

**Democracy and Morality: Religious and Secular Views.** *Edited by Patti Tamara Lenard and Margaret Moore. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2024. 306pp. \$59.95 paper.*

This helpful volume of comparative ethics contains ten chapters examining attitudes toward democracy within a range of religious and secular moral traditions, plus a short introduction and comparative conclusion from the editors. The ten traditions include the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), three non-Western faiths (Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism), and four secular traditions (classical liberalism, liberal egalitarianism, feminism, and natural law). The book is thus truly global and explores approaches to democracy from a great diversity of perspectives. It features a stellar cast of contributors. All are experts within the relevant traditions, and many have made significant contributions to their tradition's understanding of democracy. The volume also includes an annotated bibliography, which will be a helpful guide to those wanting to go deeper.

As the editors candidly admit in their introduction, this kind of project immediately encounters some difficulties. Several of the traditions predate modern democracy by hundreds of years. Asking whether they see democracy as the only acceptable form of political governance risks anachronism. These traditions' long history and internal diversity also mean that they are each far from univocal. Contributors seeking to summarise the variety of views within their tradition—from ancient religious texts, central historical figures, and among contemporary scholars—all within a 20-page chapter aimed at readers unfamiliar with the tradition, face a daunting task. Inevitably, some chapters balance the competing demands of giving a broad overview of the tradition's approach to democracy through the sweep of history with providing sufficient detail on key concepts and themes better than others. But every chapter provides a very helpful primer.

Readers will likely find the chapters on traditions that they know less about the most interesting and useful. Thus, I particularly enjoyed the chapters on non-Western religions. For traditions that one knows better, there will likely be little new information, and no doubt one can quibble about simplifications and choices of emphasis. But it is the overall combination of the familiar and unfamiliar that makes this an especially valuable volume, and every chapter worth reading. Even chapters on familiar traditions can provide helpful reminders of various facets of its approach to democracy. Indeed, I very much enjoyed the chapters on the traditions I know best (namely, Jonathan Chaplin on Christianity and David Miller on liberal egalitarianism).

The chapters invariably do a nice job of highlighting internal tensions within the traditions, and areas for further exploration. Several helpfully compare a democratic strand within the tradition with a non-democratic one—for example, Confucian meritocracy, the Hindu warrior ethic, and an Islamic rejection of democracy as usurping God’s sovereignty. This helps the reader get a sense of the tradition’s broader political ethics, and the distinctive challenges that defenders of democracy within it face.

Some prudent editorial choices help to give the book an overall unity and to treat the various traditions on a par. The chapters are in alphabetical order, rather than being organised based on ‘type’ (whether religious vs. secular or Western vs. Eastern, etc.). They all have roughly the same section headings, because the editors asked the authors to respond to the same set of guiding questions. Those questions include the definition of democracy, what kinds of equality matter, the moral standing of democracy as compared to other systems of government, and the scope of the decisions that ought to be subject to democratic decision-making. While not all contributors interpret these questions in the same way or discuss the same aspects of each of them, the assignment of the same questions to all of the authors generally works well.

One feature that stood out to me was that while all the traditions can support democracy, most do not endorse a straightforwardly intrinsic justification of democracy—i.e. one appealing to its fairness as a procedure or inherent rights to political participation. Most instead justify it instrumentally, as a means toward some other end. As a result, they often also endorse limitations on the scope of democracy or what decisions can permissibly be made, in order to ensure that the relevant end is furthered. This also means there is sometimes space to prefer different political arrangements in certain conditions. In their comparative chapter Lenard and Moore suggest that the intrinsic vs. instrumental divide largely maps onto the secular vs. religious distinction. But I'm not sure that is right. Stephen Macedo argues that classical liberals value democracy mainly instrumentally, and so would various other secular traditions not represented here (most obviously, utilitarianism). And intrinsic justifications do appear in some religious traditions—e.g. certain Christian theological strands. But the dominance of instrumental justifications is notable, given that the political philosophy literature tends to focus on intrinsic, usually egalitarian, justifications.

Most of the traditions also have some reasons to be wary of democracy. Classical liberals worry that it will lead to excessive interference in the economy, Christians worry that it will trample over social pluralism, Confucians worry that it won't lead to suitably meritocratic leadership, Muslims worry that it will lead to laws that are not in accordance with *sharī'a*. This follows from seeing government as ultimately oriented to ends set by the tradition, whether religious or secular. It gives further reasons to endorse constraints on democracy—usually via a constitution, but sometimes through religious elites judging the compatibility of democratic decisions with religious law, as Andrew March discusses in relation to Islam.

Nonetheless, the overall message of this volume is very clearly that all these traditions have internal resources that provide support for democracy, and that prominent scholars endorse it. In some cases, this involved something of an (ongoing) intellectual revolution with

respect to attitudes toward democracy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. March and Matthew Moore particularly highlight this, in relation to Islam and Buddhism respectively.

We live in a time when the presumed predominance and long-term stability of democracy, which had for a while been taken for granted (at least in the West), has come under increasing strain. Many worry about the future of democracy. This volume is an important source of encouragement, since it shows that a wide range of traditions can agree that democracy is the most legitimate and normatively justified form of political governance.

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