



# Reports

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## Perceptions of Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the “Chilling Effect”

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International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



International Institute  
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit  
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse  
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa**

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Case studies on France, Germany, Colombia and Mexico

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## Background

In recent years, the institutions that issue this report have carried out extensive research on secular intolerance as a source of persecution of Christians in the West. The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) published a special issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* on the topic of “Responding to persecution”.<sup>1</sup> Data collected by the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians In Europe (OIDAC) provides a valuable summary of recorded hate incidents against Christians, which range from events such as church vandalism to court rulings and administrative decisions that uphold the dismissal of public servants for reasons of conscience, the dissolution of longstanding Christian charities, and more broadly the exclusion of religious voices from the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) has also systematically tracked the matter in its country reports and media monitoring efforts.<sup>3</sup>

In his seminal book *Faith That Endures* (2006), Ronald Boyd-MacMillan first highlighted secular intolerance as a “persecution engine,” both in traditional hotspots of persecution, as well as in the West.<sup>4</sup> This was truly a conceptual game-changer, because it made clear that the distinction between “the free Church” in the West and “the persecuted Church” beyond the Iron Curtain and in the Muslim World was no longer – or perhaps never was – applicable. Dennis P. Petri and Frans Veerman further explored the topic in a *Philosophia Reformata* article in 2015<sup>5</sup> (republished by Brill in 2020),<sup>6</sup> in which they attempted to measure the intensity of the secular intolerance phenomenon.

The existing knowledge on secular intolerance was summarized by Janet Epp-Buckingham, Ronald Boyd-MacMillan and Dennis P. Petri in two articles that appeared in the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* in 2020.<sup>7</sup> These articles not only present an overview of literature on the subject, but also discuss the findings of interviews with representatives of over twenty faith-based advocacy organizations in Western Europe (with a focus on the United Kingdom).

<sup>1</sup> Available here: <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/issue/view/vol13>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://olire.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Boyd-MacMillan, Ronald. (2006). *Faith That Endures. The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church*. Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited.

<sup>5</sup> Petri, Dennis P. & Visscher, Frans. (2015). Revisiting Sphere Sovereignty to Interpret Restrictions on Religious Freedom. *Philosophia Reformata* 80(1):99–122.

<sup>6</sup> Petri, Dennis P. & Veerman, Frans. (2020). Revisiting Sphere Sovereignty to Interpret Restrictions on Religious Freedom. In Simon Polinder & Govert J. Buijs (eds.). *Christian Faith, Philosophy & International Relations: The Lamb and the Wolf* (pp. 240–262). Leiden/Boston: Brill.

<sup>7</sup> Petri, Dennis P. & Buckingham, Janet E. (2020). Origins and response to secular intolerance. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13(1/2):27–35; Petri, Dennis P. & Boyd-MacMillan, Ronald R. (2020). Death by a thousand cuts: perceptions of the nature and intensity of secular intolerance in Western Europe. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13(1/2):37–53.

After more than a decade of research, the authors and the institutions they represent are confident that they have gained a solid understanding of both the causes and the consequences of the secular intolerance phenomenon. We know where it comes from: we have identified its historical and philosophical sources and we have uncovered its main drivers. We also know how it manifests itself: we have mapped the legal restrictions to the free religious expression of committed Christians, and we are continuously tracking incidents and court cases. Finally, we know how to interpret secular intolerance within the broader analytical framework of religious freedom and persecution of Christians.

But one important element is still missing. Notwithstanding the past research, there continues to be much unclarity about the intensity of secular intolerance. It is obviously a genuine phenomenon, as many have confirmed before us and as the cited research bears out, but how bad is it? When considered individually, incidents categorized as secular intolerance seem insignificant and not very harmful. Moreover, court cases involving freedom of expression of (conservative) Christians are limited and several have achieved redress in courts of law. Besides, what do a few incidents of marginalization of Christians, as tracked by OIAC, OLIRE and other institutions really mean? Should we be all that concerned about secular intolerance?

As Dennis P. Petri and Ronald Boyd Mac-Millan write, these many small things together cause “death by a thousand cuts.” A few cuts do not kill you and barely hurt. But continuous small strikes eventually have an impact. We posit that the accumulation of seemingly insignificant incidents creates an environment in which Christians do not feel comfortable – to some degree – to live their faith freely. Indeed, Western Christians experience a “chilling effect” resulting from perceived pressures in their cultural environment, related to widely mediatized court cases:

“It would be wrong to assume that because several court cases are being won and because the number of court cases have diminished in some areas, the pace of secular intolerance is decreasing. Rather, the court cases have had a chilling effect on conservative Christians, who often resort to self-censorship, mainly to avoid going through the trouble and anxiety of a court case that lead in turn to the disruption of careers, advanced stress, bullying at work, and other negative experiences, as our interviewees indicated” (Petri & MacMillan 2020:45–46).

The ongoing reports we received and observations we made about this “chilling effect” and “self-censorship”, combined with the pending need to objectively assess the intensity of secular intolerance as a persecution engine are what triggered this report. Based on the former, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Secular intolerance has a chilling effect on Christians, which directly affects their capacity to express their faith freely in society and is leading to various forms of self-censorship.

This research is not about what we already know, but about what we don’t know. Our aim is to study the nature, scope and intensity of this chilling effect.

*Is there really such a thing as a chilling effect? What is the chilling effect, anyway? How is it perceived by Christians? What are the consequences of these phenomena on the lives of Christians?*

## Methodology

Against this background, the most suitable method to investigate the hypothesis we formulated was to conduct unstructured interviews with people who have experienced the chilling effect or have been close observers to it. By collecting and analyzing these perceptions, we would then be able to gain a better understanding of what the chilling effect is and to what degree Christians in different spheres of society have submitted themselves to self-censorship.

Because we wanted this research to be inductive, we deliberately decided not to articulate an a priori definition of the chilling effect or self-censorship. This allowed the interviews to be open-ended and gave our interviewees the possibility to elaborate themselves on how they understood the phenomenon without influencing them by our own pre-conceived notions. In other words, understanding the chilling effect was to be an outcome of this research, not a starting point. This turned out to be a strategic choice because it allowed us to discover many nuances of the chilling effect phenomenon. In several cases, we realized that our interviewees were not consciously aware of self-censorship in their own lives, which is an important finding, as we shall discuss later.

To acquire meaningful and specific data (and stay away from general and vague assessments), it was decided to focus on four countries in two continents where secular intolerance, as a persecution engine, produces the most extreme expressions according to the World Watch List of Open Doors International,<sup>8</sup> to observe the chilling effect in its purest form. In Europe, we selected France and Germany and in Latin America, Mexico and Colombia.<sup>9</sup>

Following a purposive sampling method (combined with snowball sampling), interviewees were carefully chosen from the networks of the IIRF, OIDAC, OLIRE and their partner organizations. To give the research sufficient focus, we chose to concentrate on actively practicing Christians – defined loosely – as they can be expected to experience the chilling effect more than nominal Christians. We also selected them to represent four spheres of society: Church, education, media and politics/government.<sup>10</sup> Within these parameters, we tried to ensure variation in terms of geographic location (urban/ rural), sex, age, education level and Christian denomination.

