

Religious freedom without freedom of speech?

A negative trend at European universities

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that the labeling of Christian beliefs on controversial issues, such as marriage and gender, as “offensive” or “hate speech” has a chilling effect on freedom of expression and religion. Building on these findings and on recent studies of free speech at universities, the present paper examines Christian self-censorship in the university context and confirms that Christian students are particularly prone to censor their views out of fear of negative consequences or being seen as offensive. One cause of this problem is secular intolerance at universities, which has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole and requires effective remedies.

Keywords

Self-censorship, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, chilling effect, secular intolerance, university.

1. Introduction

Whereas in the past religious communities have argued for speech restrictions to protect religions from offensive speech (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 6), today we see a flip side of this phenomenon. In some Western states, there is a strong push for speech codes that restrict the freedom of members of religious communities to express their beliefs when they diverge from mainstream views.

The freedom to express religious beliefs in public is a fundamental part of the right to freedom of religion. While both freedom of expression and freedom of religion are well anchored in international and European law, these rights

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have been increasingly challenged by the creation of ill-defined and overly broad “hate speech” legislation, which has led to the investigation and even prosecution of Christians for expressing their beliefs on issues such as marriage, family and sexual ethics. These prosecutions and the labeling of some Christian beliefs as “offensive” speech have had a chilling effect, leading Christians to increasingly censor their own views on these controversial issues. However, self-censorship among Christians appears to be not only a legal problem but a broader societal phenomenon, fueled by fear of negative consequences when expressing one’s views. In this regard, the university context has been particularly affected by self-censorship among students and by secular intolerance, including negative prejudice against Christians.

Methodologically, the following article provides a broad literature review in regard to the concepts of secular intolerance, Christian self-censorship, and the chilling effect. The small amount of research currently available on Christian self-censorship has identified the university context as an area of particular intolerance toward Christians and of resulting self-censorship. Based on this premise, the present article draws on existing research on Christian self-censorship and studies on self-censorship among university students in general in order to explore the potential implications for Christian students and the root causes of this phenomenon. Some of the existing research on freedom of speech in the university context refers to political categories such as “conservative,” “labor,” “left” and “right.” As these categories are not directly related to the exercise of free speech among Christians, they will not be developed further in this article. However, they do seem relevant in the context of secular intolerance and Christian self-censorship, since most of the calls for speech restrictions and attacks on Christian students and professors who express their views on issues such as marriage or abortion come from students on the political left, and since most of the controversial issues on which self-censorship is most prevalent have a political dimension.

Structurally, this article begins by discussing the relationship between freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of expression (section 2), demonstrating that the former depends on protection of the latter. In this context, it discusses the scope and limitations of these rights (section 3), the emergence of hate speech legislation (section 4), and its chilling effect (section 5). The article then goes on to discuss the resulting self-censorship, starting with an overview of the existing literature on this concept (section 6), followed by the presentation of various studies that confirm the phenomenon of self-censorship among European university students in general and Christian students in particular (section 6.1). Finally, drawing on existing research on secular intolerance, the article ex-

amines secular intolerance and the labeling of certain Christian views as “offensive” as root causes of self-censorship in the university context. The conclusion (section 7) considers the implications of and possible remedies for self-censorship among Christian university students.

2. The interrelatedness of freedom of expression and religious freedom

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom of opinion and expression, enshrined in Articles 18 and 19 of the United Nations (UN) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), have sometimes been perceived as two conflicting rights (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 5). This perception usually stems from the misconception that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) includes the protection of religion from offensive expression or ridicule. However, as the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, has pointed out, “freedom of religion primarily confers a right to act in accordance with one’s religion but does not bestow a right for believers to have their religion itself protected from all adverse comment” (United Nations General Assembly 2006:para. 37). Today, in contrast, we are seeing a reverse phenomenon, with strong demands for speech restrictions causing certain expressions of traditional religious beliefs to be labeled as offensive and sometimes even criminalized.

Viewed properly, freedom of religion and freedom of expression are two closely related rights that mutually reinforce each other (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 30). They have been termed the nucleus of the United Nations Bill of Rights (Nowak 1993:301), pointing to their common philosophical foundation. Furthermore, manifestations covered by the right to freedom of religion can be described as expressions. Even if some religious manifestations go beyond the mere “expression” of one’s beliefs (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 72), legal commentaries have described the public dimension of freedom of religion as closely related to freedom of expression (Nowak 1993:320).

