

“The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21st Century”

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ABSTRACT:

An Incomplete Nihilism? ‘Values Talk’ and the Death of God in Catholic Higher Education

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Last spring, I participated in a colloquium with our philosophy department on Heidegger’s “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead.’” While I was in no position to judge the accuracy with which Heidegger represented Nietzsche’s thought, an insight from this essay continues to challenge my approach to mission leadership, and suggests an emerging concern for the future of Catholic higher education.

Values talk, Nietzsche suggests, reveals an incomplete nihilism. That is, when we cease to engage conversations about what is true or real, we turn instead to conversations about what we most value – commitments that require no ontological or metaphysical grounding. In Catholic higher education, this manifests itself in a shift away from explicitly religious language to a more comfortable list of values inspired by the founding congregation. In this colloquium, I became painfully aware of my own reliance on these mission values in my conversations with faculty, staff, and students.

The focus of this paper is not Nietzsche’s argument itself, but rather that which remains unsaid and unacknowledged when we limit our mission vocabulary to lists of core values. This paper seeks to examine the shift to ‘values talk’ as the principle language for conveying an institution’s mission and highlight some opportunities and challenges embedded in this move.

The appeal of employing a values-based vocabulary for mission is clear. Through it, we cultivate a common and innocuous language with which we might engage the institution and a diverse community of constituents. It provides a welcome to those who do not share an institution’s faith commitments, and creates space in which to explore moral ideals together in dialogue. Yet there are also risks in limiting the mission conversation to ‘values talk’. Without grounding, an institution’s values can seem arbitrary – one set among countless others. More frequently, unchecked mission creep expands our notion of these core values until they affirm everything and signify nothing. If Nietzsche is correct, this incomplete nihilism in which we avoid talking about what is true or real ultimately leads to a complete nihilism in which there are no ultimate foundations or meaning: the death of God.

Drawing on Charles Taylor’s magisterial work *A Secular Age*, this paper offers concrete strategies for engaging this context without reverting to reactionary counter-arguments or social withdrawal. Taylor emphasizes the moral and spiritual roots of identity, suggesting that the goods we value are in fact the most fruitful starting points for a conversation about faith and the transcendent. With a particular eye toward faculty engagement and educating for justice, I will suggest that in a social climate of alternative facts and fake news, the future of Catholic higher education lies in our ability to continually affirm the radical claim that some things are (still) real.