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Municipal inter-religious dialogue in Bordeaux: between the ‘politics of diversity’ and a Catholicentric laïcité

Gwendoline Malogne-Fer

Every year since 2009, the municipality of Bordeaux has been organizing an inter-religious conference known as Bordeaux Partages [Sharing in Bordeaux], in connection with the city’s inter-religious council.¹ During this public conference, leaders of numerous locally established religions gather on the same stage with Alain Juppé, the mayor of Bordeaux, to debate on societal and economic issues, and to highlight the vital contribution of religion to city life.

Drawing on studies of similar initiatives, notably in Marseille and Roubaix, A.-S. Lamine (2004) remarks that inter-religious dialogue forms “a both formal and informal partnership between religions and the city, focused on ‘living together’”. These initiatives incorporate, to varying degrees, the issue of cultural diversity: while Marseille-Espérance is also a space for inter-community harmony, Roubaix-Espérance claims a specifically religious dimension but includes agnostics and the *fédérations laïques* (Lamine, 2004). To what extent has the emergence of a ‘diversity’ paradigm in the mid-’00s (Bereni and Jaunait, 2009) influenced the local management of religious plurality? And what can municipal initiatives tell us about representations of the French model of laïcité?

Faced with growing debates and political controversies that emphasize the normative and ideological dimensions of laïcité in France, historian J. Baubérot recalls that indeed “there is no single ‘French model’ of laïcité, but only different representations, depending on the social actors involved” (2015: 16). This should prompt us to develop more empirical studies of everyday practices implemented at the local level by municipalities and religious actors. In this chapter, analysis of inter-religious dialogue in Bordeaux aims to specify the articulation of the ideological and empirical dimensions of French laïcité, and to examine the influence of the ‘politics of diversity’ on local practices. Following an exploration of the genealogy of the Bordeaux Partages conference, I consider how the selection of themes and religious protagonists offers important clues for understanding the municipal management of religious plurality. Further, I seek to explain why, although Bordeaux Partages relies on a conception of laïcité which has much in common with that of the local Catholic hierarchy, this hegemonic

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position is not perceived by religious minorities as a threat. As laïcité was historically established against the Catholic Church, the Catholic participation in these inter-religious events is indeed seen by other religious representatives as a guarantee of peaceful and constructive relationships between local religious and political authorities.

Dual origins: Inter-religious dialogue and the politics of diversity

Bordeaux is a city of 240,000 inhabitants (840,000 in the wider agglomeration) undergoing strong demographic growth, with a smaller proportion of migrants than in most similarly sized French cities.² Catholicism is strongly established with twenty-five churches, two basilicas and one cathedral. But Bordeaux was historically characterized by the presence of Judaism (from the 3rd century), a community decimated during World War II. Also, since the 17th century, a Protestant minority has been influential among the local commercial bourgeoisie and in the development of port activities (Pacteau de Luze, 1999). The city has enjoyed remarkable political continuity since 1947, with only two mayors, both of them on the right of the political spectrum: Jacques Chaban-Delmas (1947-1995) and Alain Juppé (since 1995).³ In his analysis of the success and longevity of Chaban-Delmas, J. Lagroye notably underlines the “ideological affinities” between a mayor of Catholic origin and local Catholic employers, based on shared anticommunism, the defense of confessional schools and, more generally, the promotion of unity against all kinds of division (Lagroye, 1973: 133-194). His successor, Juppé – a favored candidate in the presidential elections when this fieldwork was conducted – also cultivates an image of unity. What distinguishes him from his predecessor, who did not include Muslims in the “Chaban system”, is his stronger recognition of that local religious community and the priority given to its integration. This specific concern is expressed in the close relationships Juppé has established with the Federation of Muslims in Gironde (FMG), and in municipal support – under certain conditions – to the project of the great mosque of Bordeaux, led by the imam Tareq Oubrou.⁴

In this political context, inter-religious and citizens' conferences were launched in 2009 as a continuation of two distinct local histories: the bilateral inter-religious dialogues initiated by the religious actors themselves; and the 'politics of diversity' implemented by the municipality since the 2000s.

