

Debate needed on future of secularism in emerging democracies, historian says

by [Trevor Grundy](#)

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Cambridge, England, March 9 (ENInews)--The sudden spread of "democratic liberation" in the Middle East means that a discussion needs to begin on whether secularism has a future in Middle East democracies, said historian Simon Schama in an 8 March lecture at Cambridge University.

Sponsored by the Woolf Institute, which is dedicated to studying relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims, Schama's lecture was entitled, "The Difficulties of Toleration: Jews amidst the Christians and Muslims."

Schama told an audience of 200 that if the West has any kind of "moral dignity and integrity," it has to open up debate about the future of democracy as enshrined in the 18th century Enlightenment, which advanced the ideas of universal human rights and toleration, or supporting the rights of others to hold different ideas and beliefs.

"As politics becomes more organized in Egypt," he said, "we need to know what kind of Muslim brotherhood we're dealing with. Is it the Muslim Brotherhood that is sort of committed to sharia [severe religious law] or is it the kind that is kinder and gentler, which indeed it might be?"

Schama, who is a well-known figure in Britain due to his books and TV appearances, said that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had been in effect "excommunicated" by Al Qaeda and the Taliban for being "insufficiently jihadist."

Schama, 66, who is University Professor of Art and History at Columbia University in New York, told his audience that whatever happens in the Middle East, he would continue supporting the rise and spread of democracy.

"If, in fact, theocracy does turn out to be one of the outcomes of democratic liberation, I would still support it. Speaking as a two state Zionist, as it were, and as someone who supports a Jewish and a Palestinian state ... I would still support democratic liberation, even if we have a theocratic crescent (which I hope we don't) extending from Somalia through Yemen and Oman up to Iran through that neo-Talibanised Afghanistan ... But I would want there to be debate in our hearts and minds about whether secularism has a place in Middle Eastern democracies."

He said such discussion would be particularly important in Egypt where Coptic Christians represent ten to 12 percent of the population. "The Christian minorities in the Middle East are tiny but incredibly important," he said.

Schama said that he has come to realize that the role played by religion in history is indispensable. "Kids grow up now with a sense that this is the most secular country in the world. But it's relatively recent in history since you could talk sensibly about politics or culture, literature or poetry ... indeed anything at all ... without religion being absolutely the firm spine of history."

He said that recent events in the Middle East and, in Pakistan, the murder of religious minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti raised once again the need to debate blasphemy laws and the nature of tolerance.

Kessler told ENInews that Schama's lecture is quite timely. "The question of tolerance and toleration is an on-going thing ... Think of the timing of this lecture and what's happening in Pakistan with those blasphemy cases. What Professor Schama is talking about is very much to the point."