



EUREL Conference **Religion and territory**
25-26 Oct. 2012, Manchester (United Kingdom)

Olivier Chatelan,

“Catholics and the urban territory in France : discourses and practices (from the 1970s to the beginning of the 2000s)”,
in Anne-Laure Zwilling (ed.), *Proceedings of the EUREL Conference ‘Religion and territory’*, 25-26 Oct. 2012, Manchester (United Kingdom), Eurel, 2013.

The online version of this article can be found at
<http://www.eurel.info/IMG/pdf/chatelan.pdf>

published on behalf of Eurel for



[DRES](#)

DRES (Droit, religion, entreprise et société)
CNRS- Université de Strasbourg UMR 7354
MISHA 5, allée du général Rouvillois
CS 50008
67083 STRASBOURG cedex
dres@misha.cnrs.fr

Catholics and the urban territory in France : discourses and practices (from the 1970s to the beginning of the 2000s)

Olivier Chatelan¹

The purpose of this paper is to present the relations between Catholics and the urban territory in France from the 1970's to the recent years. In a short introduction, first of all, let me tell a few words about the position of this original topic within the discipline of contemporary history in France until newly.

It is maybe hard to imagine but historiographical interest in religion/territory relations is recent. This observation could in part be explained by the fact that territorial planning and urban planning particularly have had a limited impact on French Catholic Church reflections. Few theologians have considered territory as a possible research topic, although the Church considers evangelizing the whole planet as its mission. The first theological studies on those questions date from the late 1960's. But France was not concerned at first (Belgian Jesuit Joseph Comblin worked in Brazil, Professor Harvey Cox taught at Harvard). These theologians were mostly Protestants (Harvey Cox, Jacques Ellul, Marc Spindler²). This lack of interest informs us on the French catholic historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: in France, few university work dealt exclusively with the catholic relation to territory. But it does not mean that historians specialized in contemporary religion did not show any interest in urban and territorial questions³. Studies on the places of Catholicism depended on the investigations lead on two scales: the parish and the diocese.

We can explain this particular interest for the parish level in the different studies, by the fact that it constitutes traditionally the basic cell of catholic community's life. The influence of the Church depends on that canonical territory for its organization and structure. Furthermore, the comfortable access to the archives makes the research on a parish easily possible. Those studies also took advantage from the fact that religious sociology multiplied surveys conducted by priests in the 1950's and 1960's. They followed the lead of French sociologist Gabriel Le Bras⁴ and canon Fernand Boulard, who were inspired by the geographical approach too. The Boulard map built in 1947 symbolises this quantitative and statistical approach of the religious practice. Likewise, the history of the mutations of contemporary Catholicism was built on diocesan literature too: this scale enables to study catholic teaching, youth and adults movements, or political and religious events⁵. It's still a relevant way to check any thesis.

¹ Research associate in the LARHRA, Historical research laboratory in Rhône-Alpes (LARHRA UMR 5190), Lyon.

² Marc Spindler (1968), *Pour une théologie de l'espace*, Cahiers théologiques, Neufchâtel, Éditions Delachaux et Niestlé ; Harvey Cox (1968), *La Cité séculière. Essai théologique sur la sécularisation et l'urbanisation*, Paris, Casterman ; Joseph Comblin (1968), *Théologie de la ville*, Paris, Éditions universitaires ; Jacques Ellul (1975), *Sans feu, ni lieu*, Paris, Gallimard.

³ Bruno Dumons (2005), « Villes et christianisme dans la France contemporaine. Historiographies et débats », *Histoire urbaine*, 13, 155-166.

⁴ Gabriel Le Bras (1931), « Statistique et histoire religieuse », *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France*, 17, 425-449.

⁵ Christian Sorrel (2004), « Échelles et espaces : le diocèse. Réflexions sur l'historiographie française contemporaine », in Benoît Pellistrand (ed.), *L'histoire religieuse en France et en Espagne*, Collection of la Casa de Velásquez (87), Madrid, 225-247.

So in the French historiographical tradition, the territory is a framework for a better understanding and analysis of religious life. But it was rarely considered as a whole research subject on its own⁶.

So let me go back to the period I chose to focus on.

During these years (from the 1970's to our days), bishops and even the pope write about financial, economical or housing issues in the urban areas. They are especially concerned about the slums of Africa and South America⁷, but not about the urban planning in Europe. In particular, only a few statements issued from the French episcopacy deal with the question of the urban areas. The Evry cathedral (near Paris) is an exception, that's why I'll develop this very particular example.

According to my research, it appears that two chronological periods stand out in the study of catholic views and spatial practices.

First, during the 1970's, we can observe that the construction of churches decreases. Some of the building sites are called off. It can be explained by a "disenchantment" which puts an end to a period of a large planning movement, which we could call "new churches movement".

Second, the 1980's and 1990's see a comeback of the need of visible religious places in the urban areas. It is particularly obvious in Evry and in many parish-planning issues.

Let us now examine my first part about the slowing down diocesan planning.

