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A challenge to us as public intellectuals

WILLIAM F. LYNCH, S.J.

Catholic Intellectual Pioneer

“The Natural Priesthood of Light”

By John F. Kane

We always need public intellectuals – those speakers and writers, artists and academics who help to shape the cultural and civic conversation which is foundational for the good of the human city.

Since the term “public intellectuals” is somewhat vague, let me give some examples and ask the reader to add her own. I think of commentators with some breadth and depth, perhaps Bill Moyers, David Brooks, and E. J. Dionne. Even more I think of academics like Robert Bellah, Martha Nussbaum, Christopher Lasch, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Cornell West. And writers as diverse as Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Peggy Steinfels, Jonathan Kozol and Maya Angelou.

Let me add specifically religious intellectuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray, Vincent Harding and Rosemary Haughton. I would also include the Catholic Bishops when, as in their still memorable 1980s pastoral letters on peace and on the U.S. economy, they sought quite deliberately to frame and shape public debate during the Reagan years.



William F. Lynch, S.J.

Of course there are also public intellectuals whose voice is more local, limited to particular cities or regions or communities.

It is important to note that public intellectuals are not prophets. Though at times the roles overlap, the tone of voice and rhetorical aim is different. Clearly we need prophets. Yet we also need those who help us frame public concerns and commitments in less acute and typically less polarizing ways. The prophet may be an intellectual, and the intellectual on occasion a prophet, yet the body politic loses something crucial to its good when the discourse of artists and intellectuals gets reduced to the partisan ranting of cultural and political warfare.

Having mentioned Murray, let me now add his friend and Jesuit confrere William Lynch (1908-1987). Indeed, were they alive today I suspect

they might find it a bit ironic that Murray is remembered primarily as a public intellectual while Lynch has generally been forgotten. For in fact Murray was primarily a theologian focused, among other things, on intra-Catholic issues about church and state. Of course that intra-Catholic concern led, in 1960, to *We Hold These Truths*, his very important book



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about American public philosophy. Yet it was Lynch who regularly wrote about our great need for public intellectuals. Indeed, he did not hesitate to say that “the central tradition of the intelligence in human society should be that of a kind of natural priesthood of light, communicating light and guidance to the people....” Lynch’s entire career, moreover, provided an important model for such an intellectual priesthood.

He was a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* before joining the Jesuits. While doing his doctorate in classics, he directed Greek-language productions of *Oedipus* and the *Eumenides* for Fordham’s 100th anniversary in 1941. With original scores and choreography by Martha Graham and other New York stage talents, the plays brought an audience from around the city and around the world.

Public intellectuals are not prophets

They provided an early example of Lynch’s continual effort to create bridges between the city and the university.

After his ordination, Lynch served as editor for Fordham’s quarterly *Thought*. His inaugural editorial in 1950, “*Ingredere in Civitatem*,” urged Catholic intellectuals to resist the temptation to remain in a comfortable Catholic ghetto. He urged them to

“enter the city” and contribute to building the kind of culture which could resist the forces (think of McCarthy!) then polarizing public life. It is not at all surprising that John Tracy Ellis’ famous essay which frames the discussion of this issue of *Conversations* appeared in *Thought* during the Lynch years. Indeed, many articles published in *Thought* during those years – by artists and politicians, philosophers and theologians, scientists and literary critics; by humanists and Christians and Jews – are prime examples of the work of public intellectuals.

1959 and 1960 saw the publication of two books that brought Lynch himself to national attention. In *The Image Industries* he called for the combined efforts of artists and critics, philosophers and theologians, to challenge the ruinous dominance of “the commercial mentality” in America’s popular arts. In *Christ and Apollo* he then issued an analogous challenge to American literary culture by criticizing prevailing aesthetic-isolationist tendencies among America’s writers and calling for recovery of the more public and realistic vocation of literature. It is also one of two books, the other being *Images of Hope* in 1965, for which Lynch is still remembered in some circles today.

In 1973 Lynch’s last book, *Images of Faith*, recapitulated and developed the challenge to our country’s artists and intellectuals which had been a central theme in his writing. It remains very relevant to discussion of “American Catholic Intellectual Life,” perhaps especially to the challenge that the ideal of public intellectuals presents for our universities.

Criticizing increasingly privatized and transcendental images of faith, he argued that the human city itself is, or should be, our most basic image of faith – just as it could also become a terrible image of the absence of faith. He was talking not so much about religious faith, but about the more basic trust, hope, and common purpose upon which the life of the city is founded. We needed to understand, he argued, that such faith is embodied in real relationships and institutions, and that the entire city is the most elaborated body of human faith.

For the daily life of the truly human city, in its many, many dimensions – from personal interactions to the largest institutions, whether political, economic, or cultural – must embody and express such foundational trust. Religious faith could and typically did play a crucial role in nurturing that more basic human faith, even as it (religious faith) could hardly thrive without the foundation of such more basic faith. Thus the narrowed reality of religious ghettos deprived religion of its fuller

The real war, he argued, was not in Vietnam but at home, and it had been heated to boiling by the nation's intellectuals.

life even as it deprived the human city of a fundamental source of strength and support.

