

JOHN PAUL II ON TOTALITARIANISM: A TIMELESS LESSON

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The merits of St. Pope John Paul II in the field of political struggle against totalitarianism are widely known and undisputed. As a result of his involvement, not only was the first free trade union “Solidarity” formed in the former Eastern Bloc of European nations, but also a radical reconstruction of that part of the world which had been under the profound influence of the totalitarian Soviet regime was made possible. It was even acknowledged by former Soviet prime minister Mikhail Gorbachev who said in 1992 that everything that happened in Eastern Europe in these last few years would have been impossible without this pope²⁰⁸.

While John Paul II’s political initiatives against totalitarianism found supporting grounds in favorable international conditions, their strength also had a proper theoretical underpinning. This latter fact is a good reason for attempting to reconstruct the Pope’s thought in order to use his insights to answer questions about totalitarianism as such —its essence, causes, and effective neutralizers—.

1. *What Is Totalitarianism?*

At its very beginning, the name *totalitarianism* had a negative connotation. In 1923, Giovanni Amendola was the first to coin and use the adjective *totalitarian* (Italian *totalitario*) in order to stigmatize the fascist quest to monopolize power in the state and to impose on the Italian society a new

²⁰⁸ Scott Appleby, “Pope John Paul II,” *Foreign Policy* 119 (Summer 2000): 12, DOI: 10.2307/1149513. Cf. Joseph Bryan Hehir, “Papal Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy* 78 (Spring 1990): 40, DOI: 10.2307/1148627.

political mentality which displayed traits of a secular religion²⁰⁹. A positive meaning was given to *totalitarianism* by Benito Mussolini who expressed its essence, when he said: “[F]or the fascist, everything is in the state, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the state. In this sense fascism is totalitarian...”²¹⁰.

Giovanni Gentile, in turn, was the first philosopher of totalitarianism. Using terminology borrowed from Hegelianism, not only did he justify the political aspirations of Italian fascists, but he also constructed a picture of a totalitarian state that resembled those presented and criticized by Hannah Arendt and George Orwell in the late 1940s, except that he himself was a proponent of such a state²¹¹.

Four periods can be distinguished in the history of the concept of totalitarianism. Initially, it was regarded as a previously unknown form of dictatorship, the implementation of which took place in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Then, it was opposed to liberalism. Next, the term *totalitarianism* was used to describe various political systems and other cultural phenomena —e.g., Tsarist Russia, Diocletian’s Rome, Plato’s ideal republic, ancient Sparta, John Calvin’s Geneva and the Catholic Church. Herbert Marcuse even wrote about the totalitarian universe of technological rationality, as that which characterizes, *inter alia*, the United States. And, in his *The Road to Serfdom*, Friedrich August von Hayek called Auguste Comte a nineteenth-century totalitarian²¹². Finally, in modern times, the

²⁰⁹ Cf. Peter Baehr, “Totalitarianism”, in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 6, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Thomson Gale, Detroit 2005), 2342. In his article which appeared in *Il Mondo* (May 12, 1923), Amendola “commented on the sham elections held in the town of Sanza in southern Italy’s Cilento hills, where Fascists presented two nearly identical lists of candidates and forcibly blocked the presentation of other lists”, and “coined the adjective ‘totalitario’ to describe the true nature of the ‘winner-take-all’ electoral system, which in those days was being debated in Italy’s lower house of parliament”. Bruno Bongiovanni, “Totalitarianism: the Word and the Thing”, *Journal of Modern European History* 3, n. 1 (2005), 5.

²¹⁰ [P]er il fascista, tutto è nello Stato, e nulla di umano o spirituale esiste, e tanto meno ha valore, fuori dello Stato. In tal senso il fascismo è totalitario . . . Benito Mussolini, “La dottrina del fascismo”, in *Italian Fascism and Anti-Fascism: A Critical Anthology*, Stanislaw G. Pugliese (ed.), Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2001), 85. Mussolini’s best-known statement on totalitarianism was given on October 28, 1925 in Milan: La nostra formula è questa: tutto nello stato, niente al di fuori dello stato, nulla contro lo stato [Our formula is this: everything in the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state]. Norberto Bobbio, *Dal fascismo alla democrazia*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 1997, 51.

