

Death by a thousand cuts

Perceptions of the nature and intensity of secular intolerance in Western Europe

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Abstract

In this study, we systematize the main areas of concern related to secular intolerance, based on interviews conducted in fall 2018 with representatives of more than 20 faith-based organizations in Western Europe. We conclude that although some Christian advocacy organizations exaggerate the intensity of secular intolerance in the West, the phenomenon is indeed widespread and getting worse. We discuss practical responses to secular intolerance in the fields of research, advocacy, religious literacy training and raising awareness within the church. Some of the trends that we categorize under secular intolerance are reversible, but most seem more difficult to reverse.

Keywords secular intolerance, perceptions, religious freedom, persecution, Christians, Western world.

Secular intolerance is a sweeping concept that goes by many names. There is no consensus on its definition or on how to assess its intensity. The opinion article by Petri and Buckingham in this issue examines existing literature on the subject of secular intolerance and provides an overview of both the causes and the consequences of this phenomenon. That article identifies the main historical and philosophical sources and the primary drivers of secular intolerance, discussing how it is manifested through the placement of legal restrictions on the free religious expression of committed Christians. The paper also interprets secular intolerance within the broader analytical framework of religious freedom and the persecution of Christians.

This study builds on Petri and Buckingham's article and has two purposes. First, we show that secular intolerance is not just a concern for a few activists but is broadly shared among leading Christian ministers as well as non-Christian intellec-

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tuals. We do this by presenting statements and publications by well-known figures, academics and multilateral organizations, as well as opinion surveys (section 1).

Second, we describe how the phenomenon of secular intolerance is perceived by Christian leaders and faith-based advocacy organizations, so as to gain a deeper understanding of its impact on the church. To this end, we discuss and systematize the findings of interviews conducted in fall 2018 with representatives of more than 20 faith-based advocacy organizations in Western Europe (with a primary focus on the United Kingdom). We begin by highlighting the main areas of concern identified (section 2) and then consider how the intensity of the phenomenon can be assessed (section 3). After that we discuss whether the identified trends are reversible (section 4) and possible responses to secular intolerance (section 5).

Our interviewees were selected from our own personal and professional networks, following a purposive sampling method (enhanced by snowball sampling). We deliberately chose to focus on the perceptions of Christians who feel directly targeted by secular intolerance; we do not describe the views of their opponents. In line with the exploratory nature of this research, we adopted an inductive and open-ended approach to our interviews, to give our interviewees the possibility to elaborate freely on how they understand the phenomenon without influencing them by our own pre-conceived notions.

This seemed the most strategic approach considering the subtle nature of secular intolerance, which generally is not physically violent and is often difficult to observe. We have no doubt that secular intolerance is a genuine phenomenon, as many have confirmed before us (including other contributors to this issue), but how bad is it? What is the impact of the legal reforms, incidents and court cases that many faith-based organizations have been tracking? When considered individually, incidents categorized as secular intolerance can seem insignificant and not very harmful. Moreover, a number of court cases concerning conservative Christians' freedom of expression have successfully achieved redress. Yet our intuition is that these many small or insignificant impositions together add up to "death by a thousand cuts." A few cuts do not kill you, nor do they even hurt. But continuous small blows and strikes have an unmistakable impact. Does the accumulation of seemingly insignificant incidents create an environment in which Christians no longer feel fully able to live out their faith freely?

Because of the sensitive nature of this research and to protect our sources, who for the most part expressed themselves transparently in the interviews, we have chosen not to disclose their names and affiliations. The interviews were conducted in an environment of trust and confidentiality and were not recorded. As we shall see, in an age of "cancel culture," many Christian leaders feel a requirement to self-censor, yet are still anxious to share about this new feeling of exclusion.

Accordingly, we do not quote from the interviews, but instead we describe the general patterns that emerged. These patterns can and should be subjected to further scrutiny. We recognize the methodological limitations related to inferring generalizations from a relatively small, non-representative sample of interviews. However, this data helps us improve our qualitative understanding of how the secular intolerance phenomenon is perceived, identify some of its nuances and manifestations, recognize patterns and formulate hypotheses for follow-up research.

