

From Harvard to Louvain: Academic freedom under attack

With the widely publicised open conflict between President Trump and some of the world's most prestigious universities, academic freedom is no longer a niche topic for a small clique of self-proclaimed intellectuals. The front is quieter in Belgium, but it has not always been so, and the frontline has moved quite radically.

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Leuven, Mgr Ladeuzeplein and university library

“American institutions of higher learning have in common the essential freedom to determine what is taught, how, and by whom. Our colleges and universities share a commitment to serve as centres of open inquiry where faculty, students and staff are free to exchange ideas and opinions without fear of censorship or deportation.”

So declared hundreds of American university presidents on April 22 in a public response to US President Donald Trump's ferocious public attacks on Harvard University.

When reading the statement, I confess to experiencing a feeling of pride. Pride because so many universities united to defend academic freedom. Pride because Harvard, where I taught for several years, was taking the lead despite (and no doubt also because of) its being the main focus of attacks. Pride also because European universities seem remarkably preserved from such threats. Belgium, in particular, seems to be doing quite well.

Every year, an index of academic freedom is published by the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. It aggregates several dimensions, such as institutional autonomy, the absence of interference in research and teaching and the freedom to communicate ideas and findings. In the 2025 edition, Belgium is ranked fifth out of 179 countries, preceded only by Czechia, Estonia, Jamaica and Sweden. This flattering place may well be deserved. However, at least judging by the history of my own university, Belgium's performance in terms of academic freedom cannot have been that brilliant up to quite recently.

Academic freedom is not the same as freedom of expression, and it is legitimately subjected to tighter restrictions. Freedom of expression is the freedom to say and write whatever one wishes wherever one wishes. It is limited as regards both content and context - though the extent varies from one country to another. Typically, speech should not incite violence, defame particular individuals or advertise poisonous products. Blasphemous, racist, sexist, negationist and hate speech are also often prohibited by law. Moreover, the exercise of freedom of expression must respect the rules of public order. By transgressing such restrictions on the content or context of speech, one exposes oneself to penal sanctions. Whether one is an academic or not makes no difference.

Academic freedom, by contrast, is a privilege claimed by academics in the form of immunity from professional sanctions such as being fired, denied a promotion or reprimanded. It is the academics' freedom to exercise their profession as they see fit, whether as teachers, researchers or public intellectuals. It covers what they say or write in their classes, their scientific publications and their public interventions - hence the connection with freedom of expression - but also what they do, for example how they evaluate their students or conduct their experiments.

While protected against a broader range of sanctions than freedom of expression, academic freedom is subjected to a stricter and more specific set of limitations that are best enforced by academic authorities, governments, or peer groups, depending on the case. For example, universities assign to their professors the task of teaching specific subjects to specific categories of students at specific times; governments require university experiments on human beings to be conditioned on the latter's informed consent; and peer groups penalise sloppy research by preventing it from being subsidised or published.

The relevant question, therefore, is not whether academics should enjoy academic freedom, but rather how extensive this freedom should be. And the academics' answer is: very. Extensive academic freedom is needed for the effective accomplishment of academia's missions, and restrictions are only legitimate if they contribute to the effective and lasting accomplishment of these missions: the production, transmission and dissemination of knowledge.

1834: Université catholique versus Université libre

A fascinating book just published, *Academische vrijheid. Een Leuvense geschiedenis*, documents how long it took for the University of Louvain/Leuven to achieve a protection of academic freedom that can plausibly claim to meet this criterion.

The old university, born in 1425, was brutally abolished by the French revolutionary troops in 1797. In 1834, shortly after the creation of the independent Kingdom of Belgium, its catholic bishops decided to found the Université catholique de Belgique. Briefly located in Mechelen, the seat of the archdiocese, it was renamed Université catholique de Louvain the following year, when the bishops took hold of the old university buildings in Leuven (where it operated -in French only until the 1920s, in French and Dutch until the 1970s, and in Dutch only since then, as the French section moved the new site of Louvain-la-Neuve).