This exploratory and inductive methodological approach was partly inspired by Dennis Petri's doctoral dissertation on The Specific Vulnerability of Religious

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<sup>8</sup> Available at <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: 'freedom').

<sup>9</sup> The United Kingdom was included in the 2020 study by Dennis P. Petri and Ron Boyd-MacMillan that appeared in the International Journal for Religious Freedom.

<sup>10</sup> We could also have chosen to study other spheres, such as the medical sphere or art.



Minorities (2020),<sup>11</sup> in which he uncovered several undetected and security-sensitive dimensions of religious freedom violations by conducting open interviews in subnational areas of Latin America. It also builds upon the insights of scholars from the broad sociological and anthropological fields who have researched similarly delicate phenomena such as violence by women against their husbands,<sup>12</sup> the influence of China in higher education<sup>13</sup> or human rights activism in authoritarian regimes,<sup>14</sup> all subjects which, due to their nature and context, lack visibility and face data collection challenges.

Turning now to practical matters, in each region a team of two persons was set up to organize and perform the interviews with key representatives from four selected spheres of society. In each country about five interviews were conducted for each of the four selected spheres of society, so on average twenty interviews were conducted in each country in the course of 2021. The interviews were conducted using two methods due to Covid-19 restrictions: remotely by the researchers via Zoom (or similar services) and in-person (strictly adhering to health and safety guidelines). When possible, interviews were recorded (unless the interviewees did not give their consent for security or personal reasons). The recordings of the interviews, as well as the interview notes and summaries, are on file with the author of this report. Separate country reports were also drafted

- In line with the research hypothesis formulated above, basic areas of question for our unstructured interviews were the following:
- Do you recognize this phenomenon of self-censorship (chilling effect)?
- Can you give examples of it?
- How does it affect you?
- Do you feel free to share your opinions on these sensitive matters?
- How does it affect other Christians you work with?

Because of the sensitive nature of this research and to protect our sources who for the most part were very vulnerable in the interviews, we do not disclose their names in this report. The interviews were conducted in an environment of trust and confidentiality. Also, we would like to avoid any debates about our interview

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<sup>11</sup> Petri, Dennis P. (2020). *The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities* (Doctoral dissertation). Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit. Available at <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/the-specific-vulnerability-of-religious-minorities>.

<sup>12</sup> Swan, Suzanne ea. (2008). A Review of Research on Women's Use of Violence With Male Intimate Partners. *Violence Vict.* 23(3):301–314. Available at [https://people.cas.sc.edu/swansc/1.swan\\_web\\_articles/2008\\_SwanEtAl\\_ReviewWomensViolence.pdf](https://people.cas.sc.edu/swansc/1.swan_web_articles/2008_SwanEtAl_ReviewWomensViolence.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> D'Hooghe, Ingrid & Dekker, Brigitte (2020). *China's invloed op onderwijs in Nederland: een verkenning*. The Hague: The Clingendael Institute. Available at [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Rapport\\_politieke\\_beïnvloeding\\_in\\_het\\_onderwijs\\_juni\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Rapport_politieke_beïnvloeding_in_het_onderwijs_juni_2020.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Glasius, Marlies ea. (2018). *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68966-1>.

sample, as we would like the discussion to focus on our findings and their implications.

It is important to say a few things here about the limitations of this research. It was clear from the outset that this research would imply significant data collection challenges which we can summarize as follows. To begin with, because of the subtle and generally non-physically violent nature of the chilling effect, it is often misunderstood or even ignored and therefore largely remains invisible. This is the main reason why the phenomenon is not recognized in religious freedom datasets such as the Pew Research Center indexes. This is further complicated by our observation, which we mentioned earlier, that several interviewees did not have clarity about the extent of self-censorship in their own lives. This meant that the researchers needed to have the capacity to make their interviewees feel at ease and be tactical to draw the necessary information out in order to shed light on this underobserved phenomenon, without falling into the trap of asking leading questions (or following a rigid questionnaire for that matter), whilst mastering the art of asking follow-up questions.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that the collected data describes the perceptions of the interviewees. This does not mean that our findings are entirely subjective and therefore irrelevant, but it would be wrong to infer generalizations from the data, especially since our sample is not representative. What the data is helpful for is to improve our qualitative understanding of how the chilling effect is perceived, identify some of its nuances and manifestations, recognize patterns and formulate hypotheses for follow-up projects. We are therefore assessing, rather than quantifying, the chilling effect.

A final limitation of this research is that it turned out to be more difficult than expected to arrive at specific conclusions about each sphere of society. Despite our intention to identify expressions of the chilling effect within specific spheres of society, most interviewees gave their opinion on the phenomenon in general, but often had difficulty identifying issues that are specifically applicable to the sphere to which they belong. This is something we will have to address in follow-up research projects.

After the limitations of this research, let us now turn to its contributions. This research is exploratory and truly unique, as the subject has never been researched before. For the first time, it allows to confirm the chilling effect is real. Second, it contributes to our understanding of the chilling effect phenomenon, offering important qualitative nuances. Finally, it provides a solid basis to develop recommendations.

In the following sections, we first offer a summary of our findings. Then, we proceed to describe in what ways this research has contributed to our understanding of self-censorship. Finally, we formulate some concluding remarks, recommendations, and areas of future research.

## Summary of Findings

For each surveyed country a separate report has been produced. In this section we present a summary of our findings: Colombia and Mexico (combined) (3.1), France (3.2) and Germany (3.3).

We decided to combine our summary of the first two countries because of their large similarity in terms of the observed dynamics in the different spheres of society. The main difference between these two countries concerns the influence of historical political secularism and anticlericalism in the case of Mexico, which we deal with separately, as it is comparable to France and former East Germany (3.4).

### Colombia and Mexico

This is a growing trend in Latin America: an increasing number of cases can be observed in which attempts are made to restrict the freedom of expression of Christians.<sup>15</sup> What is the impact of these cases, and more broadly the cultural environment, on the freedom of Christians to live their faith? The picture that emerges from our two case studies on Mexico and Colombia can be summarized by the following points:

- Those who said they were able to openly express their own religion or beliefs and their position on issues related to life, marriage, family, sexual morality, etc., especially when they dissented from the predominant culture, linked to the positions of LGBT groups, feminist groups or political parties and sectors of society that sympathize with these groups, also recognized there was “a price to pay.” Although this price varies in intensity and frequency according to the role or position of each person in the respective field of study, the immediate discrediting or stigmatization of Christians who openly voiced their convictions and the use of labels such as “retrograde”, “discriminator”, “intolerant” or “incompetent” to refer to them was recognized as a cross-cutting consequence. In some