²¹¹ See David D. Roberts, “Il disinganno di Franchini: Rileggere l’Intervista su Croce dall’estero” in *Il diritto alla filosofia: Atti del seminario di studi su Raffaello Franchini*, Giuseppe Cantillo and Renata Viti Cavaliere (ed.), Soveria Manelli, Rubbettino, 2002, 220.

²¹² Roman Bäcker, *Totalitaryzm: geneza, istota, upadek* [*Totalitarianism: Genesis, Essence, Collapse*], Index Books, Toruń 1992 8. Cf. Baehr, *Totalitarianism*, 2343; Karl Popper

scope of the word *totalitarianism* is becoming increasingly limited. There are attempts to connect it with the revolution of a new type —permanent and continuous, or apply it only to the systems of real socialism—.²¹³

The interpretations of totalitarianism differ in terms of both the characteristics of its manifestations and the understanding of its ultimate causes. It seems, however, that all manifestations of totalitarianism are a derivative of totalitarian ideologies and ways of implementing them²¹⁴.

Any universal ideology can potentially serve as a screen for the implementation of a totalitarian world project²¹⁵. However, the essential characteristics of a strictly totalitarian ideology include the pursuit of unlimited power over men in order to subordinate them to ends considered higher, such as the state, class, race, etc²¹⁶. Carl Joachim Friedrich, for example, claims that totalitarian ideology is a doctrine that covers all aspects of human life. Therefore, it is

found protototalitarianism in Plato. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno spied a totalitarian dialectic evolving out of an “Enlightenment” fixation on mathematical formalization, instrumental reason, and the love of the machine. J. L. Talmon discovered a creedal, “totalitarian democracy” arising from one tendency among eighteenth-century philosophies. Cf. also Łukasz Dominiak, “Totalitaryzm [Totalitarianism]”, in *Encyklopedia “Białych Płom” [The Encyclopedia of “Blank Slates”]*, vol. 17 (Radom: Polwen, 2006), 173: The term *totalitarianism* was given a new interpretation in “Karl Wittfogel’s *Oriental Despotism* (hydraulic hypothesis), Nicholas Sergejevitch Timasheff understood totalitarianism as an unlimited extension of state function, which allowed social democratic states to be treated as totalitarian, and Aldous Huxley, before 1944, accused the members of the British Labor Party of totalitarianism”.

²¹³ Roman Bäcker, *Totalitaryzm*, 9.

²¹⁴ A slightly different position is presented in Dominiak, “Totalitaryzm”, 177: Among the basic characteristics of totalitarian regimes, it is possible to indicate the dominance of the ideology that exhibits Gnostic traits and covers all aspects of human life, one massive hierarchically organized political mono-party wherein a significant role is played by the leader, an extensive apparatus of terror, a socialized economy and (an attempt to create) a new man.

²¹⁵ Roman Bäcker, *Totalitaryzm*, 14.

²¹⁶ Cf. Peter Baehr, *Totalitarianism*, 2342. Cf. also *Totalitaryzm - przeszłość czy realne zagrożenie? [Totalitarianism - a Past or a Real Danger?]*, R. Fiedler, S. Wojciechowski (eds.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe INPiD UAM, Poznań 2001, 41-42: The organs of totalitarian states violate all human rights and freedoms that are supposed to protect man’s dignity and inviolability and guarantee freedom of choice in the area of man’s conduct and development. They violate the right to life, freedom from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment, freedom from forced and compulsory labor, the right to legal personality, freedom from discrimination, the equality of rights and the principle of equal legal protection, the right to liberty and personal security, the right to a fair trial, freedom from punishment without law, the right to effective means of protection of rights. They do not respect freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, property rights, the right to privacy, freedom of assembly and association. In their hands, the right to participate in the management of public affairs, the access to passive and active electoral rights, and the access to public positions and functions become fiction. The violation of these rights on a mass scale is a characteristic feature of totalitarian countries. People are less important than the ultimate goal, i.e., the creation of a homogeneous society and a new kind of state. The sacrificing of people’s rights, or even their lives, is a necessary cost that must be incurred to achieve this goal.

characterized by its presence in all areas of culture (i.e., science, morality, art, and religion), its being compulsory (it must be at least tacitly accepted by society) and authoritarian (it a priori and completely determinates the current state of affairs), and its having a definite plan for the future. Juan Linz emphasizes that this type of ideology, although it may be more or less advanced intellectually, constitutes the identity of the group in power and legitimizes all actions taken by it. Hannah Arendt, in turn, adds that the irrationality of ideology as a source of knowledge about society makes totalitarianism aim at transforming human nature into a passive instrument subordinated to political power²¹⁷.

