



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

## **Board of Directors**

Mark Mercer, Ph.D. (Saint Mary's)  
President  
president@safs.ca

Janice Fiamengo, Ph.D. (Ottawa)  
fiamengo@uottawa.ca

Andrew Irvine, Ph.D. (UBC)  
andrew.irvine@ubc.ca

Steve Lupker, Ph.D. (Western)  
lupker@uwo.ca

Clive Seligman, Ph.D. (Western)  
seligman@uwo.ca

Peter Suedfeld, Ph.D. OC, FRSC  
(UBC)  
psuedfeld@psych.ubc.ca

Robert Thomas, MLIS (Regina)  
robert.thomas@uregina.ca

Frances Widdowson, Ph.D. (MRU)  
fwiddowson@mtroyal.ca

## **Past Presidents**

Clive Seligman, Ph.D. (Western)

Doreen Kimura, Ph.D. FRSC (SFU)

John J. Furedy, Ph.D. (Toronto)

29 January 2021

The Religious Studies Undergraduate Society  
Theological Undergraduate Students' Association - TUSA  
Arts Undergraduate Society of McGill University  
Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU)  
Union for Gender Empowerment

To the McGill student groups named above:

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members, students and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, see our website at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).)

SAFS has read with concern your "Open letter regarding Professor Douglas Farrow," of 20 January 2021.

([https://www.reddit.com/r/mcgill/comments/11jmzn/open\\_letter\\_regarding\\_professor\\_douglas\\_farrow/](https://www.reddit.com/r/mcgill/comments/11jmzn/open_letter_regarding_professor_douglas_farrow/)) In that statement, you call for McGill University to limit Douglas Farrow's academic freedom in teaching for the sake of inclusivity and safety. SAFS holds that limiting academic freedom will prevent the university from pursuing its mission to advance research and to educate students while serving neither of the values you prize.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus make it possible for professors and students to consider all ideas and points of view on any topic and to determine for themselves what is true or likely true. Without robust academic freedom, some topics or ideas can be declared out of bounds. Once that happens, critical inquiry and discussion are impossible.

You complain in your letter that Dr Farrow excludes some students and makes them feel unsafe. Your letter, though, does not allege that Dr Farrow treats students badly by, for instance, abusing them verbally or assigning grades on non-academic grounds. Your complaint is that students don't like to hear the views they believe him to be expressing on course topics or on the proper running of the university. Yet no one is harmed or wronged by hearing a professor's scholarly views – or his articulation of the views of others – on the matters he teaches about. Coming to understand views with which one disagrees and the reasons behind them is one way that students begin to acquire the ability to think for themselves, as only then can they critique and evaluate those views.

Your demand that academic freedom in the classroom be restricted so as to serve inclusivity and safety implies that you favour treating people disrespectfully. To treat a person with respect is to engage him or her as one's moral and intellectual equal, as a person able to participate in critical discussion. To shield people from ideas and discussion is patronizing and, thereby, disrespectful.

You demand in your open letter that the School of Religious Studies run sections with other instructors when Dr Farrow is teaching a required course. Dr Farrow is assigned those courses by the School because of his expertise in the subject matter and his abilities as a teacher. The program would suffer greatly were resources diverted as you demand. In any case, you do not allege incompetence in teaching but instead that students feel unsafe. But since in fact no one's safety is at risk, your demand is specious.

You also demand that books by Dr Farrow not be displayed in the Birks lobby. This demand rests on the claim that views expressed in Dr Farrow's work "are openly accepted by the administration, despite facilitating a hostile environment for many marginalized students." First, that the School sees fit to display Dr Farrow's books does not imply any attitude toward what is said in them. Second, because the books are academic discussions of themes of interest in the School, their presence signals the School's concern to involve students and others in the academic endeavour. That is the opposite of a hostile environment.

Students wanting to learn more about academic freedom may consult a short guide posted on the SAFS website: <https://www.safs.ca/newsletters/article.php?article=1054>

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Mercer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS)  
6593, rue Jeanne-Mance  
Montréal (Qc) H2V 4L1  
[president@safs.ca](mailto:president@safs.ca)  
<http://www.safs.ca/>  
Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/safs.ca/>

Professor, Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
923 Robie Street  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

[sergechestnut@gmail.com](mailto:sergechestnut@gmail.com)

<http://professormarkmercer.ca/>

<http://www.smu.ca/academics/departments/philosophy-faculty-and-staff.html>

Cc: Suzanne Fortier, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, McGill University

Christopher Manfredi, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic), McGill University

Garth Green, Director, School of Religious Studies, McGill University

Louise Toutée, Reporter, *Délit Français*

Maya Mau, Reporter, *McGill Tribune*

Douglas Farrow, Professor of Theology and Ethics, School of Religious Studies, McGill University