

1-1-2016

Review: Building the Human City: William Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life by John Kane

Julia Brumbaugh

Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Regis University, jbrumbau@regis.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

Recommended Citation

Brumbaugh, Julia. "Review: Building the Human City: William Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life by John Kane." *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 5, 2 (2016). doi:-.

This Resources is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

**Review: *Building the Human City:*
William Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life by John Kane**

Reviewed by Julia Brumbaugh
Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies
Regis University
(jbrumbau@regis.edu)

Building the Human City: William Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life. By John Kane. Foreword by Kevin Burke, S.J. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016. xxiii + 265 pages. \$35 (paper).

It's easy these days not to have much faith in the "human city." Polarization is everywhere. We read about the forces that divide us, but even if we want to resist those forces, the phenomenon known to sociologists as the "Big Sort" continues apace: we are more likely today than ever before in U.S. history to live and work with only like-minded people, often with a correlative contempt for people of a different mind. Our culture's incapacity to nurture civility and community life is leading some Christians to talk of a "Benedict option" involving various forms of withdrawal from the world for the sake of preserving islands of community in a collapsing civilization.

John Kane's new book on the thought of William Lynch, S.J., *Building the Human City: William F. Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life*, weighs in on this problem with a vision for world engagement. Bringing both a sharp diagnostic eye and a rigorous, if also very human, treatment for our civil ills, Kane's reading of Lynch draws one into hope for and faith in the human city. The book's stated purpose is to "gradually unfold" the corpus of William Lynch's wide-ranging work, a corpus whose meaning, in Kane's estimation, is to be found in its articulation of "a [foundational] *spirituality* for public life or for human activity in the secular world" (4).

William Lynch (1908-1987) was a New Yorker and a Jesuit of the New York Province. Trained as a classicist and with a background in journalism, he wrote widely on topics from Plato and classical theater to contemporary theater and culture. Though he was respected and widely read among his contemporaries, current scholarship on his work is rare and generally limited to particular themes. Kane's book aims, then, to enliven

scholarly and public interest in this Jesuit intellectual through an interpretation of the whole of Lynch's work, because he believes that the wisdom of Lynch's writings — his spirituality of public life — can help us in our efforts to build a human city.

The book proceeds, after discussing Lynch's life and its significance, by undertaking a tour of his corpus of writing, using as guide posts his major book-length works (themselves often collections of essays), and it concludes with a more theologically tuned chapter that illustrates the foundational role that Christ plays in Lynch's thought. The central chapters of Kane's book are arranged thematically and build upon each other in complex, interlocking ways that are threaded throughout with elements of Lynch's vision. Lynch was concerned that we approach reality in ways that help us to enter into the concrete particulars of existence with all the struggle and suffering, as well as joy and delight, that might entail. We don't automatically do this *entering into reality* well, but good art, he believed, particularly the dramatic arts of literature, theater, and film, have the capacity to enliven our imaginations in ways that enable us to learn over time the virtues of faith and hope. This, in turn, allows us to hold tensions like autonomy and authority, to create communities of inclusion and freedom, and to endure loss and suffering with grace, to name only a few examples. Art fails when it nurtures an imagination that breaks faith with what is real. Failure to deal concretely with reality, Lynch argued, often leads to the polarizations that divide us from each other, and it ultimately leads to isolation and the violence necessary to maintain that isolation. How we form our imagination, or how our imagination is formed, influences

everything — including all of secular and sacred reality, and the fraught relationship between the two. Across Lynch's work, Kane argues, we find the influence of ancient Greek philosophy and theater, Biblical stories (particularly the Gospels), St. Ignatius, and, over all, the person of Christ. Lynch uses all these sources to encourage ways of being strong enough, sensibly and spiritually, to help us navigate the many challenges that face us.

This cursory sketch of some of the key ideas found in this book barely scratches its surface. Kevin Burke, in his foreword, characterizes Kane's book as a map into the landscape of Lynch's thought, and so it is. But the map is labyrinthine. It spirals through the central ideas animating Lynch's thought — at every turn deepening the meaning and broadening the implications of this thought. In one sense, Kane's book is a survey, illuminating in turns Lynch's major works — *Images of Faith, Christ and Apollo*, *Christ and Prometheus*, and others. But Kane's survey of this landscape serves the further purpose of inviting readers to begin to inhabit Lynch's thought in such a way that the reader experiences her relationship to knowledge and civic life, both the secular and the sacred, differently. Even if the style and aim is quite different, the book reminds me in certain ways of Bernard Lonergan's great work *Insight*, the goal of which was to lead the reader to have an experience of *insight*. In the same way, Kane wants to induct his readers into the practices Lynch encourages: to resist travelling too quickly from the many to the one; to wish, that is, to extend one's desire into the world with hope; to hold contrarities in ways that resist both their collapse and their polarization; to see art, particularly the dramatic arts of literature, theatre, and film, as capable of cultivating our human imagination in ways that give courage for entering the "valley of the human," in order to build something more human together; and to imagine new ways for all people, with and without religious faith, to live within the transformed and transforming relationship between the secular and the sacred.

It is this entering the "valley of the human," this slow, patient, trusting movement into the city, that separates the spirituality described in this book from those spiritualities of withdrawal or resistance that can seem so appealing when civility seems

impossible. The vision of this book is richly Ignatian in that it trusts in and works for the goodness of the world, even, and in some ways especially, in its secularity.

The task for which Lynch's spirituality for public life is needed, though, is extraordinarily difficult. Kane's reading of Lynch's work, which was continually in critical dialogue with the arts and intellectual communities of his day, presents a picture in which Lynch recognizes the cultural divides, the contempt, and the antagonism that marked his day. These divisions are only more pronounced nearly thirty years after his death. And, though the chiding is mostly gentle, Kane, following Lynch, does not hesitate to name the ways cultural elites — artists, writers, and intellectuals — have often failed to bring to bear their creativity for labors that build up the larger human community, labors that can and must provide imaginative support for the integrative, faithful ways we need to learn to live together better. Reading this book challenges me to risk slowing down, to move courageously and deeply into the world in my place, my city. HJE