1. Slowing down diocesan planning

The "new churches movement" ended in the 1970's due to the rise of financial and pastoral issues, which had an influence on the territory/religion relation.

1. The end of the "new churches movement"

In France, during the "glorious thirty" – that means between 1945 and the beginning of the 1970's – the Catholic Church was enthusiast and willing to multiply the place of worship's constructions, especially in the suburbs that spread due to the outward growth of urban development. Those large construction plans were the great financial preoccupation of a majority of dioceses, especially the most urbanized ones. In the time of post war reconstruction that lead to the massive urbanization of France, many bishops found important to participate to the large scale investments programs. A large number of dioceses were then lead by bishops who had planning preoccupations, like bishop Dupuy in Lyon or bishop Mouisset in Nice. Usually, they continued their predecessors' work in the matter like bishops Renard and Simoneaux in Versailles or bishops Caillot and Fougerat in Grenoble. In every case, they aimed at setting and completing a network, particularly in places where catholic traditions showed weak.

⁶ Among rare exceptions : Conference « Ville et religion en Europe », Laboratoire de recherche historique Rhône-Alpes (LARHRA, UMR 5190), 7-8th December 2006 : Bruno Dumons et Bernard Hours (ed.) (2010), *Ville et religion en Europe du XVI^e au XX^e siècle. La cité réenchantede*, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble ; Olivier Chatelan (2011), « Les catholiques et l'urbanisation de la société française », *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 111, juillet-septembre, 147-158.

⁷ « Sol urbain et action pastorale. Déclaration de la Conférence nationale des évêques du Brésil » (1982), *La Documentation catholique*, 1834, 714-723 ; « La pastorale dans les grandes villes latino-américaines. Réflexions du Conseil de l'épiscopat latino-américain (CELAM) » (1983), *La Documentation catholique*, 1843, 59-62 ; « Le chrétien et le développement de la nation. Exhortation pastorale des évêques du Zaïre » (1989), *La Documentation catholique*, 1992, 887-913.

However at some point between the 1960's and 1970's some of the constructions were slowed down or even cancelled. In 1968 in Bordeaux for instance, archbishop Maziers questions the interest of building new religious edifices, and therefore stops all the projects running at that time. In a short period of time, many dioceses changed their real estate politics and sold the brand new chapels or adapted them to new uses.

Titles given to pastoral literature enlighten us on that contraction process and are characteristic of this change. During the 1960's, the dioceses' chancelleries took in consideration the work of Paul Winninger, a priest from the city of Strasbourg, Alsace, Eastern France. In 1957, he published his observations under the title *Comment construire des églises?* that we could translate in "how to build churches?". Less than 15 years later, in the 1970's, the National Committee of Church Building called its new publication "*Faut-il encore construire des églises?*" which questions the need to build new churches. This publication came out only a year after a catastrophic assessment of the new churches movement, assessment made by French sacred art specialist, Jean Capellades, in his "Guide of new churches in France". How can we explain this disenchantment?

2. Explaining the disenchantment

The first reason to the disenchantment seems to be financial. Many dioceses hesitate to keep on building due to their debt, except for the needed equipment.

Also, the churches were far from being full on Sundays, which can be explained by the constant decrease of religious practise and by the priestly vocational crisis. So why build new ones?

Some other reasons are directly linked to territory issues. From the 1970's, bishops grew interest in the increase of mobility and the new centres that result from this mobility: railway stations, airports, malls, business districts, which are more and more strongly linked one to the other. Several priests and a few bishops came to think that the Catholic Church should adapt to the new perception the residents have on their urban areas. Should churches be built there?

In the central business district of La Defense for example, located in the west of Paris, people come to work every day but only a few of them live there. To adapt to this particular kind of population, in constant movement, bishop Delarue from diocese of Nanterre made the choice to build only an intermediary place, a stopover place, called "Relay John Paul the Second".

The same choice was made in Lyon by Archbishop Alexandre Renard in 1975. Only an ecumenical information and prier centre "open Hands" located in the new business district of La Part-Dieu was needed and settled, not a church.

Those choices correspond to a more general will in favour of integrating religious places in everyday life public space. It reveals, on some level, the ambitions of the left wing Catholics who showed in the post 1968 years a great concern for socialism. To them, the absence of visible places of worship didn't represent a problem and they promoted a Church close to common people. After all, local districts' facilities could be used as chapels on Sundays in the large housing projects.

However, everybody among the Catholics didn't agree with this anti-triumphalism. In December 1969, Cardinal Jean Danielou organized a conference in Paris dealing with the relations between cities and holy meanings. On that occasion, he denounced the general acceptation of Catholicism invisibility as a failure to take responsibility. Many senior officials involved in urban planning like Paul Delouvrier for instance

didn't understand this "landfill" attitude (to be a man among the men, without confessional visibility). But this will of modesty prevailed up to the end of the 1970's. We now come to the second point of my presentation which would like to show an evolution of this phenomenon, with a renewal of religious visibility in French urban areas.

