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John Paul II's political lexicon: seven lessons for today's struggling democracies

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By George Weigel

In the first of a three-part series to mark the centenary of John Paul II's birth, his biographer George Weigel reflects on the lessons that today's struggling democracies could draw from the Polish pope's ideas. Two further articles by other authors will appear tomorrow and on Monday, the anniversary itself.

At the United Nations on 5 October 1995, Pope John Paul II celebrated “an extraordinary global acceleration of that quest for freedom that is one of the great dynamics of human history”. “Men and women throughout the world,” he noted, “have taken the risk of freedom.” And in their courage, he found a cause for hope: hope that, as he put it, the “tears of [the 20th] century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit”.

As the world marks the centenary of Karol Wojtyła's birth, the democratic project is threatened both by external enemies and internal confusions and quarrels. So we should remember John Paul II's witness to hope. That hope was not confined to his own Polish nation; it was, rather, a hope for all humanity.

At the same time, we should remember that John Paul II hoped that the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe would play a distinctive role in the democratic project of the 21st century. Having liberated themselves from tyranny through the power of truth, the power of conscience, and the power of solidarity, the newest members of the democratic family, John Paul II hoped, ought to be a reminder to the older members of the family that freedom and truth, freedom and virtue, cannot be separated without doing serious damage to democracy and to the free society.

I cannot imagine that John Paul II would be happy with the condition of the world's democracies, both old and new, today. So perhaps, on this centenary, it would be helpful to imagine that he is still with us, offering a lesson in some basic ideas about 21st-century democracy and its cultural foundations.

So let me propose on this occasion a *John Paul II Political Lexicon*. By reflecting on some key terms and ideas as he did, perhaps we can get our present situation into clearer focus, and find new paths to democratic cooperation within and among nations in the future.

The first idea: *the free society*.

As John Paul II described it in his most important social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, the free society of the future would have three interlocking, component parts: a democratic political community, a free or market-centred economy, and a vibrant public moral culture.

There is little disagreement today about the first two parts, although there are important arguments to be engaged throughout the democratic world about safeguarding democratic elections, guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary, maintaining a robust civil society, and assuring the protection of basic civil and political rights.

In John Paul II's mind, however, it was the public moral culture that would be the key to all the rest. Political and economic freedom liberate great human energies that are typically frustrated under authoritarian or tyrannical rule. What will temper and direct those energies so that they contribute to genuine human flourishing and social solidarity? What will enable democratic citizens to live beyond selfishness, in order to live in that solidarity that is essential to democracy?

Politics, John Paul II knew, is always downstream from culture. If our politics is divisive and rancorous, it is almost certainly because something is wrong with our public moral culture. That is true in the United States, and it is true elsewhere. Moral and cultural renewal – a recommitment to “living in the truth”, which helped liberate East Central Europe from communism – is thus an essential part of democratic renewal.

The second idea: *freedom*

What is the “freedom” of the free society? Do we 21st-century citizens of democracies really know, in depth, what “freedom” means?

In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul criticised theories of freedom that reduced freedom to wilfulness; that, he understood, was an infantile freedom, a concept of freedom that reduces human beings to the sum of their immediate desires. At the same time, John Paul II lifted up the idea of “freedom for excellence.” freedom as the moral habit of freely choosing the good. Thus *Centesimus Annus* stressed that an authentically human freedom – a freedom that reflects the true dignity of every human person – is a freedom founded in truth and ordered to goodness.

Throughout the democratic world today, the very idea of freedom is being infantilised, as if Frank Sinatra’s lyric, “I did it my way”, summed up the nature of freedom. But this is not the freedom that liberated central and eastern Europe from tyranny. The revolution of conscience that preceded and made possible the Revolution of 1989 was built on a much thicker, nobler concept of freedom: once again, freedom tethered to truth and ordered to goodness. The democratic world needs a rebirth of that mature, noble freedom today.

The third idea: *Europe (or, more broadly, the West)*

What is “Europe”, or, more broadly, “the West”? Is it simply a set of political and economic arrangements? Or is the West – is Europe – a cultural artefact, a civilisation?

In *Ecclesia in Europa*, as in his General Audience commentaries on the European constitutional treaty of 2004, John Paul II proposed a non-utilitarian, deeply cultural concept of the West and its component parts – Europe, and Europe’s former dependencies around the world.

The civilisation of the West, John Paul argued, was born from the fruitful interaction of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. Biblical religion, Greek philosophy, and Roman law, interacting over centuries, were the seeds from which what we know today as “the West” grew.

From Jerusalem, from biblical religion, the West learned that life is adventure, pilgrimage, journey: history is not circular or random; history is going somewhere. Thus the Exodus of Israel from Egypt remains, not simply a crucial metaphor in the spiritual lives of Jews and Christians, but the foundational metaphor for the Western ideas of both history and freedom.