During the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, interreligious dialogue in France tended to be locally rooted (Dussert-Galinat, 2013: 261). In Bordeaux, as in many other cities under the

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supremacy of the Catholic church, this dialogue is mostly organized in a bilateral way. It takes various forms and has contributed to the growing integration of members of the FMG. First of all, several events are organized, including the ecumenical “Easter morning” celebration, which gathers Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Protestants (Anglicans, Baptists, Reformed, Adventists and Free Evangelicals), as well as meetings and visits to places of worship by high school and university students.⁵ However, Serge Ricaud, Catholic diocesan delegate for ecumenism, notes “some decline (...). Today we’re able to organize public events, like Easter et cetera, but it’s more difficult to do substantive work”.⁶

The less visible and more institutionalized aspects of interreligious dialogue are generally bilateral. Dialogue between Catholics and Muslims was initiated by a former priest-worker, George Jousse, who is now the diocesan delegate for relations with Muslims. In 1986, he formed an initial group with students’ parents in Lormont, a modest suburb of Bordeaux: “We agreed that we would start from what we have in common, instead of starting from our differences: what we had in common was the education of our children in the city – school and discrimination”.⁷ Thereafter, this friendship group began to welcome Muslim students from the Talence campus:

Two [future] presidents of the UOIF [Union of Islamic Organizations of France, notably Lhaj Thami Breze] were in our group. (...) And we talked about the place of religion in a secular [laïque] society. For example, I remember – this was in 1986 – they almost wanted to go to city hall and ask for a church building! We told them, “Wait, it doesn’t work like that”. And as Christians, we explained to them how we lived the laïcité.⁸

Considering that fear springs from ignorance, this group aimed to build a better mutual acquaintance. It also helped Muslims, notably in Cenon (a neighbouring town of Lormont and Bordeaux) to establish relationships with the municipality, as Catholic members of the city council also participated in this group. Furthermore, the building of a mosque in Cenon generated some local discontent, that led the parish priest and G. Jousse to publicly support the project, to calm things down. The Catholic-Muslim dialogue embraced several levels: at the “street” level, it implied sharing common experiences within the same district; at a second level, it included intellectual exchanges on philosophy and theology. The group disappeared in 1998 and restarted in 2005, but only in the form of theological discussions (Dussert-Galinat, 2013: 285). The leaders of the Association of Muslims in Gironde (which afterwards became the FMG) remain the only partners of this interreligious dialogue, and they see it as a way to gain greater recognition from local religious actors and from political authorities.

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Bordeaux Partages also stems from the politics of diversity initiated during the early 2000s. In France, L. Bereni and A. Jaunait remark that the success of this notion of diversity (in a cultural or 'ethnic' sense) relies mostly on its polysemy. On one hand, it evokes the principles of equality and non-discrimination; on the other, it can be seen as a goal of general interest, in and of itself (Bereni and Jaunait, 2009: 5-6). In politics, practices of diversity – especially the inclusion of candidates from various cultural origins in party lists – aim to respond to the crisis of political representation by selecting candidates whose profiles reflect the electoral body (Avanza, 2010). Some studies underline the ambivalence of the notion, “between equality and utility” (Bereni and Jaunait, 2009), and the paradoxical promotion of an ethnicized understanding of social relationships in order to achieve social integration (Doytcheva, 2010). They also point out the contradictions in some politics-of-diversity approaches, which can increase what they oppose by depoliticizing or understating discrimination (Doytcheva, 2010b).

Following the reelection of Juppé in 2001, a council of foreign communities was created in Bordeaux (also in 2001) to inform all inhabitants about the city's projects and actions and to develop local democracy. This council, renamed the Council of Diversity in 2006, was mainly composed of associative leaders and included no religious actors.⁹ It was part of a politics-of-diversity program which implied three axes: the fight against discrimination; remembrance of the local slave-trade history¹⁰; and the organization of intercultural events through a structure called Mosaïque of Bordeaux (later Intercultural Forum of Bordeaux). In 2008, the municipality chose to clearly confirm the dissociation between cultural and religious diversity and launched a new event in which only religious actors would participate:

Regarding discrimination, the intercultural dimension, remembrance, we clearly saw that (...) many religious leaders participated in the events – they were interested. And on May 10th, when the mayor commemorated the historic Day of Abolition of Slavery, we saw that the religious authorities were there. We observed that here, religions are deeply involved in the city, and not only concerned with the internal life of their communities.¹¹

Until then, religious actors spoke regularly with the mayor, at private lunches, about the concerns of their communities, focusing mainly if not exclusively on technical and material issues: “At these lunches (...) it was more like, “Mr Mayor, we have a problem with the bell, et cetera” – the kind of lunch where the most important person is the general secretary or the

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technical services director, who take notes on everything (...). Everyone did his shopping, and that's it." ¹² The project was to gather all the religious actors around the mayor.