<sup>15</sup> A few examples: In a 2017 Advisory Opinion issued by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, it affirmed that “religious or philosophical convictions” are “inappropriate” and should therefore not be considered in court cases (Advisory Opinion OC-24/17 of November 24, 2017, [http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea\\_24\\_eng.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea_24_eng.pdf)). On 7 June 2020, the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI) of Argentina filed a complaint against a faith-based educational organization because of its alleged discriminatory curriculum (“El Inadi pide investigar la discriminación en FASTA”, Página 12, 07/06/2020). On 9 July 2020, Colombia’s president Iván Duque’s personal tweet in which he expresses his personal devotion to the Virgin of Chiquinquirá caused much outrage. Although after a quick judicial process, the Supreme Court of Justice revoked the order of a Court to delete the tweet, it warned the President that he must be careful with his personal accounts in order to maintain the neutrality of the government position he exercises, avoiding allusion to internal matters that could be interpreted as an official position (“Corte Suprema falla a favor del Presidente en tutela por mensaje de la virgen de Chiquinquirá”, Asuntos legales, 20/08/2021). In Mexico, legislators expressing their Christian views or advocating against abortion or same-sex marriage or those who defend the right of parents to educate their children, are being accused of discrimination and hate speech (“La diputada Elsa Méndez y la violación a los DH”, El Universal Querétaro, 07/19/2019).

other cases, situations of defamation, loss of employment, academic suspension or allegations of discrimination were mentioned.

- Although most of the interviewees recognized a limited freedom to express their convictions in different areas of society, very few identified this situation as a process of self-censorship. The interviewees used terms such as “self-regulation”, “prudence”, “use of democratic language”, “strategy”, “saying what is politically correct” or “Christian charity” to describe or explain why they saw it as necessary or inevitable not to express their convictions fully, or to use neutral language in order not to be ignored or not to suffer social or institutional consequences/sanctions.
- One of the most salient findings of this research was that the higher the level of educational instruction or Christian education, the lower the degree of self-censorship. In many cases, those who said they did not feel self-censored were people who had been part of a specific training process, sometimes related to their profession. Legislators, student activists, priests, pastors and academics said they had gone through a process in which they now feel more confident and less inclined to self-censor because they benefited from training.
- Catholics tend to self-censor more than Christians belonging to other denominations.<sup>16</sup> Apparently, the biblical training received by the evangelical sector is more profound and this influences the capacity of its members to speak without fear about the Christian faith or about topics related to life, marriage and family from a Christian perspective. Considering the influence of education on the degree of self-censorship, adherents of Protestant churches seem to be better equipped or more confident to share their convictions. On the other hand, it seems that, although the average Protestant Christian is more educated in their faith, this does not mean that they are prepared to communicate their message to a more secular audience and, therefore, they sometimes choose not to do so. In the case of priests and pastors, some of them recognized that despite their position and role as church leaders, they feel that they do not know how to respond in certain contexts, despite their seminary training, which does not equip them to deal with sensitive issues and therefore also leads to self-censorship.
- One of the factors that influence Christian self-censorship is the level of subordination in which each one is, whether in government, at school, at work or in the church itself. The lower in the hierarchy, the greater the possibility of falling into self-censorship.

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<sup>16</sup> This is an interesting insight that can be taken as an encouragement to develop a training.

- Online/Internet social networks are the main environment of hostility.<sup>17</sup> A recurring theme during the research was the recognition of virtual platforms as being main scenarios of hostility against expressions of faith or opinions on life, marriage, family, recreational use of marijuana, euthanasia, sexual morality, etc., these expressions being made by people with a known adherence to the Christian faith or those elaborated from religious arguments. Even when the arguments were not religious, it was enough that they were issued by Christians for them to be published as targets of criticism and insults. Among male respondents, a sense of increased fear of expressing opinions on feminist-related issues has also been identified in the university environment. The consequences include not only damage to their image but also – often unfounded – accusations of violence against women.
- Throughout the research a hostile environment, especially motivated by pressure groups or collectives related to sexual minorities and radical feminist groups, as well as by political parties and sectors of society that are sympathetic to these groups, was cited as the main reason for self-censorship. One of the interviewees pointed out that in protests, marches or massive events, Christians have felt watched and photographed by hooded people; another participant pointed out that his sister, a pro-life activist, received a photograph of her house from radical feminist groups as a clear sign of intimidation.
- From the information obtained through the interviews we can differentiate certain dynamics related to Christians and self-censorship: a) there is a group that does not self-censor and accepts the consequences, convinced that their faith is worth it, b) there are those who self-censor for fear of legal and/or social sanctions, c) there are also those who, due to constant self-censorship and an almost non-existent accompaniment in the faith via a religious community or other Christians, are losing their faith or who, little by little, stop seeing the characteristics related to self-censorship as a problem. The second group seems to be in the majority.<sup>18</sup>
- As a result of the attack not only on the content of expressed convictions, but also of the attack on people who express them, a kind of fear or paralyzing effect arises, which we might well call the chilling effect.
- An important consequence of this chilling effect is not only that persons are limited in their exercise of religion or in their right to manifest their

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, outside the digital environment, it also happens at workplaces and in schools (e.g., new study says that Catholic children in Ireland are the ones who suffer the bullying). It's just more visible in the digital space.

<sup>18</sup> It could also be fruitful to look at the link of religion and identity and how vital the expression of one's identity is for psychological reasons too. Religion is a strong and profound identity marker, often dominant over other identity markers, which profoundly guides behavior. The denial of an integral identity is threatening the very internal being of a person, which in the end can even lead to the separation from this identity.

convictions, but also that these violations to the right to religious freedom can cause the disappearance of religion in a given context.

- It is important to bear in mind that self-censorship is not only configured when a person, or in this case a Christian, does not openly manifest his Christian faith or his convictions or beliefs. It also refers to situations in which a Christian cannot express his or her views on sensitive issues, related to the rejection of abortion, same-sex marriage or homo-parental adoption. According to what was expressed during the interviews, the average Christian avoids this type of debate so as not to face social denunciations or sanctions.
- In relation to the above, although the term “chilling effect” is commonly related to actions or omissions on a state level, either in the form of norms or laws that can indirectly motivate the non-exercise of a right for fear of the consequences, the present research reveals that beyond the possible legal sanctions, social pressure or sanctions are very influential factors that can push Christians to succumb to the tendency of self-censorship.