According to Special Rapporteur Bielefeldt, the common feature of both rights is the focus on the human being as the rights holder, which shows that individuals must be protected regardless of the nature of the opinions or religious beliefs they hold. For Bielefeldt, this approach is the only way for democratic states to take “religious and philosophical pluralism seriously, including irreconcilable differences in beliefs and practices” (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 14).

3. Scope and legitimate limitations of freedom of religion and expression

As this article discusses restrictions on freedom of religion and freedom of expression, it should be noted that both Article 18 and Article 19 of the ICCPR con-

tain limitation clauses. In the context of fundamental rights, limitation clauses set out the lawful scope of permissible limitations by specifying their substantive content and the permissible purpose of the limiting act (Ali Nassir 2018:302-305).

Limitations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18 ICCPR) are permissible only with regard to religious manifestations, which is commonly referred to as the “public dimension” of religious freedom. According to Article 18(3) of the ICCPR, the “freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”

However, the “private dimension” of religious freedom enjoys absolute protection under human rights law, as laid out in Article 18(2), which states, “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”

Freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 19, naturally concerns only the “public dimension” (as the right to hold opinions privately is covered by Article 18). According to Article 19(3), limitations of the right to freedom of expression must be “provided by law” and must be “necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others” and “for the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.”

The wording of these articles was the result of intense negotiations between the various UN member states. With regard to freedom of expression, the changes between the earlier version, found in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which does not contain any limitation clauses, and the later version of Article 19 contained in the ICCPR reflect the controversies between Western states, which advocated for free speech, and Soviet states, which pushed for severe speech limitations. The dispute resulted in the introduction of Article 19(3) and also of Article 20(2), which outlaws “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence” (Coleman 2016:27).

4. Hate speech legislation and its implications for freedom of expression and religion

However, debates between Soviet and Western states over restrictions on freedom of expression did not end with the drafting of the ICCPR, as the USSR and allied states pushed continually for further prohibitions on “hate speech” (Coleman 2016:28). Perhaps the most far-reaching provision to this end was Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1965, which calls on states “to adopt immediate and positive

measures designed to eradicate all incitement to, or acts of, such discrimination,” including the “dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority.”

Because Article 4 of the ICERD and Article 20(2) of the ICCPR require states to take positive measures to prohibit speech that incites discrimination, even those states that initially opposed the introduction of these provisions began to enact hate speech laws following the ratification of the treaties (Coleman 2016:37). In many European states, these laws have since been expanded. Though they were originally linked to the categories of national, racial and religious identity, many national hate speech laws have been amended to include other groups and less clearly defined categories such as transgender identity and sexual orientation. This is the case, for example, with the newly introduced Scottish Hate Crime and Public Order Act of 2021 (OIDAC 2021).

Furthermore, the lack of a definition of hate speech in international law has allowed for broad interpretations that have moved further and further away from the original rationale of restricting speech that incites imminent violence. According to the Council of Europe’s 2009 Manual on Hate Speech, for example, hate speech “does not necessarily manifest itself through the expression of hatred or of emotions. It can also be concealed in statements which at a first glance may seem to be rational or normal” (Council of Europe 2009). Similarly, the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency called for a binding EU instrument to effectively counter “expression of negative opinions against LGBT people” in its section on hate speech (European Union 2010:36). It has even been argued that the use of the “word ‘family’ and the phrase ‘traditional family values’ is itself [sic] a form of hate speech” (Wenke 2013).

Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that an increasing number of Christians have been investigated and even prosecuted for alleged hate speech when expressing their religious views in public. A prominent example is the court case against Finnish Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Lutheran Bishop Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, who were charged with criminal offenses for publishing material about their biblical understanding of marriage and sexual ethics (De Pater and Hoikkala 2024).