Two weeks after the founding of the Université catholique de Belgique, Brussels' freemasons founded the Université libre de Belgique, renamed Université libre de Bruxelles in 1842. Both universities were taking advantage of the "freedom of education" recognised by Belgium's 1831 liberal constitution. Unlike the state universities of Ghent and Liège founded by the Dutch king two decades earlier, they did not rely on government resources, but in one case on the money collected one

Sunday a year in every Belgian parish and in the other, on the generosity of the country's liberal bourgeoisie.



Louvain's Higher Institute for Philosophy, founded in 1889

This financial autonomy helped secure one important dimension of academic freedom: freedom from interference by the government. In militant contrast to the Catholic university, the Université libre de Bruxelles was determined to go further. It adopted as its motto “Scientia vincere tenebras”, where “tenebras” was meant to refer to religious obscurantism. Its student anthem, still sung today on official occasions, is called “A bas la calotte”, with “calotte” referring to the skullcap that priests wore. And the fundamental principle which its professors are still required to adhere to is “libre examen”, best translated as free inquiry.

What the newly created Université catholique de Louvain expected from its professors was quite different. Article 21 of its first statutes bluntly stated: “Academic education must be in harmony with the principles of the Catholic religion. Professors are obliged not only to refrain from teaching anything contrary to religion, but also to use the opportunities offered by the subject of their courses to teach students that religion is

the basis of the sciences, and to instil in them a devotion to religion and to the duties it imposes.”

Bishops against freedom

At one time, around one-fifth of Louvain’s professors were Catholic priests. They were not allowed to publish without an “imprimatur”, granted by their bishop. The first set of professors included a certain Gérard Casimir Ubaghs, a philosopher and priest who developed a philosophical theory inspired by the influential liberal-Catholic French priest Félicité Lamennais. The bishops of Liège and Bruges did not like that at all. They complained to the Congregation of the Index prohibitorum librorum in Rome, which forced Ubaghs to change his views. Rector De Ram took Ubaghs’ defence. But the bishops would not budge. They banned priests from their dioceses at the university and suspended the annual collection of money until Ubaghs was sacked in 1866, after the rector’s death.

Priests were more strictly scrutinised, but the academic freedom of other professors was not immune from interference by religious authorities. Just one example. The English biologist St. George Jackson Mivart, author of *The Genesis of Species*, discussed and criticised by Darwin, obtained a doctorate in medicine at the University of Louvain in 1884. In 1890, he was appointed to teach natural philosophy at the university’s Philosophy Institute, which had been founded the previous year by the future archbishop Désiré Mercier with the support of Pope Leo XIII. Mercier was the driving force behind Neo-Thomism, which saw science and religion as two distinct paths towards the truth, perfectly compatible with one another. He created chairs of cosmology and experimental psychology in his institute, and Mivart was in charge of teaching the theory of evolution. However, the bishops resented his presence at Louvain, and he was forced to resign in 1894, despite Mercier’s opposition.

The grip of the religious authorities on teaching and research gradually weakened over the following decades. After World War I, the research conducted at the university sought funds from sources beyond the church as it aspired to international recognition. The rectors therefore fought for more autonomy from the bishops, while the bishops sometimes fought for more autonomy from Rome. Thus, Mercier, by then appointed archbishop, made a half-successful trip to Rome around 1925 to try to prevent the Vatican’s Biblical Commission from censoring the writings on evolution theory (once again) by geology professor and priest Henry de Dorlodot.