The dissociation between cultural and religious diversity was implemented in 2009 with the creation of a body of interreligious convergence in which the municipality aimed, *ad intra*, to bring religious actors to reflect together on societal issues, in contrast to prior bilateral and informal talks. *Ad extra*, the inter-religious and citizens' conferences also helped to highlight the mayor's ability to unite local religious leaders, and this raised some concerns about the possible political instrumentalization, or politicization, of inter-religious dialogue.

Communication strategy and public representation of religious plurality

While Bordeaux Partages cannot be reduced to this sole dimension, it is indeed a political event – the term 'political' being subject to various interpretations. And the initiators of these conferences cannot be said to systematically avoid the political dimension. Paul, a special adviser to the mayor who contributed to the creation of Bordeaux Partages, along with Anne Brezillon, the current deputy mayor for associative life, states this clearly:

During all these years, management of these things was fundamentally political, so for me, for us, the council of Bordeaux Partages was really a body where religious leaders had the "privilege" of talking directly with the mayor, and where the mayor had the "privilege" of talking serenely and directly with the imam, the cardinal, Father Theodore [Papanicolaou, representing the Orthodox churches], et cetera (...). Of course, I would say there is a matter of prestige: we're lucky to have a cardinal; an imam who has a national, international, dimension; the second biggest synagogue in France, which has its own history... So for Bordeaux, it's an element of prestige. I worked with this in mind when I was in the mayor's cabinet: when Juppé gave interviews to RFI, Europe 1 or France Inter, whenever he got questions like "how should we approach laïcité, Islam, communities?" he'd say, "In Bordeaux, I work with Tareq Oubrou." So this is also about prestige, it's a win-win relationship. ¹³

In his study of Mayor Chaban-Delmas, political scientist J. Lagroye elaborated a double definition of politics: "Politics, viewed abstractly or in connection with general issues of

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social life, is welcome" (Lagroye, 1973: 179), as it evokes moral responsibility, generosity and a spirit of openness. However, the party dimension of politics is condemned, and seen as something negative, a dangerous factor of division: "It is as if we forgive Chaban-Delmas for doing politics, provided that he does it with no intention to divide, but only to unite" (Lagroye, 1973: 181). The same formula could be used for Juppé, who through the example of Bordeaux tends to cultivate the image of a consensual political leader. This double definition of politics also inspires different conceptions and practices of laïcité: Juppé promotes an "open laïcité" based on receptiveness, dialogue and respect, as opposed to the more aggressive, less consensual definition of laïcité advocated by Nicolas Sarkozy. Juppé's position on the issue of laïcité is thus based on both local realities and national political considerations: his personal convictions and ambitions fit well into Bordeaux's political culture, and they contribute to supporting his national career and his local roots simultaneously. Put in other words, when A. Juppé promotes an "open laïcité", he distinguishes himself from rivals within his political party, meanwhile expressing his attachment to his city and its culture of tolerance.

At a first level, the message conveyed by Bordeaux Partages presents a city where it feels good to "live together", where the various religious communities coexist peacefully and respect each other. Such an image of tolerance is rooted in a specific local history that refers to the legacy of Montaigne. The first goal is to avoid possible conflicts, as expressed in the 'Appeal of 23 January 2009' for inter-religious dialogue, signed by Juppé and local religious actors as a foundation stone for Bordeaux Partages:

Bordeaux is an open city, committed to the values of tolerance and solidarity (...). Aware of the echo that these [Middle East] conflicts might have in Bordeaux, and convinced that we need, at a local level, to foster dialogue between the various religious communities of our city, the mayor of Bordeaux and the different representatives of religions in Bordeaux met today (...). We decided to establish a common and permanent framework of meeting in concert (...) to organize together an annual event in the common interest of religions and the city.¹⁴

M. Doytcheva (2010) shows how social and urban policies at the municipal level implement a politics of ethnicity – through subventions given to migrants' associations – within a political

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frame that subordinates politics to 'legitimate' values such as integration, social peace and social linkage. In a similar way, the Bordeaux Partages conferences and meetings reinforce the visibility of religious communities for the sake of "living together": the religious leaders, each representing a specific community, agree to participate in the conversion of religious diversity into a representation of local unity. The idea behind this approach is that if religious leaders talk together publically, this should encourage ordinary citizens to follow their example. Here, the register used is meta-communication: the most important thing is not what is actually said, but the very fact that religious actors demonstrate that they talk together (Winkin, 2001: 60).