5. The chilling effect on freedom of expression

The implications of hate speech legislation and the resulting criminal prosecution of Christians for expressing religious views on issues such as marriage, family, or sexual ethics in public is not limited to the personal fate of those prosecuted. These prosecutions send a chilling message, implying that the expression of religious views on certain topics comes at the risk of social exclusion, professional harm, or even legal charges. The paralyzing effect that results from attacks on the

expression of Christian beliefs, including through legal proceedings, has been described as a chilling effect (Esparza et al. 2023:12). It has been persuasively argued that this effect is independent of whether Christians win or lose these legal cases, since a potential legal victory does not reduce the harm of interrupted careers, increased stress, workplace bullying, and other negative experiences resulting from facing legal charges (Petri and MacMillan 2020:45-46).

Since one of the main fears fueling the chilling effect is social exclusion (Esparza et al. 2023:12), legal charges are not the only driving force. In a series of interviews conducted by Esparza et al. (2023) as part of an exploratory study on self-censorship among Christians (see section 6 for further details), it became clear that while some Christians indeed feared being subjected to legal proceedings on charges of discrimination, others feared disciplinary proceedings in their work or places of study, leading the majority to keep expressions of faith and opinions on issues related to life, marriage and the family private, as they had witnessed sanctions or prosecutions to which colleagues or peers had been subjected (Esparza et al. 2023:22).

Moreover, since laws have a communicative function (Robinson 1996:208), it is reasonable to assume that if criminal law severely restricts freedom of speech, “the culture of such a society will also adopt a restrictive attitude to freedom of speech” (Coleman 2016:119). Such a restrictive societal attitude can also contribute significantly to the chilling effect.

Beyond specific hate speech legislations, the adoption of laws in general has an impact on what people consider the ethical norm. For example, since the passage of same-sex marriage legislation, it has become increasingly unacceptable for people to express disapproval of this practice (Petri and Buckingham 2020:31).

Restrictions on freedom of religious expression are therefore not limited to the creation and enforcement of hate speech and similar legislation; they also imply the broader societal problem of self-censorship among those who hold religious beliefs contrary to mainstream views on marriage, family, or sexual ethics, or other contested topics.

6. Self-censorship: A common response to the chilling effect

Recent research has confirmed the existence of self-censorship among Christians. Petri and Boyd-MacMillan (2020:43), based on interviews with representatives of more than 20 faith-based advocacy organizations in Western Europe, found that Christians are more frequently resorting to self-censorship and “seem to have become accustomed to being silent about their views when they depart from the mainstream.”

In 2021, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, and the Observa-

tory of Religious Freedom in Latin America presented an explorative study on self-censorship among Christians in France, Germany, Colombia and Mexico, titled *Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the “Chilling Effect”* (Esparza et al. 2023), which has been published in *IJRF*.

The study is based on unstructured interviews and did not answer the question of the quantitative scale of self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:25). However, it confirmed the presence of this phenomenon among Christians (Esparza et al. 2023:13) and contributed to the further development of the concept of Christian self-censorship. It thereby added to the existing definition – “Christians censor their own convictions and actions if they go against the prevailing culture” – the notion “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” (Esparza et al. 2023:22).

A particularly evident manifestation of the chilling effect of speech restrictions and social hostilities against the Christian worldview, along with the subsequent self-censorship among Christians, has appeared in the university context. In the interviews conducted by Esparza et al. (2023:18), respondents identified universities as one of “the most hostile environments for people with alternative worldviews, including Christian worldviews.”

6.1. Self-censorship at European universities

Several recent studies have confirmed the rise of self-censorship at European universities. For Christian students, the chilling effect at European universities has direct implications for their ability to express their faith. However, Christians are not the only ones prone to self-censorship in the university context.

The following section presents recent studies on the general state of freedom of speech at European universities and then discusses the implications of this situation for Christians. Since there are no quantitative studies on self-censorship among Christian university students, this analysis remains preliminary and qualitative.

Examples are taken from British and German universities. There is a practical reason for this choice: currently, most studies on freedom of expression in European universities come from these two countries. While the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed in both countries, the current situation in German and British universities and societies in general presents a different picture.

6.1.1. The state of free speech at British and German universities

In recent years, the United Kingdom has witnessed a contentious discourse surrounding freedom of speech, particularly within the university context. Some

authors have expressed concerns regarding students' inability to articulate their perspectives, the denial of platforms to visiting professors or guests, and the perception of academic freedom restrictions among staff members (Simpson and Kaufmann 2019:4; Lackey 2018).