Totalitarianism has its specific characteristics in practical terms too. Here, among the ways of introducing a totalitarian ideology, the strength and determination of its proponents come to the fore. For example, Juan José Linz believes that there is no totalitarianism without a monistic center of power that emanates all forms of institutional and group pluralism²¹⁸. In addition to the human factor, Carl Joachim Friedrich mentions the technologically advanced control over all means of armed struggle, the control over all the means of communication (press, radio, etc.), and the efficient system of police terror²¹⁹. A confirmation of the specific character of totalitarian actions can be found in Pope Benedict XVI's words about the German people of the Third Reich, over which a ring of criminals rose to power by false promises of future greatness and the recovery of the nation's honour, prominence and prosperity, but also through terror and intimidation, with the result that our people was used and abused as an instrument of their thirst for destruction and power²²⁰.

John Paul II's statements on totalitarianism are part of a vast stream of criticism of this phenomenon. According to the Pope, what hides behind the facade of totalitarianism is a false vision of both man and society²²¹. The anthropological error

²¹⁷ Cf. Małgorzata Kosiorek, *Pedagogika autorytarna: geneza, modele, przemiany* [*Authoritarian Pedagogy: Genesis, Models, Transformations*] (Impuls, Kraków 2007), 16-19. Cf. Also Dominiak, "Totalitaryzm", 174: According to Arendt, totalitarianism consists in destroying the identity of individuals and depriving them of their spiritual strength by the use of an apparatus of repression directed against arbitrarily selected social groups, the existence of a developed system of terror and control over individuals, and mechanisms of eliminating the possibility of rebellion — which lead to indifference, passive consent and social atomization—. As she pointed out, the citizen of a totalitarian state cannot think independently and is usually an atheist.

²¹⁸ Cf. Kosiorek, *Pedagogika autorytarna*, 17.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Address During the Visit to the Memorial and Museum of the Nazi Concentration Camps in Auschwitz and Birkenau* (28 May 2006), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en.html>.

²²¹ Cf. Samuel Gregg, *Challenging the Modern World: Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II and*

of totalitarianism lies in its relation to man as an individual. It treats the individual man as an ordinary element or part of the social organism, as an impersonal set of social relations. This becomes particularly visible in the context of man's good which is completely subordinated to the good of the social whole. Certainly, totalitarianism does not want to deprive a man of his good —it only denies him the right to initiative and to decide his own fate, maintaining that the good of a man can be realized without taking into account his personal choices. The result of this mistaken conception of man —as John Paul II develops his argument— is that:

[T]here arise both a distortion of law, which defines the sphere of the exercise of freedom, and an opposition to private property. A person who is deprived of something he can call 'his own', and of the possibility of earning a living through his own initiative, comes to depend on the social machine and on those who control it. This makes it much more difficult for him to recognize his dignity as a person, and hinders progress towards the building up of an authentic human community²²².

An important feature of totalitarianism, then, is its anti-personalist character. It apprehends man in a typically functional and utilitarian manner and thus deprives him of his inherent dignity. Its anthropological reductionism, however, is not limited to undermining the subjectivity of the human person, but finds its completion in violating the subjectivity of society.