Of course the city could and also typically did embody not only basic faith and trust, but also contempt, division and polarization. Indeed Lynch wrote *Images of Faith* to decry the disastrous loss of basic faith which he saw threatening us in the culture wars of the 1960s and 70s. The real war, he argued, was not in Vietnam but at home, and it had been heated to boiling by the nation's intellectuals.

He lamented "the vast difference between the superb competence of our academic culture in the area of its specializations and the mediocrity of its role as world of political opinion and political culture." For the ironic reality was that some academics, in the name of "political relevance," had undermined the university's most fundamental political role. They had capitulated to the self-righteousness of partisan camps. Filled with delicious rage, they were spreading the poison of polarizing contempt throughout the body politic.

Today we know how those earlier culture wars have echoed down the decades. Indeed, for many of us the recent Bush years have rivaled "the 60s" in the level and intensity of contempt tearing into the nation's body of faith. Thus many now have a real but guarded hope that the Obama presidency may represent a turn from such polarization and may contribute to significant rebuilding of the nation's body of basic hope and trust.

What does this mean for us now?

What might be the role of our Jesuit universities in that rebuilding? I believe Lynch would have suggested ideas like the following. I at least urge them.

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, *we must recover a sense of the larger public vocation of the academy.* Yes, we need to be good scholars and teachers of our disciplines. Thus the ongoing improvement of academic quality in our Jesuit and Catholic universities is very important. Yet the full significance of that academic achievement will not be realized if most of us remain within the narrow enclaves of our specializations – if we allow ourselves to limit the scope of our vocations to our disciplines and professional associations. Jesuit schools and universities have traditionally been located in

city centers to educate men, and now women, for leadership roles in society. They have also played an at least symbolic role as centers for religious and intellectual life in the city. Quite often, of course, that role has been far more than symbolic, as we've seen in the recent history of El Salvador's "UCA."

Today a call for our universities to focus on the work of justice comes directly from Jesuit leaders. And yes, that call emphasizes the need to find many ways to embody a "university option for the poor." Yet one of the most fundamental ways that *we as universities can work for justice is by recovering and developing our role as public intellectuals.*

Again, *we do* need prophets in our midst, even at our universities. We need to celebrate the voice of authentic prophets in the human city. Yet theirs is not the *proper or specific* role of the university. Most of us are in fact called to resist the always present temptation towards "absolutized" (the word is Lynch's) and thus polarizing positions in public debate, even when that temptation issues from authentic prophecy. Indeed the primary *critical* role that the university *as university* can play in the city is constantly to call attention to such absolutizing and polarizing. That role may often involve sharp criticism of various institutions and causes, and of public figures, including religious figures. Yet it must be criticism which, having learned from authentic prophets, helps the public to understand issues and alternatives within wider, more realistic and more human frameworks of possibility.

For most of us this task of public criticism involves the very skill and restraint to which our professional training calls us. It involves, in other words, the difficult spiritual discipline of resisting our own absolutizing demons and helping our students and the wider public in such resistance – especially at times of crisis when problems are great, fears so prevalent, and the seductions of simplistic programs so appealing. It also, of course, involves the equally difficult discipline of resisting the prevalent academic pattern of retreat to the comfortable ghettos of our specializations.

Our public life is pervaded by fear and contempt.

Yet far more fundamental than the necessary task of criticism is our role in rebuilding the human body of faith. Here I believe our Catholic and Jesuit universities have a special gift and responsibility. For we are grounded in religious and intellectual traditions which affirm the deep good of the created universe, the fundamental compatibility of reason and faith, the vocational importance of all human sciences and arts. Such grounding can easily be reduced to no more than pious clichés about “finding God in all things.” Yet it can also serve as a constant reminder, to ourselves as well as to the city, that human life is, really and fundamentally, grounded in trust and hope. Whatever the very real crises and dangers we face, the world and human nature are *finally* not threatening and evil. They are, rather, *fundamentally* trustworthy and good.

Of course simply making such foundational affirmations achieves little. Indeed it can seem trite or sentimental.

Yet with Lynch I believe that, despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, our public life has really lost – or is at very serious risk of losing – such fundamental faith. It is pervaded by fear and contempt – by what Lynch called a pernicious “gnostic sensibility.” And

even if that is only partly true, the continually necessary struggle to rebuild the human body of faith always requires the contributions of many forms of talent and intelligence. Not only the universities, but certainly not without the universities.

Lynch himself continually called for the exercise of a “realistic imagination” – not just in the arts but in all aspects of the life of the city – in order to enlarge our sense of the possible. For us there is no one simple path to developing the public vocation of our universities and thereby contributing to the rebuilding of public faith. For most of us that vocation will be lived out in small and local ways, not on the larger national stage. Yet in either place and in many different ways, it will entail an ongoing and realistic re-imagining and enlarging of the scope of our academic and intellectual lives. ■

John F. Kane is professor and former chair of the religious studies department at Regis University. He has just completed a book on William F. Lynch, S.J.



Political Science Professor/Chair, Dr. John Ray, leads a discussion among Xavier University students.

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