Mgr Désiré Mercier, founder of Louvain's Higher Institute for Philosophy and archbishop of Belgium

Georges Lemaître was another Louvain professor and priest. An esteemed friend of Albert Einstein, he had a doctorate in mathematics from Louvain and a doctorate in physics from MIT. In 1931, he published his groundbreaking Big Bang theory that conjectured (later empirically verified) that the universe is expanding. He took great care to emphasise that his conjecture, if correct, neither confirmed nor refuted the thesis that the universe was created by God. The Catholic authorities left him in peace. From then on, there seems to be no trace of religion-based interference with the work of Louvain's natural scientists.

Abrupt dismissal

Philosophy is another matter. According to the first "règlement général" of the university, enacted in the 1830s, philosophy classes had a very specific

role to play. They were compulsory for first-year students in all Faculties and were charged with teaching them “the fundamental truths of religion.”

I started my lecturing career at the Université catholique de Louvain in September 1980 by teaching precisely one of those compulsory philosophy classes, to first-year students in economic, social and political sciences. I had just returned to Belgium with my DPhil in philosophy from Oxford and was asked to replace a young priest who had announced that he was marrying one of his doctoral students (soon to become a member of one of Portugal’s first democratic governments) and had been dismissed on the spot. The disgraced priest had himself been acting as a substitute for our colleague André Léonard, Belgium’s future archbishop, who was busy directing the seminary he had just founded in Louvain-la-Neuve.

After three years, I was abruptly sacked from this teaching assignment without any warning by rector Monseigneur Edouard Massaux. When I asked him for the reason, all he said was, “It is possible that some people don’t like some of the ideas you present in the course.” To the indignant president of the philosophy institute, he was somewhat more specific: “There are too many Marxists in that Faculty.”



Louvain-la Neuve, Place des sciences. Photo: Keon Raeymaekers

I have never been a Marxist, but I did devote one session, in the political philosophy part of the course, to a presentation of the Marxist critique of capitalism. I do not believe that, in 1980, the rector still expected first-year philosophy courses to teach, as in 1834, “the fundamental truths of religion”. But he probably expected me to warn my students, if I chose to include something on Marx, that anything coming from someone who wrote that religion was “the opium of the masses” should be looked at with the greatest suspicion.

Incidentally, it is quite amazing how Marx can still trigger such anguish over a century after his death, not least among people unlikely to have ever read one line by him. “We are going to choke off the money to schools that aid the Marxist assault on our American heritage and on Western civilization itself,” Donald Trump declared in a speech in Florida in 2023.

The defeated tenebras

I was deeply disappointed by my abrupt sacking, as I was convinced that both the content and style of my course was what my students needed — rather than the off-putting overview of the history of philosophy that my predecessors used to teach. But I had a comfortable tenured research position and the teaching job was given to a friend who needed it more than me. Hence, I did not make a fuss — although I perhaps should have done, as a potential modest contribution to the elimination of the last remnants of blatantly illegitimate religion-inspired infringements of academic freedom.

Massaux was the last priest to serve as the university rector and it is unlikely that there will ever be another one. One of the first acts of his successor, rector Pierre Macq, was to ask me to give that philosophy class again. A few years later he invited me to set up and direct the Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics, whose role, admittedly, involved some “preaching”, but not the preaching of “the fundamental truths of religion”.

The history of the Université catholique de Louvain since 1834 can therefore be fairly described as a somewhat hobbling march towards full academic freedom from interference by religious authorities — a gradual adoption, some would say, of the Université libre de Bruxelles' principle of “libre examen”. In Louvain no less than in Brussels, scientia seems to have defeated the tenebras.

True, the archbishop of Belgium is still the Grand Chancellor of both the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking universities (officially split since 1970), but what this means has shrunk dramatically over the decades. In November 2011, André Léonard, by then appointed archbishop, accepted my invitation to a dialogue with my hundreds of bachelor students. He told them straight away: “Yes, I do chair the ‘pouvoir organisateur’ of your university, but this ‘organizing power’ has two characteristics: it has no power and it organizes nothing.” The recent replacement of “Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and “Université catholique de Louvain” by “KU Leuven” and “UCLouvain” as the universities' public names can be interpreted as a discrete consecration of this evolution.

