



Catholics, sociologists and the city

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Reviewed: Olivier Chatelan. 2012. *L'Église et la ville. Le diocèse de Lyon à l'épreuve de l'urbanisation (1954-1975)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 274 pages.

Far removed from the habitual image of a Church incapable of dealing with the de-Christianisation that has accompanied urbanisation, Olivier Chatelan's book shows how Catholics in Lyon managed to get to grips with the urban question during France's "Trente Glorieuses" post-war boom years. By using an empirical form of sociology that was rapidly developing at the time, they sought to adapt their ministry to new urban realities.

"The attraction of cities has a ruinous influence on the religion of rural populations", wrote Gabriel Le Bras in 1956. "I am, for my part, convinced that, out of 100 country folk that settle in Paris, there are some 90 who cease to be practising Catholics the moment they leave Montparnasse station" (Le Bras 1956, p. 480). In this sentence, the man today considered to be one of the founding fathers of religious sociology in France (Willaime and Hervieu-Léger 2001) underlined the link between the urbanisation of France and the secularisation of French society. Indeed, the industrial city represented a challenge for the Catholic Church, which was forced to adapt to new realities and rapid changes.

Olivier Chatelan's work, based on his PhD thesis, questions the attitudes of Catholic leaders in Lyon (France's second-largest metropolitan area) from the 1950s to the 1970s, a period in which French cities underwent major, decisive changes – most notably the construction of large system-built social-housing estates and a series of new towns. As the author explains, "the central hypothesis of this research is that of the emergence, within the diocese of Lyon, of an urban question, namely a growing, though non-linear, awareness of urban challenges" (p. 11). It was a matter not just of adapting parish structures, but also of reconsidering the ways in which the Catholic Church existed within the Lyon urban area, and reassessing the religious practices of city-dwellers whose lifestyles were rapidly and profoundly changing. Although many aspects were specific to Lyon, the analysis proposed nonetheless helps explain a more general development; Lyon was thus, in a way, a laboratory for observing and analysing the socio-spatial processes common to all French cities.

Here, we shall concentrate on three themes in particular: the introduction and integration of the social sciences into pastoral work, the emergence of the city as a specific spatial category, and finally the ways in which the Church fits in with and interacts with the urban space.

The use of the social sciences

The author opens with a chapter on the "1954 survey on Sunday church attendance" and thus directly raises the question of using scientific methods – and quantitative techniques in particular –

for pastoral purposes. The key aim of this survey, following on from work by Canon Boulard¹ and conducted by Jean Labbens², was to “determine the obstacles of all kinds that hinder religious practices in the city” and to redefine the “parish structure so as to adapt the network of places of worship to the dynamics at play in the urban space” (p. 27).

The introduction of sociology into pastoral work therefore had to enable observations and subsequently guide the decisions of Catholic leaders. However, using sociology for this purpose was not necessarily a self-evident move, and Olivier Chatelan conveys the resistance encountered during this extensive survey well; for some religious leaders and worshippers alike, such an enterprise was seen as ultimately “threatening the monopoly of theology in the production of truth” (p. 27). In fact, the kind of “applied sociology” employed is not a particularly surprising choice, insofar as the sociology of religion in France is inseparable from a religious and pastoral sociology for which scientific production is a means to a higher end. The work thus shows that scientific knowledge is integrated more generally into the ecclesiastical authorities’ consideration of urban issues. For example, in the early 1960s, when a *pastorale d’ensemble* (comprehensive pastoral programme) was created – “a measure used in several French dioceses from the 1960s onwards to coordinate ministry efforts on a territorial basis, building on previous sociological surveys” (pp. 166–167) – church leaders entrusted Lyon-based geographer Jean Labasse³ (1918–2002) with the task of proposing appropriate territorial divisions for this programme, which resulted in the creation of nine regions across France. The use of geography went even further still, with discussions of “optimum parish size” reminiscent of Christaller’s Central Place Theory model,⁴ which had a strong influence on land-use practices in France in the post-war period.