As early as 2016, the UK Higher Education Policy Institute conducted a survey of 1,006 full-time undergraduate students enrolled in publicly funded higher education institutions across the UK to gauge their perceptions of freedom of speech on campus (Hillman 2016:ii). Although only eight percent of students reported feeling restricted in their free speech, the percentage of students who reported feeling "completely free" to express their opinions and political views was already relatively low at 41 percent (Hillman 2016:7). When the same survey was conducted again in 2022, the proportion of students who believed that "universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints" had increased to 38 percent, up from 24 percent in 2016 (Hillman 2022:13).

A study by the Policy Institute at King's College London, based on two representative surveys of UK university students and published in September 2022, indicated that while a majority of students felt they could express their views freely, more than half also believed that this was not the case for everyone (Hillman 2022:13). According to the findings, 65 percent of students felt that free speech and robust debate were well protected at their institution, and 80 percent felt personally free to express their views at their university. However, a significant proportion of students, 51 percent, said that the "climate at their university prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive." This viewpoint was shared by an even higher percentage of the UK general public, with 79 percent of respondents concurring (Hillman 2022:13).

These numbers indicate that self-censorship is primarily a concern for those who dissent from the prevailing narrative at universities and whose views are labeled as offensive by those who oppose their views. The topics on which students were most likely to hold back from expressing their views were politics (36 percent), religion (35 percent), gender identity (34 percent), and transgender issues (33 percent) (Hillman 2022:24). Another topic where self-censorship is particularly high is the sanctity of unborn life. According to a survey of pro-life students in the UK, over 70 percent of students who adhere to pro-life views reported feeling unable to articulate their perspectives during seminars and lectures (Alliance of Pro-Life Students 2021).

In Germany, the annual Freedom Index, a survey conducted by the German Statista Research Department based on personal interviews, has revealed a persistent decline in the perception of free speech among the general public over the past several decades. According to the most recent iteration of the Freedom In-

dex, released in 2023, which surveyed 1,047 respondents, 44 percent of Germans expressed the opinion that the freedom to voice political opinions is not guaranteed, while 40 percent asserted that free speech is still upheld. This percentage affirming free speech marks the lowest recorded since 1990, when 78 percent of respondents still held such a view (Statista Research Department 2023). According to the German Allensbach Institute, this is the lowest level of perceived freedom of speech since the 1950s (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2021).

When asked to identify topics that they considered particularly sensitive, the ones mentioned by the largest percentages were Islam (59 percent), patriotism (38 percent), and gender equality (19 percent). In comparison, in 1996, only 3 percent to 16 percent of respondents reported experiencing difficulty in speaking about these subjects.

In the university context, Revers and Traunmüller conducted a preliminary study on freedom of speech at German universities in 2020. They collected survey data from social science students at Goethe University Frankfurt, which is considered a most likely place for self-censorship, due to its history as focal point of the leftist student movement (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:473). The result revealed evidence of conformity pressures on the campus. One-quarter of the students reported having been subjected to personal attacks when expressing opinions that diverged from the prevailing ones, and 33 percent expressed a reluctance to voice their views openly on controversial subjects (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:474).

The two German studies also reveal a strong difference in the propensity to self-censor along the political spectrum. According to the Allensbach survey, 62 percent of right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, or Alternative for Germany) voters said they could not freely express their opinions, while 62 percent of supporters of the left-wing Green Party did not see any problems with freedom of expression. Similarly, Revers and Traunmüller commented, “Left-leaning students are less likely to tolerate controversial viewpoints and right-leaning students are more likely to self-censor on politically sensitive issues such as gender, immigration, or sexual and ethnic minorities.”

This finding aligns with the results of a survey conducted by the King’s College London Policy Institute, which revealed that students with a Conservative voting tendency were substantially more likely than those who voted Labour to perceive the chilling effect as affecting them (Hillman 2022:30). A similar finding emerged from a representative survey of US college students, in which over half of the respondents were reluctant to share their views on at least one of five controversial topics: politics, race, religion, sexuality, and gender (Stiksma 2020). The study also found that politically conservative students were more reluctant to speak about controversial topics (Stiksma 2020; Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018).