1. A widely shared concern

Before we delve into specific areas of concern regarding secular intolerance, it is useful to depict in broad terms the generalized level of concern among influential Christian leaders. Pope Benedict XVI, perhaps the most visible Christian leader until his retirement, publicly raised the issue of hostility and prejudice resulting from creeping secularism in the West (Pullella 2010).² Within the Anglican Church, Archbishop Rowan Williams (2012) and Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali (2016), albeit from different starting points (the former focusing on the intolerance of Christian expression in the public sphere and the latter discussing, among other things, the lack of accommodation for conscience in non-discrimination legislation), also gave the issue high-level attention in widely circulated books.³ The objections raised by these well-known figures are by themselves significant enough to justify taking the issue of secular intolerance seriously.

There also exist entire Christian organizations whose primary objective is to combat secular intolerance through various means. These include the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, the American Center for Law and Justice, the European Center for Law and Justice, CARE for Europe, the Christian Institute, and Christian Concern. It is also a priority for Evangelical Alliances of various European countries. Although aspects of the work of these organizations might be criticized at various levels, their very existence is significant because it reflects the widespread concern about the issue and the constituencies and donors they represent. Within the leading anti-religious persecution organization Open Doors, World Watch Research has in recent years given more attention to the empirical observation of secular intolerance, through the application of World Watch List (WWL) questionnaires in Western countries and its partnership with the aforementioned Observatory.

² Reports about Benedict's message referred to it as a denunciation of "Christianophobia," a less than elegant term it must be admitted.

³ Indeed, Nazir-Ali announced his reception into the Roman Catholic Church as a way of protesting the Anglican Church's lack of courage in dealing with secularism.

Christian leaders and organizations are not alone in expressing concern about secular intolerance; ordinary Christians frequently feel the same way. A 2015 survey by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the United Kingdom revealed that Christians:

[R]eported being mocked for their beliefs at work, being passed over for promotion and feeling under pressure to keep their faith quiet at work. Other responses included parents saying their children are ridiculed for their faith at school, and business owners feeling ‘in turmoil’ about behaving in ways that might breach equality laws. Around half of those surveyed thought better legislation is needed to provide adequate protection for those with religious beliefs. (The Christian Institute 2015)

Also in the UK, a ComRes survey in 2017 found that 3 percent of workers, or around a million people, have experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination because of their religious beliefs (The Christian Institute 2017). Ditch the Label, an anti-bullying campaign, reported that 4 percent of the people it surveyed perceive attitudes toward religion as a motive for being bullied;⁴ this percentage is quite significant since fewer than 5 percent of people in the United Kingdom are regular church attenders (2012). Surveys in the United States paint a similar picture (Ethos Institute 2017; Grossman 2016).

Leading academics too, both Christian and especially non-Christian – and the involvement of non-Christians is important in signaling that growing awareness of secular intolerance extends beyond the Christian “bubble” – have dedicated entire publications to this topic. Scholars such as Roger Trigg (2007; 2012), Paul Marshall (2018), Stephen L. Carter (2001), Steven D. Smith (2014), and José Casanova (2004) stand out, but many more could be mentioned. Some of these scholars are practicing Christians while others are silent about their religious convictions, but all are generally considered to have high academic standards. One scholar has even argued that the dominance of secularism in academia constitutes a form of “ontological injustice,” because it leads to the subordination and marginalization of non-secular visions of the world, contradicting secularism’s own claims to neutrality and universality (Wilson 2017).

Secular opinion leaders have also expressed dismay regarding particular aspects of secular intolerance. For example, conservative intellectuals such as Paul Cliteur (2018) in the Netherlands, Jordan B. Peterson (2017) in Canada and Nicolás Márquez and Agustín Laje (2016) in South America, have denounced the nega-

⁴ Perhaps even more significant, this percentage is equal to the 4 percent who indicated that they are being bullied because of attitudes toward sexuality.

tive effects of identity politics. The French left-wing philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy has depicted the self-contradictory stance of liberal thinkers and activists who embrace liberal values and therefore take intolerant positions against Christians, but who seem undisturbed by illiberal practices in Muslim communities (2008).

Finally, outside academia, secular intolerance has been flagged as an issue by international institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2006) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2015). All this evidence taken together suggests that secular intolerance is a real thing – a “social fact,” to use sociologist Émile Durkheim’s methodological concept – that deserves to be studied, not just something a few backward Christians are whining about.

We will now look at the main concerns regarding secular intolerance, as identified in the interviews we conducted and a selection of secondary sources we reviewed.