The exercise seems at times conventional, or even "boring", to religious leaders such as Jean Rouet, the vicar general of the Catholic diocese, who is familiar with the more intellectually and theologically demanding debates of the interreligious bilateral dialogues:

You can clearly see the limit of it, the limit of conventional things, just between us, it's a bit boring...

So it's about the positive role of religions in "living together"...

Exactly, we agree on that, no roughness in Bordeaux. And even when it comes to municipal politics, so everything is very gentle...

Even in times of elections?

Yes, of course! Even more! Even more!¹⁵

This perception of a polished, even monotone discourse is shared by some conference attendees, but what predominates is the success of the event, which attracts a large audience. In fact, the Bordeaux Partages project primarily draws from a kind of inter-religious dialogue that emphasizes commonalities, as well as politics that represent diversity as 'collective enrichment'.

Variable geometry in the recognition of local religions

A careful examination of the selected speakers' profiles, the modalities of their participation, and the issues addressed by the conference can highlight important features of the municipal

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politics of religious diversity, beyond a simple communication strategy to stress the mayor's ability to listen and talk with all local religious actors. The municipality indeed chooses, or confirms, who can legitimately engage with the mayor at the Bordeaux Partages conferences (and thus represent, and speak on behalf of, the various religious communities). What is most significant in the role of representative spokesperson will depend on the internal organization of each community, and this varies considerably from one religion to another. For the Catholic church, the cardinal archbishop is the only direct interlocutor to the mayor, while the vicar general is in charge of relations with deputy mayors and municipal service directors. In many cases, however, this rule of a single representative per religion can mask strong internal diversity, especially amongst Muslims and Protestants. So the choices made by the municipality are not neutral: beyond the scene of this annual conference, they shape a politics of exclusion/inclusion with significant impact on the local religious context.

This politics is implemented by the municipality (in the case of Islam) or by religious actors themselves (in the case of Protestantism). The municipality focuses its attention on the representation of Islam and, since the 1990s, it has chosen Tareq Oubrou and the Federation of Muslims in Gironde as interlocutors, for several reasons. First, the FMG has won elections to the regional council for Muslim worship. This legitimacy has been reinforced by the dynamism of the FMG, its ability to carry through projects, its local presence for over thirty years, and its dense territorial coverage. But the choice of the FMG is primarily political: the mayor aims to support an Islam of France, as a member of his cabinet explains:

There was the complexity of religious reality in Bordeaux and thereabouts, and then there was the city's choice... So it was a solution of simplicity and efficacy, and we're lucky to have someone like Tareq Oubrou who is reliable and who employs an intellectual discourse (...). [The FMG]'s representativeness is linked to the municipal strategy: it means that we want to accompany an Islam of Bordeaux – from Bordeaux – and that we consider the Federation of Muslims in Gironde to be the most able to follow this approach in partnership with us.¹⁶

Even if FMG leaders always promote a very respectful approach to laïcité, and a complete integration of Islam into French society, their legitimacy is regularly questioned, notably because its representativeness is imperfect: while the FMG is the interlocutor chosen by the

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municipality, not all Muslims of the Bordeaux region are members of that federation, and this can generate tensions. In 2012, at the opening of the third conference, Ludovic Martinez, director of the mayor's cabinet, celebrated with enthusiasm "the increasing inter-religious dialogue that exists in Bordeaux between the different leaders of religions, to the point that, as you may have seen in recent news, Catholics are selling lands to Muslims, to help them in practicing their faith". In fact, this sale was never completed, despite pressure exerted by the Catholic hierarchy and the municipality, because the local association involved was not a member of the FMG. And the mention of a rival Muslim association at the opening of the conference implicitly questioned the representativeness of the FMG, and thus the legitimacy of Tareq Oubrou, to speak that evening on behalf of all Muslims of the Bordeaux region.