## France

*“Today France is no longer a Christian country, it is a country of Christian history”,* said one of our interviewees. France is generally considered to be the cradle of secularism, although its 1905 law on laïcité was inspired by the anti-clerical legislation passed in Mexico in 1857. French laïcité is not only a regime that establishes a strict separation between religion and the state, but also a cultural mindset that has led to an environment in which religious expression beyond the – very narrowly defined “private sphere” is viewed with suspicion. In other words, secularism has encouraged secularization.<sup>19</sup> The influence of postmodern philosophies and trends (especially the aftermath of the May 1968 movement), including identity politics, further strengthen this cultural mindset. More than anything else, this mindset has led to widespread and ubiquitous self-censorship among Christians – mostly Catholics, some Protestants – as our research confirms. Our research also points to some important and unexpected nuances, which the following points summarize:

- The first major characteristic of self-censorship is its non-evidence. Many interviewees seemed to be unaware of the phenomenon, both in their own lives and in society in general. But once they “opened their eyes,” they generally confirmed the phenomenon is widespread and ubiquitous in many spheres of society. The latter points to the challenge that is posed by the observation not only of the subtle pressures

<sup>19</sup> It is helpful to bear in mind that secularism as a concept generally has a negative view of religion the moment it is not just practiced in the private sphere. To some extent it can even be considered ideological in the sense that it presumes that reason triumphs over religion in the end and that religion, as a social reality will get extinct in the process of civilization.

emanating from secular intolerance, but also the observation of the self-censorship phenomenon itself.

- Connected to this lack of awareness, many interviewees expressed their concern about the training they themselves have not had or the lack they observe more broadly within the Christian world, which does not enable Christians to detect patterns of self-censorship nor respond adequately to environments in which they feel compelled to remain silent about their faith or convictions. Indeed, several interviewees established a relationship between the lack of training and the degree of self-censorship: the less equipped people are to speak out, the more they will revert to staying silent.
- The degree of self-censorship seems to be related to the degree to which Christians have a sense of self-confidence and security about their faith. Many expressed that as they grew older and matured in their faith, they tend to be less inclined to self-censor. Again, training – in some form – is highlighted as a possible answer to this issue.
- When asked about the effects of the recent wave of vandalism on church buildings, this was generally not interpreted as an element that creates additional fear among Christians. Self-censorship is mainly related to the overall cultural mindset mentioned earlier, which already makes it very difficult for Christians to express themselves about sensitive subjects. One interviewee compared this to the Covid19 lockdown: even though the restrictions have been lifted, some people voluntarily decide to stay inside. Christians have opposed petitions to allow church services during the lockdowns because they feared it would have negative consequences on the church. Trade unions go out and protest, but Christians often decide to avoid attracting attention.
- In contemporary society, virtually all topics are being discussed publicly, with one exception: conservative Christian voices are either ridiculed or ignored.<sup>20</sup> This exception is highlighted by some interviewees as inconsistent with the ideals of an open democratic debate but is a reality throughout all spheres of society. Christians are often ashamed of their faith or have experienced rejection (including when applying for jobs) when their faith was known.
- The “secularization” (as well as “intellectualization” and “leftism”) of the Church, in particular the Catholic Church, was highlighted by many interviewees. Repeatedly, the disappointment with the silence of the French Episcopal Conference about important societal matters was mentioned, especially during the discussion of the abortion law in 1974. Since then, Church leaders are perceived to not become involved in public debates – “shyness” is the word used to describe this attitude –, although this appears to be changing recently. This “shyness” and extreme

<sup>20</sup> This is of course a delicate affirmation to make because the absence of something can hardly be proven. Yet, our interviewees experience media bias against committed Christians.

caution led some interviewees to speculate whether part of the origins of the self-censorship phenomenon are, in part, related to issues within Christianity itself. The Church seems to be more preoccupied with “peripheral matters” than with “the heart of the faith.” Moreover, even in actively practicing families, the faith seems not be transmitted to future generations.

- In private Catholic education, it seems nearly impossible to recruit committed Christian teachers. Within Catholic private schools, children tease each other about their religious convictions, but nothing serious. Principals of faith-based schools need to be careful with some of its staff, to avoid offending them, as some are non-believers or “fragile.”
- Strangely enough, there seems to be more self-censorship on behalf of the clergy than on behalf of committed lay people. Clergy sometimes feel like they need to ask permission to society to wear religious dress. It is noteworthy that the “Manif pour tous” movement against same sex marriage of 2013 was led by a broad social coalition including lay Catholics, not by the Catholic hierarchy.
- A difference can also be observed between Catholics and (Evangelical) Protestants, the latter being a small minority but that is often more outspoken and actively engaged in missionary work.
- In terms of self-censorship, there seem to be important generational differences. Young actively practicing Christians are fewer in numbers than older generations, but they seem to be more willing to witness and also to be much less fearful. This is mostly the case among youths belonging to the more conservative bourgeois classes, than within the working class (which probably confirms the importance of training/education). Moreover, these well-off young Catholics tend to operate within a secluded social bubble.
- The boldness of this subset of the younger generation is generally perceived to be a sign of hope. A conservative intellectual awakening, that is broader than Christianity, also seems to emerge, with a vibrant network of alternative media that is keenly aware of the issues that arise from the dominant cultural mindset in France, including the self-censorship phenomenon.
- Many interviewees, especially those belonging to older generations, tend to confuse self-censorship with prudence. Of course, there is a fine line between things like wanting to be cautious, delicate and not come across as offensive on the one hand, and self-censorship on the other. This is objectively complex within a cultural mindset that discourages public expressions of Christianity. Yet, many seem to have internalized this cultural mindset when they state that they do not see it as their calling to publicly voice their convictions and that they prefer to be a witness through their lifestyle. Being a witness through one’s lifestyle rather than through words may, of course, be the more strategic option, but it could also be an expression of the self-censorship phenomenon. But even



those who consider that it is not their role to witness through words express that they would not know how to deal with the polemic political issues if they were forced to.

- One interviewee completely rejects the self-censorship hypothesis: *“In my circles it does not seem that there is self-censorship for a simple reason; we could classify Christians into three categories: those who have lost their faith and are no longer Christians in the strict sense of the word, Christians who have become radicalized and who do not hesitate to express themselves, and finally those who have a living faith and who are not in self-censorship.”* In other words, this interviewee seems to consider that Christians who self-censor are not real Christians. This is a minority view among our interviewees.
- One interviewee made a very enlightening distinction between direct and indirect self-censorship:

“Direct self-censorship concerns Catholic Christians who are active and firm in their faith, meaning they have experienced an encounter with Christ, enriched by sound doctrinal knowledge. This form of self-censorship is decreasing because new generations are more daring and more combative in the face of the mainstream. However, this form of self-censorship is still very present in the Catholic hierarchy, the causes of which may be doctrinal, but I believe that they are rather based on a form of weariness and discouragement, especially among older generations.”

“Indirect self-censorship is the reaction of many Catholic Christians linked to a kind of ideological pollution, which consists in thinking that the proclamation of Christ’s victory on the cross, because of its radicality and its simplicity, is too infantile, reactionary, traditionalist, etc. I no longer conceal the message out of fear or prudence or even delicacy, but I conceal the message out of an ideology, but in an un-reflected, instinctive and shallow way. There is always a small voice that remains active in the heart of each one. This is what is called the *sensus fidei*, the sense of faith, which according to the Catholic doctrine is the action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people. Indirect self-censorship stifles this little voice.”

## Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany guarantees freedom of speech, expression, and opinion to its citizens (mainly articles 5 and 8 of the German Grundgesetz). Notwithstanding the legal framework, particular topics and attitudes seem to break a taboo. “You need to carefully watch about which topics and in which manner you express your opinion” states a 2018 survey by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research.<sup>21</sup> Current conflictual topics include

<sup>21</sup> Köcher, Renate (2019). Grenzen der Freiheit. Der Raum für die Meinungsfreiheit wird kleiner, so sieht es eine Mehrheit der Bürger. Denn mehr Themen werden zu Tabuzonen. Frankfurter

patriotism, migration, National Socialism, and gender. From a sociological perspective, informal regulations and taboos are part of every group and society, even the most liberal ones. From a normative perspective of democracy, however, “it is alarming to find a significant part of the population in fear of being attacked immediately or of being pushed into a corner in which they don’t belong,” as journalism professor Tanjev Schultz warns. The problem arising is a growing “spiral of silence,” to quote a classic theory of Mass Communication Science. The key results of our explorative research on the German situation are as follows:

- Geography matters. There are significant differences in church affiliation within the population. There is a North-South divide in terms of the presence of particular religious traditions and practices which correlate in various degrees to denominational circumstances (North: more Protestant, North and East: most secular, South: Catholic, Southwest: pious evangelical)
- It is important to note that for many Germans, believing and even talking about religion is mostly viewed as a private action. Not even pastors play a significant role in religious interactions among many church members.
- Generally speaking, a Christian affiliation as such poses no problem in public discourse, but the label “Evangelical” evokes negative connotations. It is a) used to defame people and b) avoided by politicians, authors, journalists, but also in private interactions.
- Instead of just pointing at incidents or promoters of “secular intolerance,” many interviewees linked two environmental factors for the current development: a) many Christians face a lack of knowledge. Some stereotypes and misunderstandings are more present than the views of convinced atheists. They relate this situation to b) a longtime inactivity of Christians in terms of engaging in political parties, fighting for important decision-making positions, and their neglect and inability to come across in a more self-confident and inviting manner.
- Also, in all spheres, interviewees point to the problem that it is the influence of the mass media reporting in its oversimplifying and sensationalist style that destroys a functioning debate culture, evokes personal offense and makes “media victims” careful to avoid more trouble. In the end, it also leads to a weariness of people to engage in politics.
- Some interviewees made the distinction that it is not a narrowing of tolerated margins, but that the debate has changed in the way that the consequences have worsened to the point that people are forever excluded from debates, lose their professional credibility, are not invited anymore and – not to be underestimated – become dangers to other people that are seen in contact with them. So, instead of a person’s statement, the object of rejection is the person as such, which is an irreversible stigma.

- The dominance of leftist, even socialist and gender identity dogmas, makes the universities (at least in the sample analyzed) the most hostile environments for people with alternative worldviews, including those with Christian worldviews. Adding to the vulnerable position of academics who are still in the qualification process before they are finally named professors – the enormous competition over funding, the offer of a professorship, and, not least, the lack of other similarly attractive professional alternatives for most disciplines – our analysis reveals that it can be assumed that most incidents and the largest extent of self-censorship can be found among academics.
- The hostile conditions are the same to some extent in politics and the media; the interviews support the assumption of an “opinion corridor”,<sup>22</sup> however, there are some niches for Christian and conservative politicians and journalists, be it conservative circles and networks within the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU), or alternative media such as blogs or weekly magazines. However, just like a Christian politician who voices conservative ideas will currently lose its mandate and not win enough votes to pursue his political activity, it is unlikely that a journalist who once wrote for a Christian magazine or a conservative review will be welcome again at a large/major newspaper. Another common characteristic of politics and journalism is that, although an alternative scene does exist, there is a clear no-go line marked by the position of the young Alliance for Germany party (AfD). Being labeled a right-extremist is dying the “discursive death,” as one interviewee put it.
- Our interviewees tend to pick their battles. Some of them engage with secular intolerance in one sphere (perhaps the sphere they are most active in), but do not engage with it in other spheres.

## Political Secularism and Anticlericalism

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century there were fierce (and in many cases bloody) struggles between conservatives and anticlerical liberals over secularism in general and faith-based education in particular in many countries of the world. Broadly speaking, in countries such as Mexico, France and Venezuela, the anticlerical actors won. In countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, the Netherlands and Germany, the conservatives won. This historical context is highly relevant for this study. The anticlerical legislations and the marked secular education system inserted the notion in the minds of the population of Mexico, France and the formerly communist East Germany that religion should only be ascribed to the private sphere, without the

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<sup>22</sup> The term, building on the concept of the Overton Window, was used by political science professor Henrik Oscarsson to describe the situation in Sweden. The “corridor” implies that although many opinions are present throughout the population, some of them are hardly visible in the public sphere. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion\\_corridor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_corridor).

option of manifesting itself in the public sphere.<sup>23</sup> In this case, not talking about religion or one's own convictions is part of a normalized cultural pattern that few recognize as self-censorship.

Below are a few quotes and interviews from the Mexican case that illustrate the impact of the secularist legacy:

- “I had planned for the whole family to go to Mass on Wednesday of Holy Week in the morning before school. But my children told me that they could not go to Mass before school because if they arrived with the ash cross on their foreheads, they would not be allowed to enter the school, because the exteriorization of any religious symbol is prohibited. It would be a violation of the regulations.”
- “Who said that religion is private or that it does not fit in the public sphere? In the cultural environment that norm starts at school, in the family itself ... at the dinner table we do not talk about religion because we are going to end up fighting.”
- “We are led to believe that religion is something private. You can talk about religion when you leave the public sphere, and you are alone with another person. But it is forbidden to say it in public. So, it is a kind of truth that only works like that, in private. We are conditioned to believe that. I remember that since elementary school I have heard that education should be secular. More emphasis is placed on secularism. Until I was about 17 I started to question this. There are many people who do not question it, it is a principle accepted by all, therefore it is something unquestionable.”

Below are a few quotes and interviews from the French case that also illustrate the overall situation in the three countries mentioned:

- “Outside [the Church] it was the revolution of morals with a certain collusion of libertarian, leftist and secularist movements and the emergence of a dominant current of thought that still prevails today. Although its composition has changed, its modus operandi remains the same; occupying the field and practicing a certain intellectual terrorism, intimidation, the progressive conquest of all the components of society and of the Christian world to obtain an adhesion to a reasonable faith, which has finally become adult.”
- “This is secularism: I don't like you but in the name of tolerance I do everything so that you exist but as I don't like you, at the same time I seek to destroy you. It's completely schizophrenic. But it leads Catholics

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<sup>23</sup> Looking at education materials, especially history curriculums, could help as a vital source to research the narrative and bias against the church and Christians. A study on this topic in Austria found that a high proportion of the curriculum in schools has a clear anti-church bias that is not substantiated by facts.

to be schizophrenic themselves; the Christian Sunday and the citizen week ... It is a cleavage which one is pushed into.”<sup>24</sup>

- “I remember that my son, one day, had put his catechism notebook in his school bag. At school, his classmates discovered it, and my son was mocked. And so, he never again put his catechism things in with his school things. He separated the two worlds. It’s very insidious.”
- “They wanted to confine the Catholic Church to the domain of opinion rather than to the order of worship ... Opinion is not visible, it is kept to itself, it is doomed to disappear whereas when worship develops, it is visible ... This was the case, for example, of the great processions, openly displaying the cross in public.” Processions, as public expressions of the faith, are not forbidden technically, but self-censorship is at work when their participants refrain from organizing them to avoid attracting attention.
- “Today’s Christianity behaves as if it were living in a Christian country, it says mass on Sundays. But most people are not interested in it, they don’t know anything about Christianity anymore, so we must attack the unbelievers, by teaching them: teaching the Fathers of the Church, and their great texts, and attaching to the Christian message the gestures of the sacraments, explaining everything. People don’t know any more what it means to be a Christian. They only remember two words which they caricature: charity and sin.”

