

## *Humility and Democracy*

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Democracy and ethics: an old philosophical subject that is much neglected today, not least because of widespread agreement that democracy stands for ethical pluralism. Democracy, the self-government of equals, is presumed to be incompatible with attempts to clothe citizens in one-size-fits-all Ethical Systems, such as the Nation and State, or History, Christianity, the Market, or God.

The reasoning seems perfectly reasonable. But doesn't it suppose, philosophically speaking, that democracy itself is an Absolute Ethic, a cut above other ethics, a necessary, non-negotiable and superior 'common faith' (John Dewey)? Isn't democracy therefore bedevilled by a double standard? Didn't George W. Bush prove by his speeches and actions that democracy is hypocrisy, as two-faced as the ill-famed Protestant minister who preached in his Sunday sermon that peace in the Middle East could happen only when Jews and Muslims come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?

No. Democracy is an ethic whose universality, its applicability everywhere on the face of the earth, stems from its commitment to 'pluriversality'. It stands for the robust protection of peoples and their biosphere against bogus First Principles and arrogant Grand Ideologies and their claims upon power. Democracy is not a First Principle. It stands guard against pompous Universals, including the imaginings of Liberal Democracy and Western Democracy. Its key ethic is humility, and it therefore remains calm when confronted by

the provocative question (posed by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk in *Snow*) of whether particular democracies can endure rival forms of democracy created by people they don't much like. For many democrats, that question, prompted by the election of a Hamas government in Palestine and recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, resembles a pistol shot in the midst of a theatre performance, a shout during a time of prayer. It shouldn't.

Democracy is the champion of core virtues like toleration, civility, respect for legality and non-violence. It embraces institutional pluralism, visions of complex equality and a variety of mechanisms of public accountability that ensure that wrong-headed decisions and outright folly can be prevented, or undone. Democracy seeks to humble. It favours the equalisation of power and stands opposed everywhere to manipulation, bossing and violent rule. This is not because democracy is True and Right. It is rather because democracy is the opponent of the powerful, especially when their lust for power is bathed in the conviction that True and Right are on their side.