Such a requirement of 'perfect representativeness' is not expected of all religions, and the municipality pays no particular attention to the ability of its Protestant interlocutor to represent the diversity of local Protestantism. In this case, the strategy of exclusion/inclusion is implemented by the religious actors themselves. The pastor of the Reformed church of Bordeaux is also in charge of the local branch of the French Protestant Federation (FPF), which includes the Reformed church along with twenty Evangelical churches. As the local representative of the FPF, this pastor has therefore been chosen to represent Protestants in the inter-religious meeting organized by the municipality. She insists on the numerical significance of Evangelicals in Bordeaux region, and she presents herself as the spokesperson for all Protestant sensibilities. And yet she doesn't involve her Evangelical colleagues in the preparation of inter-religious meetings: "We didn't talk about it... they never ask me what I'm going to say. They come, they listen, all the ministers are there, and no unpleasant remarks afterwards!"¹⁷ Some Evangelical ministers do indeed attend the conferences, as members of the audience, and Evangelical leaders who were interviewed claim to take no offence, for at least two reasons. First, they do not always feel at ease in these sorts of formal ceremonies. And secondly, they are satisfied with the relationships they currently have with the municipality: in cases where civic participation has been required (in founding charitable associations, or in allowing demonstrations in the public space), the municipality has supported the projects of these Evangelical churches.

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Moreover, the internal diversity of Protestantism partially overlaps cultural diversity: churches of African origin or so-called “immigrant background” are mostly Evangelical; in contrast, the Reformed parish represents a native-born Protestantism. Bordeaux Partages spotlights a white reformed minister as the representative of Protestantism in Bordeaux, despite its religious and cultural diversity. Similarly, Françoise Cartau, a white woman and a retired university teacher, is in charge of representing the Buddhists of the Bordeaux region, who are mainly from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. This is congruent with the analysis of Wood and Eade, writing about London (2013), who report that while the local Methodist churches were increasingly comprised of believers of African and Caribbean origin, that diversity was not reflected in the profile of their official representatives in charge of relationships with public authorities. Under the influence of municipal policies that prompt churches to become involved in social care, and against social exclusion, Methodism became a “public religion”. In this process, the role of ministers as official interlocutors with public authorities has been reinforced, so that mostly white ministers (being more likely to have relevant social dispositions for maintaining good relationships with authorities) have been selected as official representatives of these culturally diverse churches. Such discrimination is not always intentional and should be understood as a consequence of institutional and social processes (Wood and Eade, 2013: 67-85).

The case of Bordeaux Partages also underlines the hesitation of the municipality when it comes to integrating religious diversity into the framework of the politics of diversity, as shown by the absence of religious representatives at the Council of Diversity. The analyses of Doytcheva (2011) confirm on a more general level this difficult inclusion of religious criteria into the politics of diversity. When discrimination is approached in religious terms, discourses systematically refer to Islam and tend to describe Muslims as figures of both religious and cultural otherness (Green, 2002: 138), the affirmation of strong religious convictions then being perceived as indicative of a lack of integration (social, school, work, etc.) or assimilation (Hajjat, 2012).

While the polysemy of the notion of diversity enables the municipality to better include local Muslims, this does not imply equal treatment of all the religions established in the city.

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Bordeaux Partages instead illustrates the inequality of position among religious actors, and among the religions, in their relationships with the municipality. These conferences are indeed part of a strategy oriented to better recognition and public visibility of all religions. But not all religious actors are on equal terms, and because some may seek institutional recognition more than others, they depend more strongly on the goodwill of the municipality. This local context is also determined by the political and legal framework of laïcité, which (since the 1905 law on separation of Church from State) regulates the relationships between religions and public authorities.

A Catholic footprint

In their analysis of the various models of laïcité in the world, J. Baubérot and M. Milot highlight two principles – religious freedom (variously associated with freedom of conscience) and equal civil rights. And it endorses two ways to achieve these: the separation of Church from State, and the neutrality of state institutions (Baubérot and Milot, 2011; Baubérot, 2015: 17-18). In France, laïcité finds its origin in a history of conflict, with the opposition during the XIXth century between two conceptions of national identity: one stemming from the principles of the 1789 revolution; and the other from the Catholic tradition (Baubérot, 2000: 32). In this context, the 1905 law of separation between the Churches and the State was only belatedly and under certain conditions accepted by the Catholic Church. In a statement issued in November of 1945, the French episcopate specified the conditions under which they would agree to comply with laïcité: by drawing a distinction between the temporal and the spiritual; by emphasizing the primacy of religious freedom, seen as the completion of freedom of conscience; and by encouraging the State to recognize the social utility of religion (Baubérot, 2015: 93-94). As Baubérot remarks, amongst the “new laïcités” invoked in recent years, the “open laïcité” (advocating greater openness to religions) originally corresponds to the Catholic interpretation of laïcité.