The social error of totalitarianism consists in regarding the state (party, or the like) as a subject of social life which represents and realizes the absolute good in history. Such a state, in order to preserve its status as the highest good, will try to destroy any foreign-to-itself social initiative, or at least

the Development of Catholic Social Teaching (Md.: Lexington Books, Lanham 1999), 52; Alicja Zygmunt, "Kwestie społeczno-polityczne w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II [Social and Political Issues in the Teaching of John Paul II]", in *Stan realizacji polityki społecznej w XXI wieku*, ed. M. Miłek, G. Wilk-Jakubowski (Wyd. Stowarzyszenia Współpracy Polska-Wschód, Kielce, 2009), 186; Henryk Piliński, *Człowiek w filozofii Karola Wojtyły-Jana Pawła [Man in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła-John Paul]* (Wszechnica Polska, Warszawa, 2002), 35f. Cf. also Dominiak, "Totalitaryzm," 173: The first attempt to scientifically analyze the totalitarian regime —exemplified by the Third Reich— is attributed to Hermann Rauschning who, in his *The Revolution of Nihilism* (1939), explained the origin and character of the totalitarian state through the lack of any positive content, understanding it as a revolution of nihilism.

²²² John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Rome 1991), no. 13, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>. Cf. Piliński, *Człowiek w filozofii Karola Wojtyły—Jana Pawła*, 338: The errors of the totalitarian state, according to John Paul II, include: the negation of objective truth, the negation of the transcendent dignity of the human person who is a visible image of God, the violation of the good of the person as a subject of rights that no one can violate: neither individual or group, nor class, nation or State.

subordinate it by making it an instrument of its own ideological apparatus²²³. Divesting the person of his dignity is connected with depriving him of the right to create autonomous communities and associations of an economic, political, cultural and even family character²²⁴.

In the light of John Paul II's teaching, the essence of totalitarianism comes down to a false conception of man and society. In totalitarian systems, not only does man lose his personal subjectivity, but communities different from the state (or its ideological substitutes) also lose their value. As a result, the totalitarian society is always built on an amorphous mass in which there is no individual human subject and thus, either, there is no place for the subjectivity of any intrastate community²²⁵.

2. *Roots of Totalitarianism*

Theorists of totalitarianism seek its sources in various areas of human existence. For example, Erich Fromm claims that this phenomenon has its ultimate cause in man. In his opinion, modern people experience frustration caused by the failure in pursuing their dreams of love, creativity and liberation from loneliness. This entails the fear of freedom and responsibility that generates the need for submitting to a totalitarian authority²²⁶. Hannah Arendt, in turn, argues that the most significant reason for the existence of totalitarianism lies in society. In modern times, according to her, the forms of social life underwent a fundamental change due to the expansion of the capitalist idea of the free market. As a result, the abolition of class structures and the development of social atrophy became possible. The transformation of class societies into mass societies involved the emergence of ideologies

²²³ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 45.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 13. Cf. Charles E. Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (T&T Clark, New York, 2006), 224: The subjectivity of society opposes totalitarianism and recognizes that the social nature of the human person needs the state but above all needs the family and various intermediate groups, including economic, social, political, and cultural ones. The subjectivity of society calls for the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. The family and intermediate associations create networks of solidarity that prevent society from becoming an anonymous and impersonal mass.

²²⁵ Cf. Lukasz Dominiak, "Totalitaryzm," 176: However, one of the most important factors enabling the emergence of totalitarian regimes was the formation of masses; Gustave Le Bon (*Psychologie des Foules*, 1895), Florian Znaniecki (*Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej* [*The Fall of Western Civilization*], 1921), José Ortega y Gasset (*La rebelión de las masas*, 1929), Vilfredo Pareto and H. Arendt paid attention to this phenomenon.

²²⁶ According to Erich Fromm, the escape from freedom could also generate another need-consumerism. Cf. *ibid.*, 174.

—including totalitarian ideologies— that came to the fore in order to impose their own social projects on the masses.²²⁷ Totalitarianism can then be based on man's errors which affect his relationship with himself and other people. But can it be caused by man's faults which undermine his relationship with God? John Paul II's answer is affirmative.

The Pope argues that the roots of totalitarianism lie in the denial of God. For atheism is conducive to questioning both the identity of man (as it deprives him of the ultimate reason for his existence and development) and that of society (as it justifies all ideological experiments that question the autonomy of a man and of the communities he creates)²²⁸. The totalitarian system is thus a form of the atheistic system which—by a priori deciding the problem of God's existence and nature—deprives man of the right to decision on this matter and grants him the status of an impersonal being. John Paul II defends the dignity of man as a person by stating that:

It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it²²⁹. The rejection of God, the Source of ultimate truth, results in the negation of the objective truth that guarantees just relations between people²³⁰. Reason is then replaced by the

²²⁷ Cf. Miłowit Kuniński, "Totalitaryzm w ujęciu Hannah Arendt [Totalitarianism from the Perspective of Hannah Arendt]," in *Totalitaryzm a zachodnia tradycja [Totalitarianism and the Western Tradition]*, M. Kuniński (ed.), Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2006, 139.