In their study, Revers and Traunmüller (2020:479) concluded that European universities have become an environment in which a certain ideological perspective dominates, leading individuals with divergent or minority views to hide their opinions so as to avoid social exclusion.

6.1.2. Self-censorship among Christian university students

Addressing the question of the extent to which Christian university students are affected by self-censorship is challenging due to the diversity of opinions and political views present across Christian denominations, as well as the scarcity of data specifically addressing this phenomenon. However, substantial evidence suggests that Christian university students are among those most likely to censor their own views.

As previously discussed, the preliminary study *Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the “Chilling Effect”* identified the university context as one of “the most hostile environments for people with alternative worldviews, including Christian worldviews” (Esparza et al. 2023:18).

Furthermore, a recent study by Voice for Justice UK, which included qualitative and quantitative research based on questionnaires completed by 1,562 respondents from different Christian denominations and age groups, found that only 36 percent among the younger generation felt free to express their views at work or in other public settings (Voice for Justice UK 2024:2).

Religion is clearly among the issues on which self-censorship is most prevalent, and many of the other socially sensitive issues, such as marriage and gender or sexual ethics, which are associated with high pressure to take “politically correct” positions (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2021:4), touch on aspects of Christian social teaching. People who hold a traditional Christian worldview on these issues will naturally be among those most affected by pressure to censor themselves.

However, Christian university students also seem to be affected by intolerance of their views and identity, making them particularly vulnerable to censorship pressures. In 2023, a research study based on a sample of over 8,000 students at four different UK universities was published, examining students’ views and their experiences on campus. It found that Christians were among the three groups most likely to feel mistreated because of their worldview (Peacock et al. 2023:21). In one focus group, a Christian sociology student expressed her experience in this way:

I wouldn’t feel comfortable expressing my religious worldviews in a seminar. I do think it’s largely a secular university and I mean Chris-

tians ... have a bad reputation with secular, left leaning spaces. ... If I expressed them in a seminar, for example, it would either get shot down ... or it would just start a debate that I don't want to be part of. (Peacock et al. 2023:16)

This analysis points to two root causes of Christian self-censorship that seem to be of particular importance: intolerance of Christians in a secular environment and the fear of being labeled offensive when expressing Christian views.

6.2. Root causes of self-censorship among Christian university students

We have noted above that overly broad hate speech legislation and the prosecution of Christians for alleged hate speech when they express their religious beliefs on issues such as marriage, family, and sexual ethics, as well as the fear of social exclusion, are root causes of the chilling effect that leads to self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:12). Moreover, the fear of being labeled as “offensive” and the perception of a general intolerance of Christians in the secular environment seem to be other root causes of self-censorship in the university context that deserve further investigation.

6.2.1. The Christian worldview as offensive speech?

Requests for restrictions of offensive speech have risen dramatically on European campuses in recent years. In 2022, in a Higher Education Policy Institute poll of 1,000 full-time undergraduate students, 61 percent said that “when in doubt” their own university “should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech,” up from 37 percent in 2016 (Hillman 2016). Protection from discrimination, however, is not limited to calls for restrictions on speech. According to a recent King’s College study, 41 percent of students agree that academics who teach material that offends some students should be fired (King’s College London 2022). Similarly, an analysis by the Civitas research team, which surveyed all 137 registered UK universities between 2017 and 2020, found that “over half (55 percent) of all universities experienced a ‘cancel culture’ of open letters or petitions which pushed for the restriction of views of staff, students or visiting speakers on campus” (Civitas 2020).

Niamh McIntyre, a student who succeeded in shutting down an Oxford University debate about abortion, has insisted, “The idea that in a free society absolutely everything should be open to debate has a detrimental effect on marginalized groups.” According to him, stopping the abortion debate was justified because “as a student, I asserted that [this debate] would make me feel threatened in my own university” (McIntyre 2014). A case study from the United Kingdom found that

even at Catholic and Anglican elite universities, views considered “intolerant” or “overly conservative,” including on gender, were not tolerated. “We are intolerant of people we perceive as being intolerant,” a student remarked (Peacock et al. 2023:16). Increasingly, it seems that students want to be protected from offense more than they want the freedom to speak (Coleman 2016:115).