Overshooting?

However, an incident that triggered some media attention a few years ago may make one wonder whether this emancipation from the tenebras is overshooting. In March 2017, a part-time lecturer was teaching a moral philosophy class at UCLouvain when his lecture was recorded without his knowledge by a student and posted on YouTube. In his lecture, he presented some arguments against the Belgian legislation that legalised abortion. The university authorities looked into the matter and decided to suspend him and not renew his teaching contract.

I was shocked. Surely, professors should be allowed to address controversial moral issues in moral philosophy classes, to make an empathic presentation of a view that deviates from what is currently considered politically correct, and to make clear that this view is also their own. What can be problematic, however, is a confusion between teaching and proselytising.

On controversial issues, it is important to make students aware of the diversity of positions and the strength of the arguments supporting each of them. This can be done through a balanced presentation by the teachers themselves, but also through assigning students the task of defending contradictory positions as best they can or through inviting guest speakers chosen for their ability to defend intelligently positions that differ from those of the teacher. Even in barely controversial subjects, the aim must not be to pass on knowledge as dogma, but to explain based on which observations and reasonings a consensus has been reached.



Louvain-la-Neuve, UCLouvain's rectorate. Credit: Belga

To judge whether, in this particular case, a teaching position was misused for proselytising purposes, one would need to know more about how the segment posted on the internet fitted into the rest of the course. However, academic authorities should resist the temptation to use sanctions selectively to punish those whose actual or apparent teaching deviates from their own convictions or from the quasi-consensus that happens to prevail. In the Catholic world, those who argued that abortion should be legalised used to face serious trouble. The university should not try to get forgiveness for its past sins by hypercorrectly chastising those who argue now that the legalisation of abortion has gone too far.

Threatened by peer pressure?

It is no bad thing for a university to have non-conformist, even eccentric, personalities among its teaching staff. There are no doubt excesses to be avoided. To keep these in check, however, one must not rely on denunciations of the kind encouraged today by MAGA fans in American universities or on disciplinary procedures that restrict academic freedom from the top. One must rather rely, as far as possible, on an anti-dogmatic yet responsible ethos that is sufficiently shared within the university community and on the informal sanctions by peers that go with it.

Academic freedom, however, might also be undesirably restricted by the peer group. In a book entitled *Is links gewoon slimmer? Ideologie aan*

onze universiteiten (Is the left simply smarter? Ideology in our universities, Leuven, 2023), Andreas De Block, professor of philosophy of science at KU Leuven, reflects on the causes and consequences of the – apparently well established – overrepresentation of (loosely defined) left-wing electoral preferences and points of view among university professors.

Combined with selection and self-selection, peer pressure, in such a context, reduces the diversity of the views to which students are exposed, of the questions that researchers investigate and of the positions publicly expressed by academics. This tends to breed, intentionally or not, consciously or not, the so-called cancel culture that affects all universities, whether committed to “libre examen” or not.

This lack of diversity, De Block further argues, is detrimental to the universities’ core missions of producing, transmitting and disseminating knowledge. It is also instrumental in undermining the trust enjoyed by academic “experts” among a broad section of the general public. Consequently, it provides some governments with convenient pretexts to curtail their financial support to universities and attack their academic freedom to an extent not seen for decennia in the “free” world.

A staunch resistance to these attacks is imperative. But it is compatible with an honest permanent reflection on the contours of academics’ indispensable academic-freedom-restricting professional ethos. Do the contours of the peer pressure that enforces this ethos match what is needed for the optimal accomplishment of the universities’ three core missions? Or does this peer pressure sometimes include an undesirable restriction of diversity that badly hinders the pursuit of these missions?

The legitimate privilege of academic freedom can be threatened from within as well as from above. Attacks from above are generally more brutal, more damaging and more visible. But vigilance is in order on all fronts.