

At Library of Congress, cardinal warns against secularism

WASHINGTON - Freedom of religion, and all freedom, can be placed at risk by an “aggressive secularism” that asserts its dominance in society, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago warned in a Feb. 13 talk at the Library of Congress.

In his talk - titled “What Kind of Democracy Leads to Secularization?” - Cardinal George weighed in against both legal and cultural expressions of secularism that marginalize the importance of religion in society.

It is, the cardinal said, “an issue of great importance for our life together in a democratic republic.” Religion “can remain a necessary and legitimate actor in our affairs,” he added.

“The secular must provide legitimate ground for religion” in society, Cardinal George said. “When the secular is legitimized without freedom of religion, persecution of religion becomes inevitable.”

He noted his own remarks could be minimized. “If I were to present an argument on its own philosophical, rational terms, it would be seen as religious, because of the speaker,” he said.

Cardinal George took aim at the Supreme Court. “Their jurisprudence is admittedly incoherent,” going back 50 years to when Justice Felix Frankfurter was on the bench, he said.

The cardinal cited as one example the 1971 ruling in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, which dealt with Pennsylvania and Rhode Island laws on government aid to religious

schools. Eight-member majorities of the high court, in each of the two questions before it in the case, ruled against government aid, calling it “an excessive government entanglement with religion.”

But the cardinal noted that many European nations, “most Canadian provinces and even the Baathist regime in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq” – which, he acknowledged, was not a democracy – “have given money to the parents so their children can attend Catholic schools” without those nations’ fortunes being put at risk.

“Incoherent and unpredictable law has resulted in self-censorship,” Cardinal George added, noting on the day before Valentine’s Day that some have even banned Valentine’s Day cards to avoid any possible entanglement between government and religion.

Cardinal George said a “radical secularist” society would resemble Soviet-era Russia by “limiting freedom of religion to the freedom of private conscience and worship.”

“In the United States, the primary danger to democracy comes not from religion, but from philosophical secularism,” Cardinal George said, adding that some of the wounds have been self-inflicted. Jews embraced secularism, he said, to show that one “did not have to be Christian to be American,” and, likewise, Catholics embraced secularism to prove one “did not have to be Protestant to be American.”

But matters have been carried too far, the cardinal said, “when a preacher can be tried in Scandinavia ..., and even in Chicago, for saying that the Bible says homosexual activity is immoral.”

Cardinal George said another danger can manifest itself when “democracy doesn’t remove religion, but democracy replaces religion: “The homeland deserves our love.” At times, he said, “it can be replaced by asserting that the mission takes on a religion dimension.”

Alexis de Tocqueville, whose travels in the United States in 1831 resulted in the widely quoted book “Democracy in America,” “loved this country but was afraid for its future,” Cardinal George said. The French writer wondered whether democratic ideals would “be undermined by the same forces that give democracy its rise.”

“What kind of democracy promotes freedom? Ours, if it becomes totally free,” Cardinal George said. “What kind of democracy destroys freedom? Ours, if it becomes totally secularized.”