In Colombia and West Germany, it is not entirely the same. There continues to be some form of religious culture in the public sphere. In all the countries included in this study, the pressure of LGBT and feminist groups is strong, with different emphases. For example, in Mexico it is more visible at the legislative and judicial levels; in Colombia, it is stronger at the judicial level than the legislative. The difference is that in countries with a secular tradition there are much stronger impediments that influence Christian self-censorship at the cultural level, which in a way provides a more fertile ground for identity politics. In other words, identity politics creates obstacles to free religious expression – and indirectly encourages self-censorship – in all four countries in our survey, but this is stronger in the countries that have a secular heritage (Mexico, France and former East Germany).

Perhaps the only positive aspect of secular religious policy is that church autonomy is respected more than in less secular countries. For example, in Scandinavia, Belgium and Germany, the clergy depends financially on the state, which implies that the state can meddle in the internal affairs of the church. This

<sup>24</sup> This once again hints at the identity confusion and possibly even erosion when people of faith are pressured to conform to a specific identity and behavior.

has clearly happened in the case of Scandinavia,<sup>25</sup> but also in Belgium as one interviewee pointed out.

Finally, it's necessary to say a few words about the consequences of the increasing presence and visibility of Islam on the evolution of French laïcité, which are ambivalent to say the least. On the one hand, our interviewees agree that "French laïcité is currently being challenged by the opposition of Islam." This even leads to many Muslim parents preferring Catholic private schools over secular public schools which they distrust because the "teaching is totally closed to the transcendent." On the other hand, many complain about the political alliance between radical Islamism and the atheist far left, which are profoundly different but have "common enemies", including observant Christianity.

A third trend – which contradicts the ones mentioned above – that can be observed in French society in relation to Islam is the "weaponization" of laïcité through the multiplication of legislation intending to combat violent extremism as well as abuses within religious communities. This includes the law on the fight against separatism (proposed in 2021), the law on external signs in the public space (2010), the law on religious symbols in public schools (2004) and the law on sects (1995). Interviewees are concerned about the "identification of religion with violence: the Christian faith is targeted by these laws by association"; "At the moment, the law on separatism is being discussed in parliament, to fight against extremism. (...) Fighting against extremism allows eliminating everything, including the Catholic faith."<sup>26</sup>

## Improved Understanding of Self-Censorship

In this research we used self-censorship and chilling effect indistinctively to refer to roughly the same thing, although self-censorship could be taken as the reaction that results from the chilling effect.

The term "chilling effect" in some contexts may indicate a process of "slowing down". Thus, a clear difference should be made between the phenomenon of a chilling effect, or of an increasing chilling effect, the latter probably implying an exponentially intensifying or accelerating process of increase. If acts of self-censorship are observed at only one point of time, there is no empirical basis to prove an increasing influence, let alone an "intensifying or accelerating process of increase." To incorporate the implication of "effect," Max Weber's insights related to the subjective sense that individuals attribute to their actions must be kept in mind: an effect can only be reconstructed if individual or collective actors changed their behavior in response to or anticipation of (their perception of) the political and social circumstances.

<sup>25</sup> Kuhle, Lene (2011). Concluding Remarks on Religion and State in the Nordic Countries. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 24(2):205–213. Available at [https://idunn.no/file/ci/66929940/Concluding\\_Remarks\\_On\\_Religion\\_And\\_State\\_In\\_The\\_Nordic\\_Coun.pdf](https://idunn.no/file/ci/66929940/Concluding_Remarks_On_Religion_And_State_In_The_Nordic_Coun.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> This important new trend could also spill over to other European countries and should be monitored closely (e.g., Denmark).

The U.S. Supreme Court was one of the first courts to develop the concept of the chilling effect.<sup>27</sup> According to the court, this phenomenon occurs when an individual, who enjoys the freedom to express himself freely, decides to censor himself to avoid the negative consequences of expressing his opinion in a given case. More broadly, the Open Society Foundations has defined the chilling effect as any state action, including the practice or omission of authorities that dissuades individuals or institutions from exercising rights or fulfilling professional obligations, for fear of being subjected to proceedings that could result in sanctions or informal consequences such as threats, attacks or smear campaigns.<sup>28</sup>

Other scholars argue that the dissuasive effects must be an indirect or collateral consequence of the activities that are within the objective of a law, rule, administrative procedure, etc. In other words, the chilling effect refers to the stifling effect of the uncertainty and imperfections of the legal system, which leads people to fear being punished for doing or saying something that may or may not violate a respective rule or judicial precedent.

In this study, the chilling effect to which we refer would be a consequence of the implementation of laws and/or policies that indirectly reduce freedom of religious expression in combination with the actions of non-state actors. In this sense, the chilling or intimidating effect is a term that, linked to freedom of expression and religious freedom, can be used to refer to the deterrent effect that arises when people fear consequences for expressing their religious convictions or even behaving according to their own convictions, which can ultimately lead them to self-censorship. Thus, chilling effect and self-censorship are two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Throughout the report, the concept of Christian self-censorship has been developed to denote any situation in which Christians censor their own convictions and actions if they go against the prevailing culture. However, after listening to the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees, it is possible to add to this definition that self-censorship is also a consequence of the perception of a hostile environment or the suspicion that there will be negative consequences for the person or their closest circle for the mere fact of expressing their beliefs.

The results of the research show that some people do indeed fear being subjected to legal proceedings or being criminally sanctioned on charges of discrimination, while others fear being subjected to disciplinary proceedings in their work or places of study. With some exceptions, the majority chose to keep its expressions of faith or its opinions on issues related to life, marriage and the

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<sup>27</sup> Townend, Judith (2017). *Freedom of Expression and the Chilling Effect*. The Routledge Companion to Media and Human Rights. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82915278.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Pech, Laurent. (2021). *The Concept of Chilling Effect*. Its untapped potential to better protect democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights in the EU. Open Society Foundations. Available at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/the-concept-of-chilling-effect>.

family from a Christian doctrine perspective private because they had witnessed sanctions or prosecutions to which colleagues or peers had been subjected.

