

Self-censorship in Latin America

Empirical evidence from Mexico and Colombia

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Abstract

The trend of secular intolerance in Latin America has impacted the expression of the Christian faith, manifestations of faith-based views, and even the behavior of Christians. Based on 40 interviews we conducted with Christian members and representatives of the political sector, media, education and church, in Colombia and Mexico, we show that at least a subset of the Christian population self-censors in order not to be affected by legal sanctions or a hostile environment. 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.

Keywords self-censorship, chilling effect, freedom of expression, religious freedom, Christians, Mexico, Colombia, Latin America.

The French political scientist Alain Rouquié (1987) described Latin America as the “Extreme West” because he viewed it as a continent that in many ways resembled Western Europe, but one where political and social developments seemed to take place in a much more intense (and often violent) way and where many European political phenomena seemed to repeat themselves on a much larger scale. This perspective has been criticized as a caricature, but it nevertheless contains many general traits that characterize the continent as a whole. In his work, Rouquié refers specifically to trends such as populism, authoritarianism and militarism that Latin American states seem to have copied from Europe.

Another trait that Latin America seems to have borrowed from Europe is secular intolerance, a concept defined elsewhere in this journal issue. As Peeters (2012) and others have shown, this trend has spread well beyond the Global North. In 2021, empirical research by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America demonstrated that the widespread concerns about secular intolerance in the West also apply to Latin America.

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In this region, Christians are often accused of discrimination (REDLAD and Otros Cruces 2021). Although this accusation may be true in some cases, there also seems to be an increasing number of attempts to restrict Christians' freedom of expression. Indeed, notwithstanding the international and national recognition of religious freedom, norms that limit or jeopardize the freedom to express one's convictions are increasingly common, especially when the content contradicts or criticizes prevailing views on such issues as abortion, sexual diversity, gender identity and same-sex marriage, among others.

Here are a few examples. A 2017 Advisory Opinion issued by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights affirmed that "religious or philosophical convictions" are "inappropriate" and should therefore not be considered in court cases (IACHR 2017). 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 allegedly discriminatory curriculum (INADI 2020). On 9 July 2020, Colombia's president Iván Duque's personal tweet in which he expressed his personal devotion to the Virgin of Chiquinquirá caused much outrage. Although, after a brief judicial process, the Supreme Court of Justice revoked a lower court's order to delete the tweet, it warned the President that he must be careful with his personal accounts so as to maintain the religious neutrality of the government role he occupies, avoiding allusions to matters that could be interpreted as an official position (Asuntos Legales 2021). In Mexico, legislators expressing their Christian views or advocating against abortion or same-sex marriage, as well as those who defend parents' right to educate their children, have been accused of discrimination and hate speech (El Universal Querétaro 2019).

The proliferation of such cases was the starting point for our research. In this research, we do not take any position regarding controversial issues such as abortion, gender identity or same-sex marriage or adoption. Rather, we seek to identify to what extent and in what spheres of society Christians do or do not feel completely free to express their opinion or their religious convictions on these issues.

We set out to understand the impact of these cases, and more broadly the cultural environment, on Christians' freedom to live out their faith. We adopted an exploratory research design and conducted approximately 40 open-ended interviews with Christian members and representatives of the political, media, education and church sectors in Mexico and Colombia.²

We decided to focus on these countries because they have seen various attempts by legislative and jurisdictional bodies, along with frequent social sanctions, aiming to limit and punish the expression of the Christian faith or the manifestation of

² The country case studies were developed by Marcelo Bartolini (Mexico) and Marcela Bordón (Colombia).

faith-based viewpoints. This phenomenon, however, should be analyzed in other countries of the region where similar trends can be observed.

As a consequence of these attacks, a kind of fear or paralyzing effect arises, which we refer to as a “chilling effect.” It leads in turn to the growing practice of self-censorship, whereby Christians censor their own convictions and actions if they contradict the views of the prevailing culture. This chilling effect can be translated not only into limitations on the exercise of religion or on the right to manifest one’s convictions, but also into violations of the right to religious freedom and the eventual decline of religion in a given context.

The picture that emerges from the study we conducted in Mexico and Colombia can be summarized by the following points. Those who still felt able to openly express their own religious beliefs and their position on issues related to life, marriage, family and sexual morality – especially when they dissented from the predominant culture or were linked to the positions of LGBT groups, some feminist groups, or political parties and sectors of society that sympathize with these groups – did so recognizing that there was “a price to pay.” Although this price varies in intensity and frequency according to the role or position of each person in their sector of society, the immediate discrediting or stigmatization of Christians who openly share their convictions and the use of labels such as “outmoded,” “discriminatory,” “intolerant” or “incompetent” to refer to them was recognized as a cross-cutting consequence. In some other cases, instances of defamation, loss of employment, academic suspension or alleged discrimination were mentioned.