2. Main areas of concern

Secular intolerance does not affect all Christians, but mainly conservative Christians. Christians who hold more liberal views – and recent Pew Research Center (2018a; 2018b) surveys suggest that this group is increasing in number – may often be in agreement with many developments that we classify by this label. We will therefore describe the main areas of concern for conservative Christians.

2.1 Generalized religious illiteracy

A key point mentioned in all our interviews, as well as in Rowan Williams’ work, is the alarming level of religious illiteracy among policymakers, journalists, academics and judges, which reflects the advanced degree of secularization of Western society. This widespread religious illiteracy is of concern because it leads to considerable misunderstanding of religion (and especially how religion informs behavior), which translates into public policies and court rulings that fail to take into account matters of importance to religious people (Smith 2017).

The importance of religious literacy was recently highlighted in England, through the death by violence of Sir David Amess MP on 15 October 2021. During the two hours that he lay dying of wounds, the local police denied access to a Roman Catholic priest, who was nearby and who sought to give him the Last Sacraments, and to comfort him generally. This shows how public servants of all kinds, whether in police, prisons, immigration services, health service, etc. need to be aware of how religion and faith affect the needs and likely behavior of fellow citizens. We will give more concrete examples below, but in general, we can state that there appears to be less and less room for freedom of conscience in many spheres of life.

The principle of separation between church and state is also increasingly misinterpreted as a separation between faith and politics. This misunderstanding is ac-

accompanied by the erroneous idea that a secular state is automatically more neutral and that faith can be restricted to the private sphere (because religious freedom is understood only as ensuring freedom of worship). Together with the existing prejudices against religion, the advanced degree of religious illiteracy indirectly fosters intolerance of religious views.

2.2 Identity politics influencing public policy and court cases

Although religious illiteracy may lead to unconscious intolerance of religious views, interviewees also stressed their perception of conscious opposition. Specifically, they indicated their belief that various influential lobbies have a deliberate agenda (although not in the sense of a conspiracy orchestrated by an evil mastermind) to exclude or silence conservative religious views on certain topics because they are considered discriminatory. The most high-profile example of this in recent times has been the UK LGBT lobby group, Stonewall, which pushed an exclusionary agenda of seeking to define sex as gender. It was subsequently found to have exceeded the agreed legal understanding of the issue through its workplace diversity scheme.

Three general types of lobbies can be distinguished: (1) classic secularists who advocate for the exclusion of religion from the public sphere; (2) the feminist movement, which advocates for the social and political emancipation of women, including from religious dogmas and institutions; and (3) groups seeking identity and minority rights, such as LGBTQ groups pursuing the social and political recognition of different sexual minorities. Occasionally these groups collaborate around a shared agenda. In fact, even gender lobbies and Islamic organizations have joined forces to advocate against speakers perceived as discriminatory, such as in the coalition that has prevented so-called “hate speech preacher” Franklin Graham from gaining entry to the UK because of his comments on homosexuals and Muslims (Kuruvilla 2018).

The main focus of especially the latter two types of lobbies is to end discrimination against vulnerable minorities. This priority translates, among other things, into a push for equality legislation applicable to all spheres of society. Often this sort of legislation conflicts with freedom of religion and freedom of expression; the latter rights come under growing pressure because there is increasingly less acceptance of disagreement, respect for conscience, or willingness to grant reasonable accommodation. As Bishop Nazir-Ali has stated, “In this most recent spate of equality legislation, conscience has not been recognised” (2016:104). Indeed, there is growing concern among conservative Christians that, because of the adoption of such legislation and the multiplication of court cases, the rights of minorities are given precedence over other fundamental rights.

2.3 Self-censorship of Christians

As a result of both the implementation of legislation and policies that reduce freedom of religious expression and the “chilling effect” that arises from the various court cases – even when most court rulings are balanced and therefore favorable to Christians – Christians are resorting more frequently to self-censorship (which could explain why there appear to be fewer court cases now than some years ago).

Our interviewees indicated an increasing amount of pressure on Christians to conform to cultural norms, with socially conservative views being silenced as a result. Christians seem to have become accustomed to being silent about their views when they depart from the mainstream. In addition, almost all our interviewees complained about the generalized apathy of Western Christians who, for various reasons (as discussed in greater detail below), are not taking a stance against restrictions on their freedom of religion. This is true both for individual Christians and for the church as an institution. If there is no pushback, politicians more readily ignore the concerns of Christians.