Although the concept of chilling effect revolves mainly around the actions or omissions of public authorities which create (with or without intention) a climate of fear and consequently a climate of self-censorship in individuals or institutions, this intimidating effect can also be the result of fear of sanctions or social consequences, even when there has not been a judicial proceeding, or a state authority has not intervened in the process. Among them we can mention insults, defamation, attacks on social networks and on some occasions, threats and physical attacks. When dealing with elected public officials, the sanction is related to not supporting an electoral campaign.<sup>29</sup>

During the research, a group of people were identified who decided to self-censor themselves because of the way their teachers or classmates had been treated on social networks or in their schools. For many, the fear of not being socially accepted or fear of being “socially lynched” is an important factor to consider.

At the same time, among those interviewed there is a small group of Christians who found in the impetus and security of their superiors or colleagues the motivation and strength to manifest their convictions. In other words, if the managers or team found a way to deal with this chilling effect and expressed their convictions, participated in debates or did not allow themselves to be intimidated, this attitude was identified as a positive factor in the behavior of other Christians, who acted or expressed their convictions more freely without fear of social consequences. However, this willingness to speak openly without fear is diminished when the consequences are linked to legal sanctions.

From a theological perspective, self-censorship can be conceived as a limitation that we apply to ourselves on the content of our words. It is having a thought, something in mind and not expressing it out loud. It is keeping silent what we would like to say. Self-censorship seems to be an essential obstacle to the Christian life: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

There are many reasons why Christians keep silent about what they would like to express. Sometimes they do it out of modesty or delicacy. Propriety keeps us from expressing this or that publicly to avoid scandal, misunderstanding, etc. Christians at times chose the lesser evil of keeping silent for a higher purpose. What makes self-censorship different from verbal propriety, delicacy or even strategy, whatever its objective may be, laudable or not, silence because of propriety has an absence of finality. In self-censorship one simply keeps quiet.

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<sup>29</sup> This probably is one of the biggest problems and deserves much attention, as the case of Germany shows.



## Conclusions

This research was instrumental first of all to confirm that the chilling effect is real for many observing Christians in different spheres of life. This may not be surprising to actively practicing Christians who are constantly exposed to people in their personal and professional networks who express concerns about this phenomenon, however, it is highly significant from an analytical perspective. “Self-censorship” presents itself as a hard-to-grasp phenomenon because it is up to the researcher to decide and suppose when and if there is reason to assume something has been censored. This poses a methodological challenge because researchers and interviewees need to clarify those very terms, topics, names, ideas, that are being withheld. It is precisely for these reasons, that research on self-censorship is not to be found very often, but this doesn’t make research any less interesting or inspiring. In other words, this research establishes the phenomenon as an objective social fact, making it visible and tangible. Notwithstanding how obvious the phenomenon may be to many, many do not see it, precisely because they have internalized it, consider it normal or simply do not discern it because of its subtle nature. This report may help to open their eyes to this phenomenon.

Secondly, this research made it possible to get a nuanced picture of the way this phenomenon expresses itself depending on denomination, social sector, geographic location and age group. The comparative findings of our studies on Colombia and Mexico are generalizable to all our cases:

### Church

- The Church has allowed itself to be self-censored.
- Christian religious leaders have more freedom to express themselves freely (but they do not always take advantage of it).
- The level of self-censorship may depend on hierarchies and denominations.
- Christian leaders must be doubly prepared to defend their positions. Doctrinal arguments are insufficient.
- Pressure from legislation, media and culture/society in general seek to keep religion in the private sphere.

### Education

- In general, the belief system of the scientist or academic must be kept silent.
- The activities/opinions of students are exposed to scrutiny and may be subject to social and institutional sanctions.
- In universities, male students perceive greater disadvantages in expressing their opinions on issues related to feminism.
- There is a lack of education/training on pluralism and religious freedom.

- New e-learning modalities due to the pandemic were used to eliminate religious classes.

### **Media**

- There is a greater presence/voice of non-Christian actors in the media.
- Dissemination of distorted messages and biased or tendentious information is common.
- There is an obligation/pressure to follow the editorial line.
- There are restrictions on broadcasting religious content.

### **Politics/government**

- Statements and/or opinions at work or in the performance of public duty, are scrutinized.
- In the exercise of public functions, dissent often means discrimination and disrespect for religious diversity.
- Religious openness is applauded, but profession of faith is restricted.
- Adherence to the Christian faith discredits/delegitimizes the public official and hinders the exercise of the public function.

Regarding the assessment of the intensity of self-censorship, we must admit that the quantitative impact of this phenomenon is still unknown. However, as a result of the present research, it is possible to affirm that at least one group of the interviewed Christians self-censor in order not to be affected by the hostile secular environment – which is possibly even more hostile in countries with a secular legacy –, that is, they avoid expressing or manifesting their convictions/beliefs, or if they do express them, they qualify the words or phrases used, as well as the content. This self-censorship is the result of a chilling effect whereby Christians tend to conform to dominant rules or norms for fear of being sanctioned or criticized.

Fourth, although this was not a stated goal of the research, the people we interviewed expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to share their concerns, which at times led the researchers to play a pastoral role. For example, the Mexican Archbishop told us: “thank you so much, for forcing me to think about these issues.” A French priest said: “What I learned from this interview is that I need to be attentive to the distinction between caution and self-censorship ... It gives me a key to discernment ...”

Fifth, there are signs of hope. Despite the terrible picture that emerges from this research, one highlight of the research is that some groups of young Christians seem to be affected less by self-censorship than older generations. Another highlight is that the awareness of self-censorship seems to be growing outside formal church circles (understood as church leaders, parachurch institutions, etc.), as our interviewees reported: it tends to happen more among youth groups, university gatherings, conservative media, etc.

Finally, many interviews can be re-read as implicit requests from church leadership and individual Christians for help. The statement by the Mexican Archbishop cited above is emblematic in this regard, but he is not the only one. Many interviewees expressed the need for training that equips them both to detect patterns of self-censorship and to respond adequately to environments in which they feel compelled to remain silent about their faith or their convictions. We cannot but interpret this as a request for help made by the global Church. At the same time, the large number of interviewees that seem to be unaware of the extent of the self-censorship phenomenon, also suggest that the Church needs to take a more active role to combat this phenomenon. Our findings thus allow us to develop specific recommendations on how to address secular intolerance in a constructive way, which is the object of the next section.

## Recommendations

This research suggests that the chilling effect and its corollary, self-censorship, are real. Having established this, it follows that we must do something about it. Coming up with the adequate response to this phenomenon is not easy and requires much wisdom, but based on this and prior research, several recommendations can be formulated.