²²⁸ On atheism, see Zofia J. Zdybicka, U.S.J.K., "Atheism in *The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*", *Studia Gilsoniana* 7, 4 (October-December 2018): 709-757, DOI: 10.26385/SG.070434.

²²⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 13. Cf. Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, trans. P. Guietti, F. Murphy, Grand Rapids, B. William, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan 1997, 192; Jacek Moskwa, *Jan Paweł II*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 2005), 48; John Paul II, however, brought to this discussion, along with his views as a theologian and philosopher, the specificity of his historical experience which strongly suggested that totalitarianism —while striving to take over the whole man— also makes its claims on his spiritual sphere. There, it encounters faith in God, that is, a reference to an absolute value system that excludes total subordination to the system. Without going into all the complicated problems of differences and similarities between Communism and Nazism, we must note, however, two features they have in common. Firstly, the conviction that history should be the object of a radical change —made by the proletariat and its party avant-garde in the first case, and by the charismatic leader and the elite around him, acting on behalf of the nation, in the second. Secondly, the tendency to question the revealed religion.

²³⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 44. Cf. *ibid.*, 17: In social life, then, human freedom could detach itself "from obedience to the truth, and consequently from the duty to respect the rights of others. The essence of freedom then becomes self-love carried to the point of contempt for God and neighbour, a self-love which leads to an unbridled affirmation

will of a ruler, a party, a state or the like, and the value of a man is determined by how much he can contribute to the achievement of ideological goals.²³¹ Totalitarianism thus takes the principle of the priority of power over reason (*plus vis quam ratio*) to the extreme and consequently makes man adopt a worldview imposed on him by force, rather than worked out by his own reason accompanied by his own freedom²³².

Totalitarianism is not disinterested in social order, but the latter is ultimately understood here as the result of decisions, not objective truths. The negation of objective truth in social life leads to the monopolization of political power. From the perspective of totalitarian ideologies, social leadership is absolutely infallible, which leads to the conclusion that it always makes the right decisions²³³. No social group, however—as the Pope states—“has the right to usurp the role of sole leader, since this brings about the destruction of the true subjectivity of society and of the individual citizens” by making “the individual and the people become ‘objects’, in spite of all declarations to the contrary and verbal assurances”²³⁴.

Is, however, John Paul II’s teaching — which seeks to embody truth in social life— free from what it tries to oppose? For it seems that the deliverance of man from totalitarian ideologies is the work of those who seek after and cherish freedom, rather than those who seek and follow truth²³⁵. The Pope is aware of the pitfalls posed by the fanatical and fundamentalist approach

of self-interest and which refuses to be limited by any demand of justice.”

²³¹ Ibid., 44: It must be added that totalitarianism arises out of a denial of truth in the objective sense. If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people. Their self-interest as a class, group or nation would inevitably set them in opposition to one another. If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others. People are then respected only to the extent that they can be exploited for selfish ends. Thus, the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate—no individual, group, class, nation or State. Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority, by isolating, oppressing, or exploiting it, or by attempting to annihilate it.

²³² Ibid., 29.

²³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 44.

²³⁴ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Rome 1987), n. 15, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

²³⁵ Cf. Józef Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni* [*In the Land of Ailing Imagination*] (Kraków: ZNAK, 1997), 140; Richard J. Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” *First Things* 73 (1997): 16-21; Mirella W. Eberts, “The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, 5 (1998), 817-842.

to truth. He sees a particular danger in the attitude resulting from religious ideologies that justify denying human freedom in the name of the claims they make. Therefore, the attitude toward truth cannot be an ideological attitude that strives to insert the diversity of social and political reality into some rigid frames. Respect for truth requires at the same time the recognition of the fact that human life is carried out in various ways, which are by no means perfect. The right attitude toward transcendent truth does not exclude the dignity and freedom of every human person, on the contrary — it guarantees respect for them—²³⁶.