2.4 Stealth moves

Secular intolerance progresses at different levels, occupying ground in more and more spaces by stealth. In our interviews, a general historical pattern emerged, starting with the trend of secularization of society and followed by the implementation of progressive legislation in an increasing number of fields, among which transgender rights represent the latest. As laws change attitudes, the existence of legislation can be perceived to translate into increasing intolerance of those who oppose such legislation.

This process is not automatic but is the result of the persistent lobbying of decision-makers and is often aided by judicial activism, as various advocates provoke the establishment of jurisprudence through specific cases. For example, in numerous cases street preachers have been accused of discrimination. Although, in most (if not all) cases, the street preachers were acquitted based on freedom of expression, new cases are constantly being filed as part of an ongoing effort to provoke a change in jurisprudence. Some interviewees believe that once a judge breaks with previous jurisprudence, the next area that will come under pressure is the sermons that pastors and priests deliver during church services, with the potential consequence of censorship of sermons and teaching messages given inside churches.

2.5 Restrictions in the church sphere

Usually, gender lobbies are not physically violent, but there are exceptions. The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDAC) has documented attacks on churches (which could be simple vandalism or deliber-

ate assaults by radical gender lobbies or Islamist groups) (Observatory 2019:22-23). The authorities generally act properly in response to instances of physical violence against churches, recognizing this activity as criminal. OIDAC has also noted increased registration requirements and taxation of religious organizations in some countries, all of which places unnecessary restrictions on the church sphere.

3. Gauging the intensity of secular intolerance

Having reviewed the evidence for secular intolerance as well as the main areas of concern, we will now consider how to determine the intensity of this phenomenon. The direction in which things are heading can hardly be viewed positively but is all the alarm warranted? What is the pace of the advance of secular intolerance? World Watch Research is currently undertaking an effort to score WWL questionnaires for Western countries, and this study should yield additional data. For now, we will make a few general comments.

First, secularization, or at least the “de-Christianization” of the West, is likely to continue. Insofar as secularization has led to an increase in (sometimes unintentional) intolerance of religion by policymakers, the level of secular intolerance is likely to increase. This process seems to have accelerated in recent years. This concern is exacerbated by the impression of the growing power of the state as a regulator, which enables it to interfere in more spheres of society.

The OIDAC data (Observatory 2018; 2019) also provides a valuable summary of recorded hate incidents against Christians, which range from relatively minor 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 (such as Catholic adoption agencies in the UK), and more broadly the exclusion of religious voices from the public sphere.

OIDAC documented an increase in reported cases of oppression on religious grounds, which cover both direct and brutal, and indirect and subtle tactics: 180 incidents in 2015, 250 in 2016, 275 in 2017, and 325 in 2018 (Observatory n.d.). The vast majority of these incidents involved vandalism against churches and Christian institutions, along with some acts of violence against Christian ministers, as well as mockery by media sources of the church as an institution. These acts are perpetrated by ordinary vandals, secular and gender activists and Islamic groups.

There have been numerous court cases involving conservative Christians and institutions, but systematic records of these cases are not kept by most organizations, so it is difficult to objectively assess their impact.⁵ In one well-known case, the

⁵ Noteworthy exceptions are The Christian Institute (<https://www.christian.org.uk/case/>) and Christian Concern (<https://www.christianconcern.com/cases>), which each reported having around 50 live cases and 20 to 30 prospective ones. Other organizations do not maintain publicly accessible records of

Ashers Baking Company in Northern Ireland faced popular condemnation for refusing in 2014, on the grounds of the owners' Christian faith, to prepare a wedding cake for a gay couple with the message "Support gay marriage." On 10 October 2018, Ashers won in the UK Supreme Court, ending a 4-year legal battle and overturning all previous judgments against it. The court held that Ashers acted lawfully and did not discriminate against the customer (*Lee v. Ashers Baking Company* 2018).

A similar case in Colorado was dismissed by the US Supreme Court (*Masterpiece Cakeshop* 2017). There have also been numerous cases involving marriage registrars who have suffered reprisals for refusing to perform same-sex unions (which have led to the dismissal of public servants in the Netherlands, the UK, and the United States); medical personnel and social workers who have gotten into trouble because of their beliefs; and street preachers who have had to defend themselves against accusations of homophobia, sometimes as a result of a setup (Stott 2013). The Lautsi case of 2011, concerning the public display of crucifixes in Italian schools, also received widespread attention (Puppink 2012).