Although most of the interviewees recognized limits on their 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 explain why they considered it necessary not to express their convictions fully, or to use neutral language so as not to be shunned or suffer social or institutional consequences.

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 had completed a specific training process on how to deal with sensitive issues from a faith perspective. Christian legislators, student activists, priests, pastors and academics said such training had enabled them to feel more confident and less inclined to self-censor.

Another finding was that, among our interviewees, Catholics tend to self-censor more than Christians belonging to other denominations. Apparently, the biblical training received by Evangelicals is more profound and influences its members’ capacity to speak without fear about the Christian faith or about topics related to

life, marriage and family from a Christian perspective. At the same time, although the Protestant Christians are generally more educated about their faith, this does not mean that they are prepared to communicate their message effectively to a secular audience. As a result, they sometimes choose not to do so at all or, if they do speak up, do so in a confrontational and intolerant manner, which has cost them credibility and opportunities to be heard in debates on issues relevant to society.

As for the priests and pastors interviewed, some of them recognized that despite their position as church leaders, they feel that they do not know how to respond in certain contexts. Some said that their seminary training did not equip them to deal with sensitive issues. This factor also leads to self-censorship.

Another factor influencing Christian self-censorship is the level of subordination at which one is located, whether in government, at school, at work or in the church itself. The lower in the hierarchy one is, the greater the possibility of falling into self-censorship.

In addition, social networks seem to be the main environment of hostility. A recurring theme during the research was the function of social media as places for attacks on expressions of faith or opinions on life, marriage, family, recreational use of marijuana, euthanasia or sexual morality articulated by people known to be Christians or elaborated using religious arguments. Even when the arguments were not religious, just the fact that they were presented by Christians sufficed to make them targets of criticism and insults. Among male respondents, an increased fear of expressing opinions on feminist-related issues was noted, especially in the university environment. The consequences of articulating such views included 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 organizations 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 believe they have been monitored 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.

In Mexico, the anti-clerical legislation and the markedly secular education system insert the notion in the minds of the general population that religion should be relegated to the private sphere, without the option of manifesting itself in the public sphere. 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. The following comment provides a representative illustration:

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.

Another interviewee observed, “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.” A third Mexican interviewee stated:

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, free and compulsory. More emphasis is placed on secularism. When 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, and therefore something unquestionable.

Considering the aforementioned, from the interview responses, we can differentiate certain dynamics related to Christians, chilling effects and self-censorship: (1) some Christians do not self-censor and accept the consequences, convinced that their faith is worth the risk; (2) some self-censor due to fear of legal and/or social sanctions; (3) there are also those who, due to constant self-censorship and almost non-existent accompaniment in the faith by a religious community or other Christians, are losing their faith or gradually cease to view the reality of self-censorship as a problem. The second group seems to be the largest of the sample.

We must bear in mind that self-censorship is not present only when people – in the present study, Christians – refrain from openly manifesting their Christian faith, convictions or beliefs. It also refers to situations in which Christians believe they cannot safely express their views on sensitive issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage or adoption. Based on the comments made in the interviews, most Christians avoid this type of debate so as not to face social denunciations or sanctions.

Although the term “chilling effect” is commonly related to state action or omission, in the form of norms or laws that can indirectly motivate the non-exercise of a right due to fear of the consequences, the present research reveals that beyond the possible legal sanctions, social pressure or sanctions are a very influential factor pushing Christians into self-censorship.

Overall, a significant portion of the Christians interviewed self-censor in order not to be affected by this hostile environment; that is, they avoid expressing or manifesting their convictions and beliefs, or if they do express them, they qualify the words or phrases used as well as the content. This pattern provides evidence of the chilling effect whereby Christians tend to conform to dominant rules or norms for fear of being sanctioned or criticized.

This research marks a first attempt to approach the phenomenon of Christian self-censorship. The generalizability of its conclusions is limited, because of the small number of interviews conducted. We do not propose that our conclusions should be interpreted as definitive for all Christians, but only as a starting point.

We hope that our findings will motivate further research efforts, with a larger and more representative sample, encompassing more sectors of society and various countries of the region. In this way, we can delve deeper into this phenomenon and learn about its possible causes and consequences, so that we can more vigorously preserve the personal and collective dimensions of Christians' right to religious freedom.

The full report (in Spanish) can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3zNf76t>.

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