



SIGNS OF THE TIMES By Massimo Faggioli

December 14, 2023

Catholic universities in the United States and the Israel-Hamas war

The politics of higher education and the future of dialogue between Christians, Jews, and Muslims



By Massimo Faggioli | United States

Add to your favourite stories

Universities are still a central part of the moral and spiritual life of our countries, or at least they have been over the last two centuries. The state of health of the universities is indicative of the health of a civil, social, and political community. It attests to the kind of knowledge intellectuals and scientists propose to the younger generations, and it is a barometer of the way we deal with deeply divisive issues, such as the current war between Israel and Hamas.

It was interesting to watch the presidents of Harvard, M.I.T. and the University of Pennsylvania testify on December 5 at a US congressional hearing on campus anti-Semitism. The three of them (all women) have been accused of not sufficiently condemning pro-Palestinian demonstrations during which students have been chanting "from the river to the sea." The presidents tried to draw a fine line between what constitutes [hate speech](#) and [free speech](#).

[Andrew Sullivan](#), a Catholic who is one of the most influential commentators in the United States, harshly criticized their performance before Congress, saying it was evidence of "the toxic collapse of America's once-great Ivy League". One of the presidents, M. Elizabeth Magill of the University of Pennsylvania, [resigned](#) on December 9 -- four days after the congressional hearing. The chairman of the university's board of trustees, Scott L. Bok, also stepped down the same day.

Emulating Ivy League schools

American Catholic universities are not part of the "Ivy League", but many of them try to imitate those storied institutions that are. This is a chapter of the history of American Catholicism entering the mainstream, in sectors like higher education where Catholics were not welcome or outright excluded until the mid-20th century. It was clear to Catholic college and university presidents that [commenting or not commenting](#) on pogrom-like attacks that Hamas carried out against Israelis on October 7 meant entering a danger zone.

It is interesting to note that, thus far, Catholic university campuses in the United States have been spared the worst [controversies](#) concerning the boundaries of "free speech", antisemitism and Islamophobia. Catholic schools are by no means immune from the rise in incidents of the last few years and months and American Catholicism has had its own share of anti-Semites in its history -- in some cases, televangelists like Charles Coughlin reached a massive audience. But the ways in which Catholic campuses have experienced the post-10/7 situation and the Israel-Hamas war say something important about the [role of Catholic higher education](#) and of the Catholic Church in general.

Most of the US Catholic colleges and universities were founded the 19th and early 20th centuries. Historically, they helped Catholics, many of them immigrants, enter the American mainstream and climb the socio-economic ladder. In the 21st century, Catholics are integral part of the gatekeepers and no longer outsiders. Catholic academics are not afraid of the divisions between liberal and conservatives or between theologians and bishops. But today's fault lines around anti-Semitism and Islamophobia divide the Catholic academic establishment, including liberal Catholic academics, in ways that are not very dissimilar from those that divide the Democratic Party.

Another reason that we do not see Catholic universities involved in incidents in the last few weeks is that the mechanisms of self-control and self-censorship are historically well-oiled and built in the system of Catholic institutions in general. In other words, there is a keen sense of the difference between what *can* be said and what *should* be said on some public issues. Interestingly, this also seems to be part of the culture of the large cohorts of Ivy League-educated faculty and administrators who are hired by Catholic universities.

Finally, conservative Catholic donors and alumni in the United States are more intent in changing Catholic colleges and universities from the inside, slowly turning them away from the alleged dominance of liberal-progressives, rather than joining right-wing Americans in their attack against the academic elites.

Dealing with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

But there are other, more complex reasons that help explain the particular role and value of US Catholic institutes of higher education, and what is at stake for them, even beyond this international crisis with highly polarizing effects on their campuses.

One of them is that Catholic academic culture has implemented DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) in ways that are often more cautious from the sometimes ideological way that we have seen in Ivy League schools. This does not always mean keeping a distance from DEI or even rejecting it. But it does mean that Catholic institutions must constantly navigate extremely delicate and unspoken negotiations between different voices and stakeholders, one of which is the hierarchical Church. Claiming and maintaining academic and institutional freedom from the hierarchy has taught Catholic colleges and universities lessons that can be applied in other situations. In other words, being a member of a Catholic institution still imparts a certain amount of healthy intellectual *laïcité*, with stabilizing effects against the temptation to embrace blindly the ideological buzzwords of the day.