Although most courts have ruled in favor of the religious freedom of Christians, the very filing of such cases reflects and reinforces a societal mood that functions essentially as a form of squeeze against religious freedom. Moreover, even where jurisprudence protects religious freedom, every new incident that goes to court can result in a groundbreaking decision, which is why every court case is perceived by Christians as a battlefield. Also, the fact that fundamental rights have come under stress and are interfered with is by itself a concern.

An important distinction must be made between criminal and civil cases. Criminal cases, such as those involving restrictions of street preachers' freedom of expression, are usually won by the preachers and their legal counsels. The law is on the side of freedom of speech, and the judges' interpretations are generally favorable. (Of course, even when cases are won, entire careers are disrupted and good names slandered along the way.) In civil cases related to such matters as employment or education, however – especially when they allege discrimination based on (sexual) identity, which often involves subjective interpretations of (sometimes exaggerated or fabricated) circumstances – the defenders of religious freedom lose more often than they win, mainly because the judicial branch's interpretive role is much broader.

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 go-

court cases. OI DAC includes some mentions of court cases, but they are mixed together with incidents of vandalism. It would be worthwhile to develop a jurisprudential compendium so as to better gauge the intensity of this phenomenon.

ing 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.

Moreover, our interviewees expressed the belief that many incidents go unreported, making it very difficult to determine the extent of this phenomenon. However, the logs of requests for advice received by Christian charities on matters such as how to respond to workplace harassment related to one's Christian views, or on how to deal with sexual minorities in the workplace or the classroom, indicate a steady increase in recent years. One charity reported receiving approximately 10 email inquiries each week along with another 10 to 15 telephone calls. Another reported fielding over 100 calls a year from parents and teachers who don't know how to respond to LGBT issues in their schools because they fear being accused of discrimination or hate speech.

Another sign of the intensity of secular intolerance is the observable influence in international institutions and forums of gender lobbies, which support UN-sponsored programs that promote abortion and family planning, as well as making development aid conditional upon the implementation of progressive policies (Peeters 2012).

Finally, legislation in this realm can be grouped into the following areas: non-discrimination legislation (which has been used to marginalize both Christian manifestations of belief and rights of Christian conscience in situations where competing claims to rights conflict); censorship of the cross and other religious symbols from the public square; the limiting of freedom of expression through various manifestations of hate-speech laws; equality legislation that affects the freedoms of Christian business owners; attacks on parental rights in education; attacks on conscience rights for medical professionals; and registration and tax requirements for churches (Kiska 2012).

Again, although Christian advocacy institutions have had relative success in combating the most extreme secularist policy proposals; the fact that new proposals are introduced so frequently is noteworthy. It signals that the drivers of secular intolerance are determined to keep pushing their agenda. In other words, even if many attacks can be parried through advocacy campaigns, this does not mean there is no threat. Moreover, Christian advocacy groups report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to even express opposing points of view involving identity or minority rights (especially regarding sexual orientation) without fear of sanction.

4. Are the trends reversible?

Most of our interviewees indicated that the trends described above can be reversed only if the church speaks out against secular intolerance and resists the restrictions

imposed by political decision-makers and the broader culture. If the church fails to stand its ground, however, secular intolerance will progress unabated.

Of course, secular policies and laws can be repealed, but the secularized cultural context from which they emerged is much harder to change. Our interviewees recognized that since secularization is the root source of contemporary progressive policies and the consequent intolerance of opposing views, achieving cultural change will be very difficult. Moreover, the secularist worldview strongly dominates “establishment” sectors such as politics, the judicial branch, the media, and academia. Protest votes against this establishment, such as the votes for Brexit or for Trump, are unlikely to have much impact in the long run (and a progressive backlash could even be expected). Even though the general population seems more conservative than the establishment, cultural norms are gradually becoming more liberal, primarily because the adoption of progressive legislation has a normative impact on the wider culture.

We can already observe that some aspects of secular intolerance are more reversible than others. As already described, the law seems to be firmly on the side of freedom of speech in criminal cases. In this area, it appears possible to push back against secular trends, although concerns remain. In particular, the ever more frequent self-censorship practiced by many Christians is worrying.