In their 2020 article, Dennis P. Petri and Ron Boyd-MacMillan suggest the following intervention areas. We re-print them here because they remain valid based:

- **Research:** Because the frontlines of secular intolerance are rapidly moving, it is essential to keep tracking where this phenomenon is going. More on this in section 7.
- **Advocacy:** As there continues to be a push by the drivers of secular intolerance to implement more progressive policies and to provoke progressive rulings by judicial instances, it is imperative to offer adequate advocacy responses in these fields. Advocacy is understood here to include two dimensions: (a) legal assistance and (b) policy influencing. Legal assistance refers to litigation and more generally to the legal counsel for Christians who find themselves embroiled in court cases. Policy influencing refers to 1) lobbying against laws and policies that could potentially harm the religious freedom of Christians, and 2) lobbying in favor of ones that will expand their religious freedom.
- **Religious literacy training:** There is an urgent need to educate policymakers, public servants (including the police) and judges about religion to increase their religious literacy. We have seen that a high degree of religious illiteracy leads to misunderstanding of how religion informs behavior in different spheres of society and what the legitimate role of religion in the public domain is. Illiteracy therefore can consequently be the cause of ‘practical intolerance’ against Christians. One can be very pessimistic about the impact of such efforts considering the presumed anti-Christian bias of establishment personnel – an assumption that may or

may not be true, but it is undeniably a critical aspect if we want to reverse secular intolerance. It is also essential to include a religious literacy component into any advocacy initiative (and in legal casework as well) for it to be successful. Key messages to communicate are things like religions are not necessarily violent; the separation of church and state is not violated by religious expression; there must be room for conscientious objection and reasonable accommodation of beliefs, etc.

- **Raising awareness within the Church:** As was presented before, most legal cases can be won, but the media storm and societal tension can be very intimidating and have a chilling effect leading to self-censorship. For this reason, it is critical that Christians are educated about their rights and above all are encouraged to remain active and confront the restrictions they face for exercising their faith. In our interviews, we learned that many Christians are relatively ignorant about their rights and are surprised when they hear about the broad protection of their freedom of speech.
- **The factors of the generalized apathy of the church need to be properly understood and addressed.** Awareness must be raised within the Church, so that both denominational bodies and individual Christians resist the challenge to conform to the dominant secular worldview, but instead take a proactive stand. As our interviewees repeatedly stressed: if churches stand their ground, it might be possible to push back on parts of secular intolerance. (This is also a point made eloquently by Roger Trigg, when he argues that strong institutions can be a buffer between external pressures and individuals.)
- **Raising awareness within the Church** must be done at two levels. The first level is to create awareness among Christians about what secular intolerance entails, because there is a lot of ignorance about the threats that are posed by this phenomenon, and why this is a form of persecution. In addition, Christians need to be educated about their rights, as many seem to have internalized secular assumptions, and are ignorant about the existing protections for freedom of religion. In a way, this is about building religious literacy for Christians.
- The second level is to **encourage Christians to actively engage with and confront secular intolerance**, i.e., to stand their ground. This must of course be done in a strategic and wise way, but there are all kinds of advocacy tools that can be used to speak out against secular intolerance, using all the channels at their disposal (politics, education, media, etc.). This is essentially about offering civic education to the Church.<sup>30</sup>

**Based on this research, the following complementary recommendations have been formulated:**

<sup>30</sup> The forgoing paragraphs may seem like a repetition, but we wanted to explicitly distinguish between the diagnostic that is made by our interviewees and the recommendations we suggest based on this diagnostic.

- It is vitally important to **focus on training** not only related to the doctrine of faith, but also on content related to religious freedom and topics on which Christians are usually censured: defense of the life of the unborn, marriage, family, sexual morality, etc. Training should also contemplate improving the argumentative skills of Christians, which will allow them to better communicate their messages.
- The Catholic Church is the denomination with the largest number of members in all surveyed countries, but with fewer members properly trained to deal with the chilling effect and self-censorship. One way to address this shortcoming is to redouble efforts to make their congregations more and better trained.
- Those who said they felt mostly self-censored admitted to not feeling confident to give their opinions or participate in debates or conversations on specific topics, especially those related to abortion or same-sex marriage, because they did not have the knowledge to argue their responses. In addition, they feared using language that could expose them to charges of discrimination or being accused of hate speech.
- The findings of this research should be disseminated. At the end of the interviews, almost all the participants were grateful to be part of this effort because now they can put a name to what they had intuited or perceived. This, in their words, especially in the church setting, would help them put the issue on the table and find ways to train priests and congregations to deal with the chilling effect and self-censorship.

## Areas of Future Research

The following methodological refinements are suggested for further research:

- The distinction between conservative thought and Christian teachings runs throughout the interviews from all spheres. It turns out that it is some conservative positions that face strong headwind in the public sphere, but not necessarily their Christian background. How should research on Christian self-censorship treat this distinction, and the fact that “conservative” can never be substantially defined?
- Another distinction is the one between content and form. Especially interviewees who hold a representative function maintained that they have adapted their wording, but without giving away the core of belief and basic positions. Maybe there should be a scale introduced to the analysis indicating the “depths of change and adaptation.”
- Yet another methodological distinction should be made between people who deliberately change their behavior because of a change of mind, and those who do so under pressure and with regret. It would be

inadequate to interpret any change of behavior and speech as act of self-censorship.<sup>31</sup>

- What if Christians regret that their position and that of their Church is being reduced to a moralizer in sexual ethics and, subsequently, decides that this is not the core of the teachings as well as their personal belief? It should be debated, from which point of view this case is to be analyzed. From the subjective feeling of the individual, this is no cut in religious freedom or freedom of speech, but a true change in either opinion or in the importance attributed to the issue as such. Only from an institutional perspective of a Church that claims, e.g., sexual ethics or abortion as an unalterable core teaching, withdrawal from certain topics or mitigation of certain positions can be considered a form of self-modification (even here not necessarily censorship).<sup>32</sup>
- The research also shows that in some fields, the interactions in question need to be more defined. E.g., it makes a large difference if the research focuses on the freedom of religion on the level of the church members or Church employees or representatives, and if the relevant environment is the Church internal sphere, or the secular surroundings of the people in other roles (employees, students, colleagues, neighbors, consumers, etc.)
- Investigate norms, laws or jurisprudential precedents that give rise to the chilling effect and self-censorship. Once identified, it is possible to better understand their possible effects on the manifestations of faith or convictions of Christians in each country.
- Continue research on chilling effect and self-censorship in other countries. It is expected that as the research progresses, not only the methodology but also the points to be analyzed will be refined.
- Conduct more studies on specific spheres of society to identify more sector-specific nuances and formulate more targeted recommendations.
- Socialize the findings with broader groups of people through the organization of focus group discussions (this was a goal of this research but turned out to be difficult to organize virtually in the context of the pandemic).
- Work toward the development of measurable indicators of the self-censorship phenomenon to better gauge its intensity.
- An important point that deserves further investigation is the impression that it is members of the Catholic Church who tend to self-censor more than members of Protestant denominations in majority Catholic countries.

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<sup>31</sup> This distinction is helpful for the conceptualization of the phenomenon and also a tool for measurement of intensity. It also shows that self-censorship can have a positive function.

<sup>32</sup> The chilling effect is not experienced the same way depending on the “type” of Christians. This must be remembered, as Christianity is very heterogeneous.

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