John Paul II emphasizes that the human person's freedom is a measure of human dignity and greatness. Freedom, however, is not a value in itself. It is combined with truth, since it is fulfilled in the human quest for truth and life in truth. In the lives of individuals, freedom detached from the real truth about man becomes license, whereas in political life, it takes form of whims of the most powerful and expresses itself in the arrogance of power²³⁷.

3. *Democracy: An Antidote to Totalitarianism?*

It seems that totalitarianism has its polar opposition in the so-called free world represented by individualism, democracy, liberalism and even rationalism.²³⁸ John Paul II notes that, in the modern world, the tendency to build a social order based on democratic principles prevails. It is generally agreed that this system best suits both human nature and the requirements of social justice. Since society consists of persons who are all rational and social beings, it is necessary to allow each person to participate in power. Hence, democracy is to guarantee the participation of all members of society in government—at least their indirect participation²³⁹.

²³⁶ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 46. Cf. Mary A. Glendon, "A Challenge to the Human Sciences," in *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom*, George Weigel (ed.), Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington 1992, 81.

²³⁷ John Paul II, *Speech to the UN General Assembly* (New York, 5 October 1995), n. 12, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

²³⁸ See Kenneth Minogue, "What Is the Opposite of Totalitarianism?" in *Totalitarianism and Western Tradition* (Krakow: Centre for Political Thought, 1998), available at: <http://www.omp.org.pl/stareomp/totalitarianism.html>.

²³⁹ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*, Rizzoli, New York 2005, 127-131; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46. Cf. Zygmunt, "Kwestie społeczno-polityczne w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II," 187. On the popes' position on democracy, see Jacek Świątek, "Demokracja w nauczaniu papieży [Democracy in the Popes' Teaching]," *Człowiek w Kulturze* 20 (2008), 85-100.

If democracy is justified in view of its respect for all, it is in line with expectations only when it implies the true conception of the human person and functions in a state in which human rights are respected. According to the Pope, the most important human rights include: the right to life, the right to live in a family and moral environment, the right to develop intelligence and freedom, the right to work, the right to start a family, the right to have and raise children²⁴⁰. Therefore, the goal of an authentic democracy will consist in providing appropriate conditions to educate individuals in the spirit of true ideals and promote the subjectivity of society through the creation of autonomous structures of participation and co-responsibility²⁴¹.

The papal understanding of democracy, however, is not universally accepted. Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly popular to claim that democratic forms of political life should be based not on truth understood in a classical sense as the *adequatio rei et intellectus*, but on agnosticism and skeptical relativism. Among democrats, then, there is a clear division between those who accept the ultimate truth and those who believe that truth is variable and depends on the decision of a majority²⁴². John Paul II notes that in a situation where there is no invariable and universal truth that sets the tone for all political life, it is not difficult to find totalitarian methods of exercising power even in a democratic society. Therefore, in his opinion, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism²⁴³.

What are the values that protect democracy from totalitarianism?

According to the Pope, the supreme value which protects the true identity of democracy is man —the human person— ²⁴⁴. It is so on account of

²⁴⁰ See John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46. Cf. Zygmunt, “Kwestie społeczno-polityczne w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II”, 188.

²⁴¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46.

²⁴² Ibid. Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Rome 1993), n. 101, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>; Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” 16-21. On the criticism of majority democracy, see John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Rome 1995), n. 69-70, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

²⁴³ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46. Among those who warned about the possibility of a totalitarian democracy, there were Benjamin Constant, J. L. Talmon i Alexis de Tocqueville, see Arkady Rzegocki, “Czy demokracja może być totalitarna? [Can Democracy Be Totalitarian?]”, in *Totalitaryzm a zachodnia tradycja [Totalitarianism and Western Tradition]*, M. Kuniński (ed.), Ósrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2006, 221; Peter Jones, “Freedom”, in *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*, P. Barry Clarke, J. Foweraker (eds.), Routledge, London-New York 2001, 364.