The conception of laïcité expressed through Bordeaux Partages shows many commonalities with those of the local Catholic hierarchy, which has a strong influence on its form – framework of discussion, actors selected – as well as its content. The laïcité promoted by

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Cardinal Ricard is very close to that of Alain Juppé, and this “ideological affinity” (Lagroye, 1973) can be observed in two areas: the non-interference of politics in religious affairs (and vice versa), and the social recognition of religions for the sake of “living together”.¹⁸ The Catholic footprint on the public discourse around laïcité is all the stronger, since organization of these inter-religious conferences relies largely on preexisting bilateral dialogues initiated by the Catholic Church.

One religious actor took note of these Catholic-centric patterns during the preliminary meetings at Bordeaux Partages, remarking that “the mayor is there, and the cardinal always sits to his left or right”¹⁹. The modalities of speech and presentation also reflect an implicit hierarchy: the cardinal is usually first to be presented, and his title (Father, Eminence) is never omitted, unlike the titles of others.

The ideological affinity between the Catholic conception of laïcité and the mayor’s discourse appears firstly in the vocabulary and arguments used by Juppé, since he often draws on his Catholic background to nurture his own reflection and public stances. At the 2012 conference, in response to those who expressed surprise at seeing the mayor organize such an event, Juppé explained his conception of laïcité as follows:

I am deeply attached to the principle of laïcité, which is one of the foundations of the Republic; for me, there is no discussion on this. We simply need to agree on what it means – the temporal and the spiritual – politics and politicians are in the temporal domain, and religious authorities in the spiritual domain, each one with his role. Laïcité means that religion doesn’t interfere in political decision-making, and conversely, politics doesn’t meddle with religious issues. It’s very clear. Does it mean we ignore each other? That we don’t speak together? Of course not.

As in this invocation of the spiritual and the temporal (as opposed to a legal definition of laïcité based on separation of Church and State), Juppé often draws on a Catholic vocabulary to express his views. For example, he frequently uses the term ‘Christian’ as equivalent of ‘Catholic’, as when he said in 2012, “I identify myself with the Christian religion” – an equivalence used by the Catholic Church to implicitly assert its vocation to encompass other Christian expressions (notably Protestant and Orthodox churches). The name Bordeaux Partages was also probably inspired by ‘Christian values’, as he declared in 2002: “Why

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shouldn't we recognize that the values now conveyed by the French discourse reflect the success of Christian morality? (...) 'Sharing' is typically a word from Christian inspiration" (Boulic, 2002: 151-152).

During these conferences, Juppé alternatively or simultaneously appears as the city mayor, as a citizen of Bordeaux, as a statesman (in 2012, he was Minister of Foreign Affairs), and as a Christian. Gifted with a "good ear for religion", he presents himself as the conductor of a religious polyphony while he demonstrates a particular proximity to ideas expressed by Cardinal Ricard, as is evident from his concluding remarks at the 2012 conference:

A word came up from time to time, in what you said: reason, and balance. I think it's a very important point. Respect for minorities too – I think Father Ricard mentioned it in terms of his vision of truth – we had an interesting debate on truth. And perhaps there was, or still is, in some practices of religion the certainty of owning a definitive and absolute truth, leading to marginalization of those who don't believe in that truth. So I really appreciated your reaction, Eminence, on this question: certainly, relativism is dangerous; certainly, we are all concerned with the quest for truth; but we shouldn't impose it on others and should instead embrace this spirit of dialogue, which might be the solution to the various issues addressed tonight.

This kind of discourse enables Juppé to display his proximity to the Catholic Church, without that particular affinity being interpreted by other religious actors as discrimination: indeed, it seems to make sense in the frame of the remarkable all-encompassing ability of the Catholic Church, which appropriates values and principles such as French laïcité, inter-religious dialogue, respect for foreigners, etc., putting them in its own terms by underlining their Christian foundations. This contributes to blurring the boundaries between particular interest (defense of Catholic interests and doctrine) and general interest (representation of the interests of other religions). In other words, when public authorities show respect to the Catholic Church – in a French context where laïcité was historically established against that church – then it is taken as meaning that they respect all religions.

