Opinion
News



by Michael Sean Winters

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At CatholicMoralTheology.com, Tobias Winright of St. Louis University has posted a statement signed by dozens of ethicists, Catholic and non-Catholic, regarding the assassination of Gen. Qassem Soleimani and the shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner a few days later. The statement is unimpeachable, but the sad thing is I doubt the framing they bring to the issue was much discussed in the Situation Room, and I doubt these concerns would have been raised in any previous administrations either.

In The New York Times, is Davos still important? Unsurprisingly, its founder says yes. But as you scroll down, you find out that Rutger Bregman — the Dutch journalist and historian who shook things up last year when he said, "I hear people talk in the language of participation and justice and equality and transparency, but then, I mean, almost no one raises the real issue of tax avoidance, right? And of the rich just not paying their fair share. I mean, it feels like I'm at a firefighters conference, and no one is allowed to speak about water." — has not been invited back this year. If you don't think the global elite is clueless, read on.

Also in the Times, Rivka Weinberg looks at the lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust about how to confront monstrous evils like racism and anti-Semitism in our own time. She is very wise about the limitations of most humans, who will not rise to heroic resistance, but I wonder if she is correct that a simple refusal to collaborate is enough. It may have been enough in Italy during World War II, but with modern technologies and the loss of privacy, I wonder. I still think we should stigmatize bystanderism.

On the subject of anti-Semitism, Pope Francis recently had some powerful words. He urged Catholics and Jews "not to take the path of distance and exclusion, but that of proximity and inclusion; not to force solutions, but to initiate ways of drawing closer together." It is imperative, too, that when dealing with those traditional Catholics who claim to reject Vatican II, we remember to inquire if they are rejecting *Nostra Aetate*, the seminal rejection of anti-Semitism by the council. If so, shake the dust from your feet and move on.

In the Atlantic, Eitan Hersh takes on, and takes down, college-educated white folk who think they are participating in politics when they are really, in his phrase, "political hobbyists," who are no more involved in politics than a viewer of "Sports Center" can be said to be engaged in an athletic pursuit. I think he undervalues the importance of gathering information and discussion with colleagues and neighbors to a successful democracy, but he is right in diagnosing some of the ill effects of confusing political participation with yacking. E.g., he writes:

> Our collective treatment of politics as a sport incentivizes politicians to behave badly. We reward them with attention and money for any red meat they throw at us. Hobbyism also cultivates skills and attitudes that are counterproductive to building power. Rather than practicing patience and empathy like [political activist Querys] Matias needs to do to win over supporters in Haverhill, hobbyists cultivate outrage and seek instant gratification.

I wish he had considered whether or not religious affiliation among white liberals alters that equation. My guess is that it does. This is an important read and goes a long way toward explaining why special interest groups have been able to amass so much power.

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At Religion News Service, Mark Silk dissects President Donald Trump's announcements on National Religious Freedom Day and finds one of them unexceptional and the other actually a violation of religious freedom. I agree with Silk that it is no burden on a faith-based service provider to expect them to refer a client to an alternate service provider if either the client wants a service the faith-based provider does not offer, or if the client objects to some religious element of what the faith-based provider performs. But this cuts the other way also: There should be no forcing faith-based providers to offer services of which they disapprove. Thomas Jefferson's words, quoted by Silk, are magnificent but they do not resolve all conflicts and when there is a conflict, we should seek to balance rights, not let one side trample the other.

In The Washington Post, a look at the challenges and issues facing those charged with rebuilding the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. It is also a reminder that other countries draw their lines separating church and state very differently from the way we do: It is shocking that the archbishop of Paris and the canons of the cathedral are barely mentioned!

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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