II. FROM THE 1990'S TO THE RECENT YEARS: the religious comeback to the urban areas

Since a moment when Jean-Paul the second accessed to pontificate, the Catholic Church has claimed a larger place in the cities. In the renewed interest of the pastoral head for the urban areas in France, the construction of Evry cathedral and the new planning issues of the French parish network were key moments.

1. The return of religion in the urban areas.

In France, the decision to build a cathedral in the planned city of Evry (near Paris) was indeed a turning point. It showed the will of the Catholic Church to be visible again in the urban areas. The construction took place from 1992 to 1995. Bishop Guy Herbulot chose to locate the Resurrection cathedral near administrative centre in order to create a real town centre. When the model was presented in Rome to Pope, John Paul the Second declared that the presence of a religious building should be a sign that would express a meaning understandable by the future generations⁸. In 1989, a conference called "Architecture religieuse: le retour du monumental" ("religious architecture: the monumental is back") held in Evry too had already put the stress on a general movement towards the marking of urban areas with religious buildings. The whole process of the cathedral building in the 1990's seems in total accordance with that movement.

In the same years, in the diocese of Paris, cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger (1981-2005) encourages the renewal of his parishes by the construction of 7 new churches and the settlement of new religious communities (Emmanuel, Chemin Neuf) in the city. According to the sociologist Jacques Palard, the parish reinforcement can be understood as a solution to compensate the religious activism crisis.

⁸ « La maquette de la cathédrale d'Evry présentée à Jean-Paul II » (1990), *La Documentation catholique*, 2008, 626 ; « La visite du pape à la cathédrale d'Evry » (1997), *La Documentation catholique*, 2166, 772-774.

2. The renewal of parish planning issues

In the late 1990's a large renewal of the French parish network took place. In the name of "mission", "proximity", "responsibility", existing parishes are grouped together⁹. This territory planning inside the Church came up for discussions in the French catholic head. To archbishop of Lyon Balland for example, this new retailing is a way to redefine the people of God's citizenship. Bishop Jaeger from diocese of Nancy is more concrete and maybe more clear-sighted: he mentions the necessity to adjust the parish geography to the number of potential priests, which is weak.

The researcher could also see a response of the Catholic Church to the urban civilization issues:

- like the need to differentiate your workplace from your residence/housing;
- like the fact that communities progressively split up due to the increasing competition of social networks;
- like the secularization movement that turned the Church in a social affiliation among others. As the clerical demography didn't evolve much, the participation of laymen in parish daily life grew. It explains the need for the Church to reorganize itself. So, more than the result of a real thinking about territory retailing, it seems that the Church faced the urgency to ensure religious guidance, with limited means.

Redefining the parish frontiers was also a way for the religious authorities to participate to discussions on larger urban planning issues. And this is new for the Catholic Church. In October 1997, two years after of the Law on regional planning and sustainable development, passed in February 1995, the socio-economical and political Episcopal committee organized a conference (in Paris, Luxemburg Palace) to discuss and define possible ways to engage a discussion with civil authorities on those issues¹⁰.

This brings me to the end of my presentation. Does it mean that the Church of France decided to focus on territory planning in the recent years? One can't assert it, even if we must admit that some catholic groups gathered and acted as think tanks on their own urban area planning issues. Indeed, in Le Havre, a group called "Le radar" (the radar) composed of elected representatives, executives and teachers, campaigned for town planning politics. On the contrary, referring to the canonical law code (canon law five-one-five), to some, like archbishop Gilson of Sens-Auxerre, the people, not the territory, should come first as they form the true community of believers.

It should be reminded that in its history, the Catholic Church is embedded in the French territory through its parish network. Yet, few historical studies have focused on the Catholic Church relation to territory. It seems that committed laymen or priests, who are often interested in sociology, are more concerned with the urban area planning issues than the head of the Church. What is interesting is that, the work of priests in the French suburbs, particularly the most distressed, has recently become more visibility through several publications, while these experiences remained unknown for a long time. Among these books, I could mention Pierre Tritz and his "*Prêtre en banlieue*" (Suburb Priest). Even bishops have published their

⁹ « Refonte des paroisses » (1998), *La Documentation catholique*, 2188, 797.

¹⁰ Commission sociale des évêques de France (1998), *Eglise et société face à l'aménagement du territoire*, Paris, Cerf/Centurion.

studies like Guy Herbulot, *L'espérance au risque d'un diocèse* (Hope at risk in a diocese) or Jean-Luc Brunin, *L'Église des banlieues* (The suburbs' Church)¹¹. They all have the same frame: they use priests' testimonies on daily life work in a society marked by religious indifference and social crisis, who still want to believe in a renewal of solidarity.

¹¹ Pierre Tritz et Véronique Le Goaziou (2006), *Prêtre en banlieue. Rencontre improbable entre un religieux et une sociologue*, Paris, Editions de l'Atelier ; Guy Herbulot (2003), *L'Espérance au risque d'un diocèse. Entretiens avec Jean-François Courtille et Gérard M. Omnès*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer ; Jean-Luc Brunin (1998), *L'Église des banlieues. L'urbanité : quel défi pour les chrétiens ?*, Paris, Editions de l'Atelier.