The Catholic leaders go so far as to define the perimeter of municipal intervention in the inter-religious dialogue, and they regret the overly strong dependency on the municipality of some religious minorities (especially Buddhists and the Orthodox faithful). On one hand, the Catholic hierarchy ensures that the scale of this dialogue remains within certain limits, the case of Marseille-Espérance (in which Cardinal Ricard had previously participated) providing

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an example of what should be avoided: “a self-feeding structure”, “a Rube Goldberg machine”. On the other hand, Catholic leaders emphasize the fact that inter-religious dialogue existed before Bordeaux Partages and should not be summed up by an annual conference:

They [the politicians] are responsible for the cohesion of the society – notes George Jousse – so they may need to know what we think, but we shouldn't be instrumentalized for the promotion of politics. By the way, this is something Alain Juppé understands – he said a few times in these meetings – “I know that relationships began before we had these meetings together” – and I wish he would repeat it again and again, because I refuse, as does the Bishop, to be at the mercy of politicians. We have enough convictions, I think; we have a vision of society and its future, and we don't need to depend on any political initiative. This is what I doggedly claim. Not that I refuse politics – I am in favor of Christians' commitment in politics – but it seems to me (...) we have a century of experience since the Separation, we need to draw the marrow from it. We all know that we can exist on our own without being dependent.²⁰

The themes of the conference, focusing on the role of religions in “living together”, also corresponds to the position of the Catholic Church, which refuses to discuss strictly religious issues at such an event initiated by the municipality, as J. Rouet explains:

We clearly distinguish between inter-religious dialogue and the dialogue between religions in the city: we see them as two things of a completely different nature and, as I told Mr Juppé, I would not understand if the city hall organized inter-religious dialogue in a laïc State, this sounds weird to me... Questioning religious actors on issues of public interest, to see what our contribution and reflections on these issues might be, I consider it a valuable laïcité, an intelligent and positive one: we are citizens, with this specificity, but we are citizens so it's good to hear our point of view – as much as any bocce or tennis association, that's it. But when I see city hall organizing inter-religious dialogue, this leaves me speechless.²¹

The Catholic leaders were also the only ones consulted by the municipality on the opportunity to invite Freemasons to speak at the 2014 conference on laïcité, and on this occasion their response was negative.²² Two distinct views of the masonic movement can be observed amongst religious actors, linked with different interpretations of laïcité. Some insist on the need to distinguish among the various masonic lodges established in Bordeaux since the 18th

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century. René RAMPNOUX, the regional representative of one of these lodges, the Grand Orient de France, explains that he would feel comfortable at such conferences:

If I received an invitation, I would go, no worries... What do we have in common and what are the differences? Perhaps we've something in common, a quest (...) the availability of a Freemason for everything connected with spirituality is strong, there is a real availability for sharing such a quest for explanations.²³

But for the Catholic leaders who refused to share the stage with Freemasons, Bordeaux Partage is a space of convergence and discussion for religious actors only: to include Freemasons would elevate Freemasonry to the status accorded to religion; under laïcité, this would then be a State-endorsed 'faith', but with well-known anticlerical and anti-Catholic accents. This would undoubtedly disturb the necessary serenity of the conferences. Beyond expressing the two views of the masonic movement, this position by the Catholic hierarchy also underlines a specific conception of laïcité.

According to Portier, the Catholic Church has historically adopted various strategies to deal with the French model of laïcité, from initial resistance to the progressive recognition of laïcité implemented under the 4th Republic, and reinforced under the 5th Republic. Portier explains this Catholic acceptance via two main reasons: the reshaping of Church doctrine after Vatican II, and the practical evolution of laïcité towards a less anti-Catholic approach (Portier, 2015). According to Mgr Dagens, laïcité has become "an institutional framework as well as a mindset which helps to recognize the reality of religious fact, and especially Christian fact in the history of the French society" (Bishop Conference of France, 1996: 46).

In its mobilizations to defend the public funding of Catholic private schools, or on ethical and sexual issues, the Church advocates an open approach to laïcité which would recognize the right for religions (and especially for Catholicism) to express their opinions and be heard within French society. The Catholic Church has indeed accepted laïcité, but it remains critical: the strategy of resistance that prevailed until 1945 has become a vigilant attitude toward public authorities, practices or discourses that could suggest a resurgence of anti-clericalism. Thus Cardinal Ricard worries about an "activist laïcité which leads to a relation toward Islam similar to the rejection experienced by the Catholic Church at the end of the 19th century; I prefer a laicization of laïcité".²⁴ The Catholic Church has been the only one to express such clear opposition to a militant and 'strict' conception of laïcité. This critical

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stance is in line with the position of Alain Juppé, who refuses to view laïcité as a right-wing idea or as an instrument of discrimination against Muslims in France.