From Athens, from Greek philosophy, the West learned to have faith in reason and in reason’s capacity to get at the truth of things – including the moral truth of things. That faith in reason, linked to the biblical idea of creation, explains why science flourished in the West: there are truths to be discerned in the world; those truths are, so to speak, “built in”; and our minds can grasp them. This conviction shaped the founding of modernity’s first democratic republic, the United States, as the American Declaration of Independence based the nation’s claim to independence from Great Britain on “self-evident truths” from which derived rights endowed in everyone by “nature and nature’s God”.

And from Rome, the West learned that the rule of law is superior to the rule of brute force or raw coercion in human affairs.

To ignore any of these component parts is to misread the ongoing story of the West, John Paul II insisted. Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome are all necessary for the future. A loss of faith in the God of the Bible leads to a loss of faith in reason, and a loss of faith in reason is lethal to the democratic project, for argument based on reason and on the moral truths embedded in the world and in us is the lifeblood of democracy. Thus democratic renewal in the 21st century will give serious attention to all three of these sources of the civilisation of the West – and it will rid itself of the shallow idea that the roots of the 21st-century democratic project go back no farther than the 17th-century continental Enlightenment.

The fourth idea: *historical memory*

In his last published book, *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II reflected on the importance of historical truth for the democratic future. And as he had taught the church in the years preceding the Great Jubilee of 2000, memory must be purified if a humane future is to be secured.

A true telling of a nation's story, purified of distortions, leads to an open future. Falsified or distorted history contributes to personal corruption, and often leads to social decadence and ultimately to tyranny. That was true in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, and the lessons of that Weimar experience were never far from John Paul II's mind.

For John Paul II, then, the truth about a nation's history was an important part of that vibrant public moral culture that was the key to the free society of the 21st century. Poland had suffered for 44 years, between 1945 and 1989, from a falsification of its history, a lie that was in service to power detached from truth. Poland, and every other nation, needs a true story. Cleansing historical memory and resisting attempts to rewrite history for partisan political ends are essential to the renewal of the democratic project in the 21st century.

The fifth idea: *pluralism*

There is great confusion in the West today about the term "pluralism". Pluralism is not the mere fact of plurality, or difference. Pluralism, rightly understood, does not simply denote the sociological fact that there are differences of religious and political conviction within every democratic society.

Rather, true pluralism is a moral and cultural achievement with important political implications. True pluralism is a truth-based conversation among people of different perspectives, in which all parties seek the common good. The achievement of this genuine pluralism is a society's reply to the word of the Lord conveyed to humanity through the prophet Isaiah: "Come, now, let us reason together..." (Isaiah 1.18).

In *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II observed that "fundamental to the Polish spirit...is multiplicity and pluralism, not limitation and closure". That national characteristic he described as the "Jagiellonian" dimension of the Polish spirit and he traced its roots to the great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was, as he wrote,

“a Republic embracing many nations, many cultures, many religions”. As you can imagine, that historical memory has resonance for an American, the son of a natively diverse land that must always work at pluralism and solidarity. I hope it still has resonance in the Poland of the 21st century, and indeed throughout the West.

John Paul II's thick understanding of pluralism as a social accomplishment also sheds light on the meaning of tolerance. Tolerance, as John Paul understood it, did not mean ignoring differences. Tolerance meant engaging differences within those bonds of civility and respect that ought to characterise the citizens of a democracy. For John Paul II, then, tolerance did not mean that there is “your truth” and “my truth” but nothing we recognise as “*the* truth”. No, for John Paul, tolerance meant a mutual exploration of the truths built into the human condition – and the steady, patient effort to teach the 21st-century world that such truths exist.

None of this was mere abstraction for John Paul II. That is why he saw the Solidarity movement's ability to join diverse people in a common, noble enterprise as a great achievement. Solidarity, the movement, embodied solidarity, the virtue – and the fourth foundational principle that John Paul II cemented into Catholic social doctrine.

The sixth idea: *patriotism*

To revisit John Paul II's homilies and addresses during the Nine Days of June 1979, and especially his homily in Gniezno on June 3, is to learn important lessons about patriotism for today. Here was a Polish patriot whose Polish and Cracovian roots and experience and loyalty had led him to a broader appreciation of the spiritual unity of the Slavic peoples, and indeed of the cultural unity of Europe.

John Paul II was not a “European” in some abstract way: he had come to a vision of Europe – whole and free, breathing with both its lungs, East and West – through his Cracovian and Polish experience, not despite that experience. By the same token, his Polish patriotism was not chauvinistic or xenophobic. It was not closed in on itself, but open to those who were “other”. Poland, sometimes betrayed and too often ignored by the West, was, he insisted, woven into the tapestry of Europe. John Paul II's words on this subject are worth recalling on this 40th anniversary; here is what he wrote in *Memory and Identity*:

...nation and native land, like the family, are permanent realities... [Yet] one thing must be avoided at all costs [-]...an unhealthy nationalism. Of this, the 20th century has supplied some all too eloquent examples, with disastrous consequences. How can we be delivered from such a danger? I think the right way is through patriotism. Whereas nationalism involves recognising and pursuing the good of one's own nation alone, without regard for the rights of others, patriotism...is a love of one's own native land that accords rights to all other nations equal to those claimed for one's own. Patriotism, in other words, leads to a properly ordered social love.