Another reason is that Catholic colleges and universities in the US try to ensure that a certain level of religious literacy continues to be an integral part of the core curriculum of all students, and of the culture of administrators (this last part is becoming more complicated). This means that there is still the ability to respectfully recognize one another in our different religious and [cultural diversity](#) without reducing our differences to a fight around who is oppressor of whom, and without making of it another chapter in our commodification identities. The ability to navigate this moment works largely in unspoken and embodied ways, thanks to an implicit set of common values that does not need to become a policy written by legal counsel and enforced by administrators. Indeed, there are Catholic institutions that are known for their commitment to the theology of inter-religious dialogue and specifically their institutes for Jewish-Catholic relations.

At the same time, it also must be said that [American Catholic colleges and universities](#), in their *de facto* autonomy from the institutional Church and the Vatican, have kept a distance from Pope Francis' stance on the Israel-Hamas war and his strongly worded criticism also of the State of Israel's way of conducting war against Gaza. It's one of those rare moments when [US bishops](#) looked closer to [Francis](#) than the more liberal lay [Catholic leaders](#) in the United States.

Opening the doors to Jews, but what about the Palestinians?

Catholic higher education has been more proactive in reaching out to the American Jewish community and offering those [students](#) who seek it "a safe place of refuge". Some Catholic universities have even begun to directly admit Jewish students who want to transfer in from other schools where they feel threatened by anti-Semitism. But, by and large, the Catholic institutions of higher education in the United States have been careful in voicing their opinion on how Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are conducting the war in Gaza or the violence perpetrated by Israeli settlers in the West Bank.

The [voices](#) of Palestinian students and others who are critical of Israel's military [response](#) can be heard on Catholic college and university campuses. But the presidents, administrators, and faculty of these institutions must walk a very fine line. Like their confreres at Ivy League schools, they also have to deal with a board of trustees, donors, and alumni. It's one of the signs of the distance between Catholics in the Middle East, including [Jerusalem's first cardinal](#) and the American Catholic establishment, now dealing with a generational and cultural transition from the old generation of mostly white male clergy and mostly white nuns to a more diverse leadership, especially on college and university campuses.

American Catholicism has joined the US mainstream (or what remains of it) and we can see a certain unity among Catholic elites regarding the Israel-Hamas war, which largely aligns with the US foreign policy establishment. How Catholic campuses are responding to the war might strengthen the the bond between Catholics and Jews. But the dialogue with Islam might have to start from scratch, no matter how much it has progressed during Pope Francis' pontificate.

The Catholic Church still has a lot to do in order to protect and develop its teaching on inter-religious dialogue, religion and nationalism, and peace and war, especially in countries like the United States where the legacy of Vatican II is in peril. It was shocking, but not really surprising, to see the antisemitic rantings from traditionalist Catholics who replied to the comments that [Bishop Robert Barron](#) -- the US Catholic prelate most active on social media -- posted on X (formerly Twitter).

But there is a specific role and potential that the Catholic Church and its institutions of higher education have in our national and international debate on the Israel-Hamas war and on these times of absolute enmity between Israelis and Palestinians. Of course, all of this is at risk if Catholic colleges and universities decide to reduce and eliminate programs and courses in the theology and religious studies and continue to imitate the game that's being played by the illustrious schools of the Ivy League.

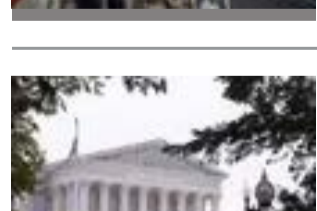
Follow me on social media @MassimoFaggioli

Try 1 month for USD 1 [Subscribe](#)