There also is an expectation that hate-speech legislation might eventually try to reach inside churches, effectively censoring Christian preaching. Paul Coleman, in *Censored* (2012), anticipated an extension of the scope of hate speech (and a lowering of its threshold) in the near future, leading to a culture of censorship and the broadening of government monitoring.

In other areas, particularly cases involving sexual orientation, it seems nearly impossible to overturn existing policies, as any attempt to do so is immediately met with hostility and accusations of discrimination. Christian advocacy organizations said it is increasingly difficult to lobby against legislative proposals in this area, and administrative court challenges around matters of conscience are usually unsuccessful. In this realm, there seems to be a new hierarchy of rights, with equality trumping religious rights.

On the other hand, there remain some areas where political victories are possible. For example, the demands of the transgender lobby (such as the compulsory use of alternative pronouns to identify transgender people) seem so absurd to many people, including even feminists, that they are still met with vast societal resistance. In the case of the already mentioned Northern Ireland bakery, even prominent gay rights activists have defended the bakers’ right to free speech (LifeSite News 2016).

Secular intolerance does not spread evenly throughout the Western world. Some aspects of this phenomenon are more advanced in certain countries than in others. In the

United States, for example, hate speech is not a criminal offense, but it is in Europe. The influence of European multilateral institutions must be recognized, although this area requires further research. Countries such as Poland and Hungary have more conservative policies, but are increasingly facing pressure for maintaining them.

Overall, although some aspects of secular intolerance can still be resisted, the battle lines are constantly moving. Secular intolerance is expanding into different spheres of society, and it can do so freely as long as there is no effective pushback.

Our interviewees were generally very pessimistic about the church's response to the threats posed by secular intolerance. In fact, many of them expressed frustration with the general lack of assertiveness by the overwhelming majority of Christians. The following reasons (some of which overlap) were cited for this behavior:

- A large part of the church is liberal and approves the progressive policies being implemented.
- Perhaps unconsciously, many Christians view dimensions of secularism as normal. Christians are generally ignorant regarding their rights and are surprised when they learn what rights they have.
- There is a sense of resignation among conservative Christians, who treat persecution as something to be expected. Others seem to have surrendered already.
- At times, the church is more preoccupied by internal (interdenominational) disagreements than by the need to form a united front against secular intolerance.
- Often, Christians prefer not to make a fuss about the harassment they encounter. They fear that speaking out would only make things worse for them.
- The more pietistic denominations hold a narrow view of the Great Commission. They believe that struggling against secular intolerance distracts from the gospel. They seem "more concerned with the flock than with the wolves," as one interviewee put it.
- Especially in rural areas, there is a benevolent view of the state. People think that government is neutral and that things really are not so bad.
- As a whole, Western Christians are complacent. They behave like a grumpy majority, instead of accepting the fact that they now are by all measures a minority.
- The vast majority of Christians are often too busy with their lives and have no time to worry about secular intolerance.

The message is clear: the Church needs to wake up if secular intolerance is to be stopped in its tracks. But this must be done with caution and strategic insight.

Before we turn to specific recommendations on how secular intolerance can be addressed, a final aspect deserves to be mentioned. Some interviewees expressed concern that the Christian organizations that do engage with secular intolerance do so from the wrong point of departure. Some Christian organizations combat secular intolerance by trying to use the state to impose conservative values upon society, just as progressives

seek to impose their views. One interviewee referred to this approach as “Christian authoritarianism” and characterized it as very dangerous. The solution should not be to try to impose a Christian worldview, not only because doing so would oppress the freedom of others, but also because this strategy could easily backfire as soon as progressive parties regain control of the state. Rather, we should advocate for a reduction of the state’s role so that it cannot impose its values any longer, whether it is progressive or conservative, and so as to advocate for respect of the rights of the Christian minority.

5. Possible responses to secular intolerance

Based on our interviews and the literature we consulted, we propose the following possible responses to secular intolerance: research, advocacy, religious literacy training, and raising awareness with the church.

5.1 Research

Because the frontlines of secular intolerance are shifting rapidly, it is essential to keep tracking where this phenomenon is going. We have described a few recent evolutions (such as the current advances made by progressive advocates concerning sexual orientation, the results of criminal cases, and the shift in civil law), but we need to be capable of anticipating changes in other areas in the future, as well as understanding differences between countries. Solid research is especially important because we have the impression, with a few exceptions, that many Christian organizations opposing secular intolerance neglect research and, as a result, sometimes make outlandish claims that do more harm than good. Without proper research, it is impossible to inform adequate responses.

