a major shift (some have not hesitated to call it “epochal”28), and it is not to be expected that it saw everything clearly or got everything right or anticipated all eventualities. But one thing it did get right: that it was possible to address the church’s rights and responsibilities in the modern world without relying on the easy certainties of either liberalism or anti-modern Catholicism.

NOTES

1 See What is Liberalism? Englished and Adapted from the Spanish of Dr. Don Félix Sarda y Salvaný by Condé B. Pallen (St. Louis: Herder, 1899) (the original Spanish title of this book was: “Liberalismo es Sin”); A. Roussel, Liberalisme et catholicisme. Rapports présentés à la “Semaine
The encounter between Catholicism and liberalism


See Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre’s two books, Lettre ouverte aux catholiques perplexes (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965) and Ils l’ont découverté: Du liberalisme à l’apostasie, La tragédie conciliaire (Excurse: Ed. “Fidelitter,” 1987), in which he stops just short of regarding this document as heretical. Francesco Spadafora, La tradizione contro il Concilio (Rome: Volpe, 1989), 239–247, has recently asked whether the Congregation for the Interpretation of the Decrees of Vatican II should not respond to the accusation that the Council, by surrendering in this text to liberalism, has called into question the infallibility of the magisterium.

Joseph Ratzinger’s description of Gaudium et Spes as “a revision of the Syllabus of Pius IX, a kind of countersyllabus” (Principles of Catholic Theology, 381–382), is cited by Archbishop Lefebvre as evidence for his view that Vatican II departed from orthodox tradition; see Ils l’ont découverté, 184n.


In general it may be said that Vatican II chose Murray’s historical analysis over the one which underlies Lefebvre’s position.

“What was at stake was not this or that theory, this or that special scholarly question, but the form in which the Word of God was to be presented and spiritually interpreted. Here the preparatory text [on the sources of revelation] was unsatisfactory, and the Council rejected the extant texts. But the question at this point was: What now?” (Ratzinger, Theological Highlights of Vatican II, 148). Later he describes the split that occurred when the draft of Gaudium et Spes began to be debated in 1965: “it became clear that the old conflict of ‘integrist’ and progressives promised to break down. No longer was there the old majority and the old minority; new lines had formed to face new tasks and new problems...a certain conflict between German and French theology began to be visible” (Ibid., 151).

For an example, see Joseph Ratzinger, “Freedom and Liberation: The Anthropological Vision of 1986 Instruction Libertatis Concilia,” in Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 255–275, where the “two contrasting conceptions of history and freedom between which we have to choose” are described as “anarchy” and “constraint.”

20 See J. A. Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," Theological Studies 51 (1990): 579–602. Although de Lubac's Surraturel was in good part an effort to rescue Thomas from the Thomists, it is also clear that de Lubac believed that many traces of original sin remained after Aquinas's effort to "baptize" Aristotle.
21 See, for example, the interplay between Thomism and Augustinianism in Ratzinger's discussion of the anthropology found in GS 12–17, in Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, vol. v, 119–140.
22 A full treatment would have to include at least such topics as: the rapid collapse of the Roman Catholic sub-culture and of its theological legitimation in Neoscholasticism; the peripaties of theological developments from "secularization-theology" to political theology to liberation theology to a theology of democratic capitalism; the development of Catholic social teaching from Populorum Progressio to the Medellin documents to Octogesima Adveniens to the Synod of 1971 to Laborem Exercens to the Vatican critique of liberation theology to Sollicitudo Rei Socialis; the critique of liberalism in the 1960s; the transformation of Western culture; the affirmations of "post-modernity" and the "return of the sacred"; the return of "fundamentalism"; the efforts of the church to make its voice heard in the public arena (US bishops' pastoral letters); the responsibilities of Catholic public officials, etc.
23 This phrase and variants on it occur often in Murray's writings: "the traditional substance of Western society," "the social relevance of the Christian patrimony," "the Christian substance of society," "the spiritual substance of social life," etc. In We Hold These Truths (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960) it seems to be what is described as the "social consensus": "It is not the residual minimum left after rigid application of the Cartesian axiom, 'de omnibus dubitandum.' It is not simply a set of working hypotheses whose value is pragmatic. It is an ensemble of substantive truths, a structure of basic knowledge, an order of elementary affirmations that reflect realities inherent in the order of existence. It occupies an established position in society and excludes opinions alien or contrary to itself. This consensus is the intuitive a priori of all the rationalities and technicalities of constitutional and statutory law. It furnishes the premises of the people's action in history and defines the larger aims which that action seeks in internal affairs and in external relations" (pp. 9–10).
25 We Hold These Truths, 84.
26 Ibid., 208.
27 See Church, Ecumenism and Politics, 204–275.
28 This view, which was popularly expressed even during the Council in such phrases as "the end of the Constantinian, or the Counter-Reformation, or the Tridentine age," has been argued more carefully in many of the writings of Giuseppe Alberigo. It also appears in Hermann Joseph Pottmeyer's hermeneutics of the Council as a "transitional event"; see "A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council," The Reception of Vatican II, ed. G. Alberigo, J.-P. Jossua, and J. A. Komonchak (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 27–43. It is severely criticized in the revisionist interpretation of the Council given in The Ratzinger Report.