The threshold of what is considered offensive, however, seems to have been lowered significantly, leading to an increasing labeling of Christian worldviews on subjects such as marriage and gender in this way. This phenomenon is exemplified by the findings of a Whitestone Insights survey, which revealed that 23 percent of individuals age 18 to 34 expressed support for the ban on the general sale of the Bible, “unless the offending parts” that “some perceive as hate speech” were edited out (Christian Today 2023). This exceedingly broad conception of hate speech should be viewed in the context of European hate speech legislation, which has been discussed above.

Evidently, the framing of a traditional Christian worldview as hate speech has had a chilling effect, leading Christians to refraining from expressing their views on socially critical topics out of fear of being perceived as hateful (Right to Life UK 2024; OIDAC 2024). Consequently, it is not surprising that one of the primary reasons why students self-censor is the potential that peers will criticize their views as offensive (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:479).

The chilling effect that these speech restrictions have on university students was characterized by the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the UK Office for Students as follows: “When an institution fails to protect, or punishes, legal speech, the effect goes well beyond the speaker. It casts a penumbra of silence. This is the chilling effect” (Billot 2023).

6.2.2. *Secular intolerance and self-censorship*

A close examination of the underlying factors contributing to Christian self-censorship within a secular academic environment, which many Christians perceive as hostile to their worldview (Peacock et al. 2023:16), suggests that the concept of secular intolerance offers a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. This term has been used (Boyd-MacMillan 2006; Petri and Visscher 2015:91-122; Petri and Buckingham 2020:27-35) to describe the hostile atmosphere that leads to discrimination against Christians in the West. Drawing on Rowan Williams’s (2012) concept of “programmatic secularism,” which holds that the state should not be clouded by religious convictions, secular intolerance describes a radical form of secularism that aims to exclude religion from the public sphere (Petri and Buckingham 2020:29), based on the conviction that religion should have no influence on society, especially in education and politics (Petri and Visscher 2015:99-122).

While sometimes promoted in the name of “neutrality,” secular intolerance has been shown to be anything but neutral. The Open Doors World Watch Research Unit, for example, describes secular intolerance – which, according to the organization, is one of the engines of Christian persecution – as an attempt to “transform societies into the shape of a new, radically secularist ethic.” Christian individuals or organizations that do not conform to the new social norms on issues such as marriage and family are likely to face discrimination (Open Doors Analytical 2017). Consequently, secular intolerance is not manifested only in isolated incidents involving Christian activists but is rather a shared experience among Christian leaders (Petri and Boyd-MacMillan 2020:37).

Western secularization has led to growing religious illiteracy, or “an increasingly misinformed understanding of what religion entails, with the corollary that public policies and legislation reckon less fully with religious sensitivities” (Petri and Boyd-MacMillan 2020:32). This development reinforces secular intolerance (Petri and Buckingham 2020:31), as it contributes to negative stereotyping of Christians, as well as to legislation that does not adequately accommodate religious freedom.

In a study analyzing open-ended interviews with 20 faith-based organizations, Petri and Boyd-MacMillan (2020:43) found that many Christians resort to self-censorship in the face of secular intolerance and have even become accustomed to remaining silent about their beliefs that do not conform to mainstream views. Further research in this area has confirmed that “Christians self-censor in order not to be affected by the hostile secular environment” (Esparza et al. 2023:25).

It is safe to assume that the same relationship between secular intolerance and self-censorship also holds true in the university context. One illustrative case involved discrimination against the Christian Student Mission in Germany (SMD). In 2018, the SMD revealed that its local student groups had been denied or had lost accreditation at more than 30 German universities (Enders 2018:2; Lutz 2018). Without accreditation, student groups cannot use any campus facilities, let alone hold events, set up book tables, or distribute leaflets. The student governing bodies that denied accreditation justified their decision by pointing out that the SMD had indirectly supported the German March for Life, an annual pro-life demonstration that calls for the protection of unborn children and better support for pregnant women. According to the student body, the march was “homophobic and anti-feminist” (Lutz 2018), and therefore the SMD did not deserve to be recognized as a student group. The other main reason given for the *de facto* ban of the group was that “religion has no place on campus” (Lutz 2018). Clemens Schweiger, the leader of “Campus for Christ,” one of the banned groups, observed, “The atmosphere at universities has become much more anti-Christian. As a Christian

organization, we hardly get any space. The Christian faith is being pushed into the private sphere” (Lutz 2018).