Finally, we should underline the use that was made of the sociologists of the Chicago School. Olivier Chatelan tells us that, in a 1958 work, *L’Église et les centres urbains*, Jean Labbens “uses the Chicago School’s analysis tools to highlight the way in which religious behaviour is determined by the urban environment” (p. 71). He talks of “ecological factors”, to use the terminology employed in the American sociologists’ work⁵ (p. 71), even though their research was still little known among French sociologists at the time.

The city as a specific category and field of intervention

While the city of Lyon was radically changing over the period covered by the book, the ecclesiastical authorities were questioning the very nature of the urban space. “The city in itself, in its global, territorial and functional components, became the object of discourses and practices among Catholics” (p. 11). In sum, the difference between rural and urban was not one of degree, but of nature.

Following his 1954 survey on Sunday church attendance, Jean Labbens laid down the specificities of the urban space, which was not just the spatial context in which pastoral work takes place, but in fact a key explanatory factor for changes in religious practices (Labbens 1954). Here, Olivier Chatelan points out what he calls a “heuristic function of the city”: “the urban space is an indicator of the changing religious feeling and religious practices in contemporary Catholicism” (p. 30). Jean Labbens identified new breaks and discontinuities in the urban fabric (bridges, railways, tunnels, etc.) that created the effect of psychological distance despite the physical

¹ The name of Fernand Boulard (1989–1977) is closely associated with the very first works of pastoral and religious sociology in France. Boulard was the author of a number of works that reveal a desire to use sociological tools for pastoral ends (Boulard 1954; Boulard and Rémy 1968).

² Jean Labbens (1921–2005), a pupil of Gabriel Le Bras at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), was a professor of sociology at the Catholic University of Lyon.

³ A presentation of Jean Labasse can be found in the journal *Géocarrefour* at the following address online: http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/geoca_1627-4873_2002_num_77_2_1576 (in French).

⁴ See the online geographical encyclopaedia *Hypergé* for a brief presentation of Christaller’s model: <http://www.hypergeo.eu/spip.php?article234>.

⁵ On this point, see also Chatelan 2010.

proximity of religious facilities. In addition, in the aftermath of World War II, urban areas were characterised by new forms of mobility – illustrated by the democratisation of the motor car – which greatly undermined traditional parish geography. Indeed, the work of Jean Labbens consisted precisely in identifying the salient features of this new urban civilisation, in order to determine how it could orient new religious practices.

The emergence of the city as a specific category for the Church also raised the question of the relevant territorial division. First and foremost, it was the “urban parish” that was the subject of debate and discussion: in a space marked by fragmentation and new-found mobility among individuals, was it really the the most effective unit for pastoral work? The debate surrounding the urban parish would continue over the two decades covered by Chatelan’s work. In 1965, the Belgian sociologist François Houtart came to the conclusion that the parish, based on a territory organised around a church building and defined in canon law (Houtart 1965), was obsolete.⁶ At a time when the living space of city-dwellers was becoming increasingly complex, the Church had to find new criteria for belonging that were sociological, and no longer purely geographical.

Reinforcing the Church’s presence in the city

The use of social science and studies into the nature of urban space were not ends in themselves, but were pursued with a specific purpose in mind: to ensure the continued and reinforced presence of the Church in Lyon. Olivier Chatelan invalidates the widespread notion that the Catholic institution, as a result of excessive bureaucracy, failed to notice and learn from the social and cultural changes of the time. Rather, he shows that religious leaders constantly questioned the practices and the forms of presence of the Church within the urban space. By retracing, step by step, the efforts of the Church over a generation, Olivier Chatelan shows that its attitude continually fluctuated between a planned strategic effort and pragmatic adaptations that met the constraints of the time.