²⁴⁴ For the Pope, every human being is a person whose earthly life begins at the moment of conception and should last until the moment of natural death. Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*.

man's inseparable bond with the personal God, whereby the human person not only occupies the highest place in the hierarchy of beings that constitute the natural world, but also deserves due respect from other people, and even from entire societies. Other values have "value" inasmuch as they contribute to personal human development²⁴⁵. Their quality is of great importance. Values are, in fact, the foundation on which both individual lives and the life of the whole society are built. They are also measures of the "value" of a democracy, that is, whether it creates and secures a social climate appropriate to human persons, or allows plans to impose an anti-personalistic ideology on society —an ideology that, in the name of some deified collective, would try to dethrone the true God and thereby deprive human persons of their intrinsic dignity—²⁴⁶. The more openly it disregards the dignity of man, the more clearly a democracy shows totalitarian tendencies. According to John Paul II, such tendencies include, for example, acceptance for programs that undermine morality and attack the family by promoting moral permissiveness, divorce, free love, abortion, contraception, euthanasia, or the manipulation of life. By rejecting voluntary service to all members of society, a democracy automatically harnesses itself in the yoke of slavish loyalty to powerful political or financial centers²⁴⁷.

4. Conclusion

Despite the collapse of its most representative twentieth-century instantiations —Nazism and Sovietism, totalitarianism can still be regarded as a live issue—. First, because there are countries where totalitarian ideas receive a lot of favorable attention²⁴⁸. Secondly, because in many countries,

²⁴⁵ Cf. Beata Kotek, Adam Spalek, "Samowychowanie w ujęciu Jana Pawła II droga wprowadzania w świat wartości [Self-Education in John Paul II as a Way of Introducing into the World of Values]", in *Wychowanie ku wartościom w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II [Educational Upbringing toward Values in the Light of John Paul II's Teaching]*, vol. III, ed. K. Chałas (Lublin-Kielce: Jedność, 2007), 48-51. It seems that the anthropological dimension of John Paul II's teaching is most clearly visible in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (Rome 1979), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

²⁴⁶ Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (1 January 1985)* (Vatican 1984), no. 6, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

²⁴⁷ See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 20. Cf. Jarosław Gowin, *Kościół po komunizmie [The Church after Communism]* (Znak, Kraków 1995), 191; Czesław Ryszka, *Jan Paweł II Wielki* (Ed. Św. Pawła, Częstochowa 2002), 348.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Agnieszka Kołakowska, "Political Correctness and the Totalitarian Mentality", in *Totalitarianism and Western Tradition* (Centre for Political Thought, Krakow, 1998): [T] here is quite a lot left to say about the continuing totalitarian temptation: the astonishing

especially wealthy ones, the policy that prevails is a consumer policy which makes it difficult to recognize and respect the primacy of persons over things. Finally, because there are countries where a renaissance of religious fundamentalism takes place, which results in rendering it difficult for religious minorities to exercise their civil or religious rights²⁴⁹.

The analysis of John Paul II's views on totalitarianism leads to a conclusion that the Pope contributed not only to a practical weakening of totalitarian systems in the political world, but also to a significant deepening of theoretical knowledge about them. In the light of his teaching, totalitarianism appears as an attack on the human person, consisting in an attempt to subordinate him to a collective subject. The main reason for the emergence and implementation of totalitarian ideologies is the negation of God as the ultimate guarantor of human dignity and freedom. In the field of social life, the separation of man from God results in the replacement of truth by the dictates of power. Living the life without free access to universally knowable truth can lead to various, even democratic, forms of totalitarianism. Democratic totalitarianism occurs when transcendent truth is excluded from the public sphere in the name of a democracy that gives absolute primacy to majority rule. Such a democracy becomes a treacherous danger for both individuals and minority groups²⁵⁰. It finally seems that only an authentic democracy built on respect for the dignity of all human beings as persons can provide the necessary conditions for the successful overcoming of totalitarianism.

growth of the totalitarian mentality in the West. For in the West, the totalitarian mentality, instead of receding, as we anticipated after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, seems to be spreading and gaining ground. Available at: <http://www.omp.org.pl/starecomp/totalitarianism.html>.

²⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 29.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II", *First Things*, May 1997, 16-21.