While most forms of secular intolerance in the university context seem to revolve around negative comments, mistreatment and administrative actions, some Christian students have also reported facing violence or suspension. In these cases, secular intolerance in connection with a “new, radically secularist ethic” (Open Doors Analytical 2017) appears to affect especially those Christian students who openly express conservative worldviews on topics such as marriage and sexual ethics or are actively involved in pro-life groups. According to Hans-Joachim Hahn, the head of the German Professors’ Forum, there has been an increase in incidents of aggressive political groups undermining the right to freedom of expression, a development that has raised concerns among not only students but also academic staff. Professors who hold conservative Christian worldviews “are attacked and defamed via social media and their lectures are sometimes physically threatened,” he wrote after a lecture on abortion at Göttingen University was prevented by activists (Katholische Nachrichten 2019).

Such incidents of discrimination and intolerance have an evident chilling effect on Christian university students, leading them to censor their views. Julia Rynkiewicz, a Christian midwife student from the United Kingdom who faced a four-month suspension after her university learned about her leadership of a pro-life student group, expressed this relationship in an interview with the *Telegraph* (Swerling 2020) as follows: “What happened to me risks creating a fear among students to discuss their values and beliefs.”

7. Implications and Remedies

Widespread self-censorship among Christian college students has far-reaching implications. First, it can lead to long-term structural changes in society as a whole. If the Christian worldview is completely negated in universities, future power structures and narratives will be shaped by only one dominant, secular worldview. Second, if freedom of religion and conscience is not protected in universities, Christian students may be driven out of those fields where secularist ethics are particularly dominant, leading eventually to the total exclusion of Christians from certain professions.

The present analysis highlights this problem. By comparing recent studies on freedom of expression at universities and self-censorship among Christians with earlier research on secular intolerance, we can see that secular intolerance, which manifests itself in demands for speech restrictions and intolerance toward Christian students, is a root cause of self-censorship among Christian students. Specifically, the labeling of certain worldviews, such as the belief that marriage

is a union between one man and one woman, as offensive hate speech is a main reason why some Christian university students resort to self-censorship, particularly on issues such as marriage or sexual ethics. Furthermore, self-censorship does not affect only Christians but is a broader societal problem.

One remedy for this phenomenon seems to lie in rediscovering the true scope and permissible limitations of the human right to freedom of expression. Incitement to violence through speech is, rightly, considered illegal and not protected as free expression. However, support for marriage as the union of a man and a woman is not incitement to violence and should not be treated as such. If free speech is to prevail on European campuses, it is crucial to help students realize that not every disagreement constitutes discrimination (Anderson 2019: 363) and that, for good reason, there is no human right to be protected from offense.

On a practical level, those who promote open, pluralistic debate and freedom of speech in universities will have to take into account the high sensitivity and need for emotional security experienced by the younger generation. Helping students to rediscover the beauty of controversy and to understand education as a search for truth, sometimes through exposure to different arguments, will be crucial. This is also true for Christian students who sometimes prefer quiet harmony to open debate.

Despite the broader context of the problem, self-censorship should also be highlighted as a religious freedom issue. Since the expression of religious views is an integral component of religious freedom, there can be no religious freedom without freedom of expression. Further research on the relationship between secular intolerance and the freedom of Christians to express their religious convictions, particularly in the university context, would be important in this regard.

In this context, the promotion of religious literacy in universities will be important to counter current misconceptions about the Christian faith and the resulting hostile attitudes. As most European universities have a history as Christian institutions, students should learn about the history of their institutions and the contributions of the Christian faith to European democracy and human rights law. A better knowledge of history in general will also help students understand more fully the value of freedom of expression and the dangers of restricting it.

Finally, a better understanding of one's own faith and Christian ethics has proven to be a successful means for Christians to overcome self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:14). Therefore, moving beyond self-censorship involves a personal dimension and responsibility. It will also require a concerted effort by Christian churches and institutions to equip the younger generation with sound knowledge of faith, doctrine, and apologetics so that they can provide meaningful responses in today's controversial debates.

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