In brief, to be a Pole for John Paul II was to be a person of a particular loyalty, whose particular experience had opened him up to wider loyalties without ever forgetting his roots. Surely there is a lesson here for today.

The seventh idea: *a public church in a free society*

In the encyclicals *Redemptoris Missio* and *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II taught a bold vision of the church's role in the free society of the 21st century. As envisioned by John Paul II, the church of the 21st century was neither an *established* church nor a *partisan* church: neither a church that sought to put state power behind its truth claims nor a church allied to a political party. As the pope wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*, "the church proposes; she imposes nothing". The church asks, and if necessary demands (as it did under communism), to be able to make its evangelical proposal in public; and the church claims the right, as a civil society institution, to be a vigorous partner in the public debate.

But the church does not seek legal establishment, nor does it provide a chaplaincy to any political party. Partisanship jeopardises the independence of the church and, even more importantly, partisanship reduces the Gospel to a political programme – precisely one of the criticisms that John Paul II made of certain forms of Latin American liberation theology.

Nor was the 21st-century church described in the teaching of John Paul II a *privatised* church, withdrawn from the public square by its own decision, by the application of coercive state power, or both.

European Catholicism had long been used to ecclesiastical establishment. Those days, John Paul II knew, were over. And the alternative to ecclesiastical establishment, was neither a privatised church nor a ghettoised church nor a partisan church but a *public* church: what John Paul II called in *Redemptoris Missio* a *proposing* church. As John Paul II taught explicitly in *Centesimus Annus*, this proposing church would work in public primarily through the free associations of civil society, rather than as a political actor. The proposing, public Catholicism of the 21st century would make arguments; it would not seek to craft policies, although the arguments it made would suggest that some policies were more compatible than others with freedom lived nobly, in solidarity, and for the common good.

The proposing, public church sketched by John Paul II's social magisterium would work at a deeper level of public life – the level of cultural self-awareness and self-understanding. The church would, in other words, be the guardian of the truths that make it possible to live freedom well.

This idea of a "public church" also tells us something about the free society in the 21st century. The free society must indeed be "open", and that openness must be comprehensive: the free and open society cannot mean a public space from which religious conviction is excluded as a source of moral and political insight. It is time for Europe and the entire West to rid itself of the cultural hangover caused by the idea that democracy, freedom, and openness require a *laïcité* that creates a religiously naked public square. That is itself an undemocratic claim, for it denies to many citizens the right to bring the deepest sources of their moral convictions into public life.

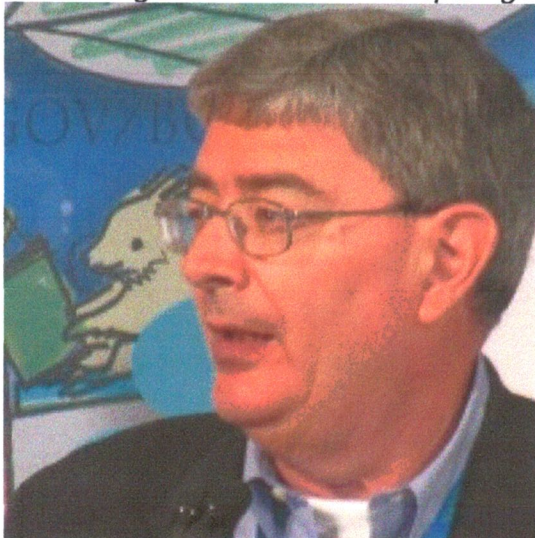
Moreover, the inability of "liquid" post-modernity to give a strong account and defence of democracy against the claims of the new authoritarians in Moscow, Istanbul, Beijing and elsewhere – and against the political project of radical jihadist Islam – suggests that the West today needs to rediscover what biblical religion once taught it

about the dignity of the human person, the limits of state power, and the moral superiority of living in solidarity with others rather than for oneself alone.

Post-Christian Europe is increasingly post-rational Europe, and its inability to mount a strong, culturally transmitted, and politically resonant defence of democracy and the free society, on anything other than utilitarian grounds, must be addressed in the years ahead. The “public church” envisioned by John Paul II – neither established nor partisan nor ghettoised – could play an important role here.

It is a curiosity that a man like John Paul II, who never lived in a mature democracy, should have such a penetrating insight into the democratic project and what in a political culture makes a flourishing democracy possible. But we should, on this centenary, be grateful for his insight. And we should learn from it better than we have in the decade and a half since his death.

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