We can no longer focus only on the relationship between religion and politics. Instead, we should improve our understanding of the present-day drivers of secular intolerance and how different spheres of society are threatened by this phenomenon. The current battles seem to revolve around identity politics in education, employment, and medicine. More scholarly research on judicial activism and the real impact of court cases is needed. The role of multilateral political and judicial institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights deserves permanent monitoring. We also need to improve our understanding of the extent of self-censorship among Christians. More generally, we need more insight into both the intensity and the pace at which secular intolerance is progressing. We should be gathering information that will allow to objectively gauge the intensity of secular intolerance.

5.2 Advocacy

As the drivers of secular intolerance continue to push for more progressive policies and progressive rulings by law courts, an adequate response in the realm of

advocacy is imperative. We understand advocacy as including two dimensions: legal assistance and policy influencing. Legal assistance includes engaging in actual litigation and, more generally, providing legal counsel to Christians who become embroiled in court cases. Advocates must also lobby against laws and policies that could constrict the religious freedom of conservative Christians.

As legal assistance is a relatively straightforward intervention, the nature of which will depend on each specific case, we will focus here on the main priorities with regard to policy influencing, synthesizing the main recommendations of four authors: Paul Coleman (2012), Stephen Baskerville (2017), Paul Marshall (2018), and Steven D. Smith (2014). We focus primarily on addressing the ambiguity of hate speech and anti-discrimination legislation (also called equality legislation), as well as the imbalances between these rights and freedom of religion and expression. This must be done both through fact-based analyses and arguments and by enhancing the power of storytelling so as to win over people's hearts and minds.

These authors suggest starting with the reform of national hate-speech laws, an area where some efforts by Christian advocacy organizations have been successful. In addition, international law must be re-examined so as to restore the broad protections it provides for freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Finally, all advocacy efforts must be oriented toward creating the most robust free speech standard possible and hark at Milton Freedman's famous warning that "the society that puts equality before freedom will end up with neither." Some experts whom we consulted still hope to cultivate the political will to accommodate the rights of Christians.

5.3 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 advanced levels of religious illiteracy lead to misunderstanding of how religion informs behavior in different spheres of society and of the legitimate role of religion in the public domain, thus encouraging practical intolerance of Christians. One might be very pessimistic about the impact of such efforts, considering the presumed anti-Christian bias of "establishment" sectors of society. But this undertaking is critical if we want to reverse secular intolerance. It is also essential to include a religious literacy component in any advocacy initiative (and in legal casework as well) for it to succeed.

Key messages to communicate include the following: religions are not necessarily violent; the separation of church and state is not violated by religious expression; and an open society must leave room for conscientious objection and reasonable accommodation of deeply held beliefs.

Although gaining access to train public servants has become increasingly difficult – whereas gender lobbies seem to have open doors to government officials – there are nevertheless some positive illustrations. For example, some Christian advocacy organizations informed us that training police officers in this field has led to a reduction in arrests of street preachers, because the police understood that the preachers were legitimately using their right to freedom of expression.

5.4 Raising awareness within the church

As noted above, even where legal cases can be won, the media storm and societal tension can be very intimidating and have a chilling effect, leading to self-censorship. For this reason, Christians should become educated about their rights and should be encouraged to remain active in responding to any restrictions they face for exercising their faith. Our interviewees believed that many Christians are relatively ignorant about their rights and are surprised to realize that their freedom of speech is broadly protected under the law.

The factors contributing to the church's general apathy must be properly understood and addressed. Awareness must be raised so that both denominational bodies and individual Christians may proactively resist the challenge to conform to the secular dominant worldview. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that if churches stand their ground, it might be possible to push back against aspects of secular intolerance.

Raising awareness within the Church must occur at two levels. The first level is to create awareness among Christians about what secular intolerance entails (since there is still considerable ignorance of the threats posed by this phenomenon) and why it constitutes a form of persecution. In addition, Christians need to be educated about their rights, as many seem to have internalized secular assumptions and are unaware of the existing protections of freedom of religion. In a way, this undertaking is about building religious literacy for Christians.

The second level is to encourage Christians to actively engage with secular intolerance. This must of course be done in a strategic and wise way, but many advocacy tools and channels are available in politics, education, and the media. This work essentially entails offering civic education to the church.

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