You may also like



World
In Jerusalem, the Armenian quarter resists threats from settlers



World
US Supreme Court to examine issue of abortion pill access



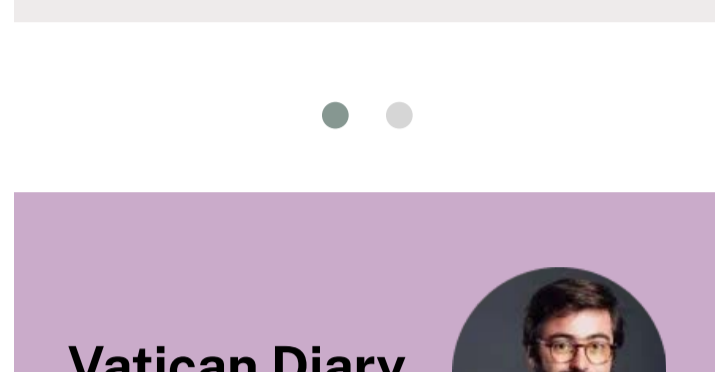
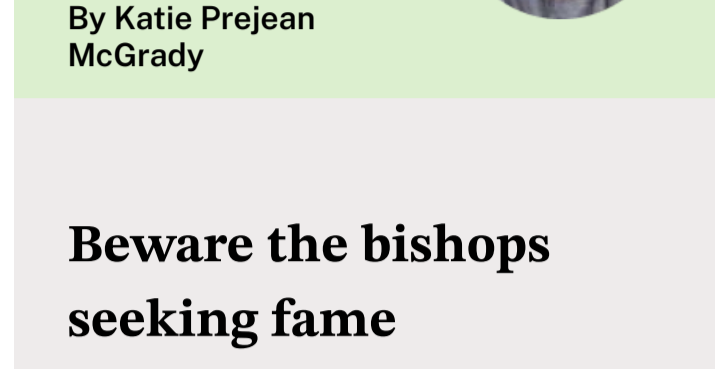
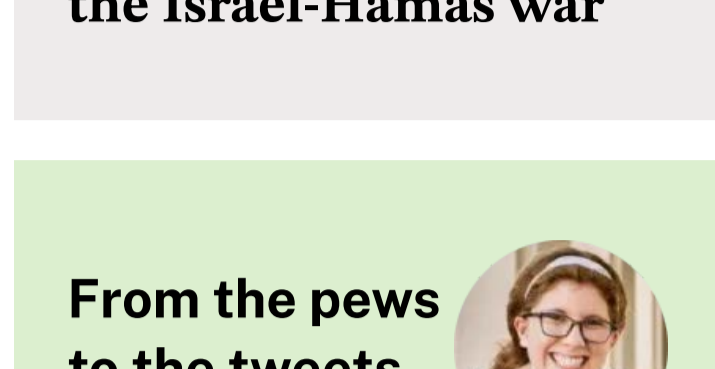
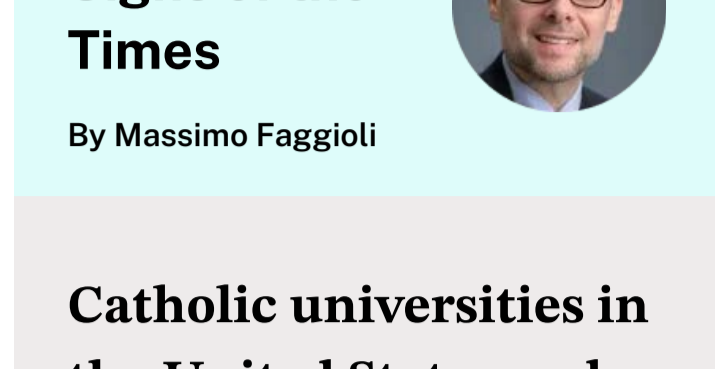
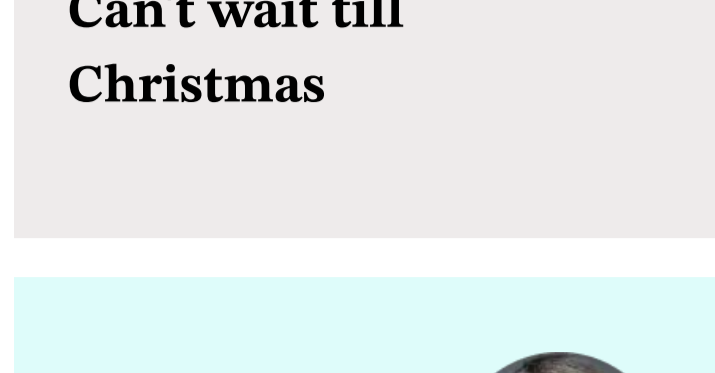
World
United Kingdom: Widespread mental, physical suffering due to Covid-related church closures



Religion
Swiss bishop accused of sex abuse 13 years after his death



Editorials
"Transition away from..."



SPECIAL 3-MONTH OFFER

Try 3 Months for USD **4.99**

50% OFF

Pay USD 4.99 for the first three months; cancel anytime.

Enjoy Unlimited access across any device.



Catholic Digest
UCAN
Living in faith
La Croix Africa
La Croix espanol

About Us
Contact Us
Newsletter Sign-up
Donate
Terms and Conditions
FAQ

La Croix
Confidentiality Policy
Sitemap
Countries
Authors
Cookies