The presence of the Church is expressed above all through its incarnation as a place of worship. Between 1954 and 1975, the question of building new churches was central, particularly in the newly urbanised suburbs of Lyon. However, the answer to this question was far from obvious as, in a context where a new urban civilisation was emerging, the position of the place of worship, along with its functions, was the subject of debate. Olivier Chatelan shows (in Chapter 4: “Where to build? Religious facilities put to the test on the ground”) that the construction of a new church was accompanied upstream by a significant period of planning. As he remarks, “It is on the basis of places of worship, provided they are well located, that Christians are able to make sense of the city, unlike the modern city that is plagued by a disorder that renders traditional communities (family and parish) unclear and illegible” (p. 97). The presence of the church should thus seek to order the space around it. In order to achieve this, “the only possible geographical position is therefore the centre of the neighbourhood” (p. 97). The criteria used to determine this “centre” can be placed into three categories identified by the author: sociological, demographic and geographical.

Despite a willingness to proceed rationally in establishing new churches, what actually emerged in practice was a “parish structure built on adjustments that redefined the place of the Church in the urban space” (p. 115). In all, “between 1954 and 1975, 41 places of worship were built in the Lyon area” (p. 124). This building frenzy did not, however, follow clear urban growth patterns. For example, the city of Lyon proper was losing inhabitants at the time, but gained 16 new churches – albeit with priority given to peri-central districts (notably the 7th, 8th and 9th *arrondissements*), which were the most demographically dynamic. Conversely, in some suburban municipalities, facilities remained conspicuously lacking: in Vénissieux (a working-class suburb to the south-east of Lyon), for example, the population almost quadrupled from 20,000 in the mid-1950s to nearly 75,000 in 1975, but only one new church was built in the town over the same period.

⁶ Article 518 of the Code of Canon Law states that, “as a general rule, a parish is to be territorial; that is, one which includes all the Christian faithful of a certain territory”.

Furthermore, the task of redefining the place of the Church in Lyon was inseparable from considerations concerning the new churches that were built. Certainly, the architecture of the new buildings and their internal layouts had to reflect the concerns of the time. Accordingly, the Catholic institution chose to break with the architectural triumphalism that previously highlighted the omnipresence of Catholicism in all sectors of society⁷. This architectural choice is a testament to the mission that the Church set itself with regard to its urban faithful: Olivier Chatelan points out that this corresponded to a “choice to bury, even render invisible,” its buildings (p. 200), like the leaven in the dough in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew, which was widely mobilised during these years.

Over nearly 250 pages, Olivier Chatelan expertly highlights a “*territorialisation* of pastoral issues” (p. 241) during the *Trente Glorieuses*. Not only does he deconstruct the image of an institution incapable of responding to rapid socio-spatial changes, but he also asks, more directly, whether there was an anti-urbanism or “anti-city movement in the French Catholic Church in the second half of the 20th century” (p. 246). He shows how the studies and experiments conducted by the Catholic Church reflect areas of fundamental tension: first, between an overall approach for the city as a whole on the one hand, and localised, specific approaches on the other; and, second, between a redefinition of the parish along social lines – with parishes becoming groups of affinities – and a redefinition along territorial lines that looks beyond individuals’ social affiliations.

In conclusion, we are far from having exhausted the many riches of this work by Olivier Chatelan, whose analysis lies on multiple levels and, as such, will interest researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Although the book carefully records the urban condition of Catholicism during France’s post-war boom years, it also sheds light on certain realities in the 2000s and beyond. Indeed, the delicate balance between innovation and attachment to tradition, and between long-term strategies and circumstantial adaptations, remains relevant today, as illustrated by the recent inauguration of a church – St Thomas’s – in Vaulx-en-Velin, to the east of Lyon (Coroller 2012). Finally, the work of this historian opens the way for a comparative exploration of faith in urban areas, where growing religious diversity raises questions about the ways in which religious institutions manage and mark their presence within a given territory.

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⁷ “All triumphalism must be avoided and care must be taken to ensure the multifunctionality of buildings constructed,” stated Cardinal Renard and his auxiliary, Bishop Rousset, in November 1971 (p. 194). On this particular point, see the work by Franck Debié et Pierre Vérot (1991).

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