Conclusion

Lamine (2004) has suggested that inter-religious dialogue as a contribution to “living together” might be regarded as an ideal-type of “civil religion” congruent with the French model of laïcité. Such a civil religion could indeed enable political leaders to take the religious pluralization of large French cities into account, and to seemingly respect the principle of neutrality by integrating all religious actors on equal terms. In fact, the concept of ‘civil religion’ takes various significations, depending on the historical and national contexts. In its institutional dimension, it refers to a transfer of sacredness from the Catholic Church to the State, and underlines the conflictive history of laïcité, marked by “the war of the two France”. From a philosophical perspective, ‘civil religion’ describes the foundation of social links to a non-denominational religious reference (like in the United States) or the sacralization of that social link in itself (Baubérot, 2009: 16-20).

These different understandings take place in specific national contexts. The U.S. has put immigration at the heart of its nation-building, while France in its national history has not given immigration such significance. Therefore, as Baubérot points out, the American “civil religion” ... “has strengthened the social link in a country built by immigration”, while in France, the notion of civil religion, as recently promoted by Nicolas Sarkozy, is aimed primarily at stating that “if France has become culturally diverse, its history remains ‘essentially’ Catholic” (Baubérot, 2009: 20-21).

Analysis of the municipal institutionalization of inter-religious and citizens’ dialogues in Bordeaux helps to deepen reflection on these issues by considering, firstly, the influence of the politics of diversity on the local management of religious plurality, and secondly the consequences of local interpretations of laïcité.

Bordeaux Partages draws inspiration from the politics of diversity in at least two ways. On one hand, convergence among religious representatives is based on a principle of non-discrimination and contributes to better integration of the religious minorities, notably Muslims, into municipal politics. On the other hand, the inter-religious conferences which seek to promote “living together” in Bordeaux contribute to understating and depoliticizing the cultural dimension of diversity, by emphasizing a “global approach” (Doytcheva, 2010b)

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for the sake of the ‘collective interest’. But while the politics of diversity tend to promote, in a liberal and meritocratic fashion, certain exemplary personal successes that transcend cultural differences, religious diversity as it is displayed in Bordeaux instead implies a public affirmation of both individual and collective religious convictions. Men and women called to appear on stage sometimes find it difficult to combine these various registers of speech, as individuals and as representatives of a specific religious community; and the different registers of legitimacy, whether religious or political, and their relationships with the municipality, can contribute to and reinforce or else jeopardize their own religious legitimacy. While the politics of diversity represent “a reformulation of the dialectical relation between difference and equality by the Republican doxa” (Simon and Escafré-dublet, 2009), they do not question the injunction to ‘integrate’ – addressed to those who are suspected of not being French enough, as exemplified by conditions imposed by the municipality in order to support the FMG’s great mosque project in Bordeaux.

According to Baubérot, what is observed in France today “is less a diminution of the social influence of Catholicism than a shift from privileged links with the State to an important place in civil society” (2015, 140). Examination of local inter-religious dialogue suggests that this statement requires some qualification, at least in the case of Bordeaux. The “Chaban system” established by Jacques Chaban-Delmas during his forty-eight-year term as a mayor of Bordeaux (1947-1995) implied the strong participation of various (notably religious) actors from civil society, local elites, and intermediary bodies in municipal political life. Alain Juppé reformulated this local tradition in terms of the politics of diversity and local democracy. The Catholic Church appears as both an actor in inter-religious dialogue and a co-creator of the rules that govern these conferences initiated by the municipality. What makes the Catholic Church’s hegemonic position acceptable – and not an evident threat to the principles of laïcité – is its strong commitment to defending religious freedom, and its vigilance against any political interference in religious affairs.

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¹ This research was carried out in the frame of the Norma research project (NExT programme, Hesam University). It included some thirty semi-direct interviews, conducted in collaboration with Yannick Fer from June to August of 2014 in Bordeaux, mainly with deputy mayors and religious representatives (Buddhist, Reformed and Evangelical Protestant, Catholic and Jew).

² The immigrants originate from various geographical areas, notably South-Western Europe (Portugal and Spain) and the Maghreb (Algeria and Morocco).

³ With the exception of the period 2004-2006, when A. Juppé (having been ruled ineligible) spent a year and a half in Quebec and notably discovered "reasonable accommodations" and another style of state regulation of cultural and religious diversity.

⁴ The conditions include preaching in French and the ban on any funding from foreign states.

⁵ *Sud-Ouest*, 10 June 2010 « Les communautés musulmane, juive et catholique ont accueilli des collégiens ».

⁶ Interview on 1 August 2014.

⁷ Interview on 3 July 2014.

⁸ Interview on 3 July 2014.

⁹ The Council of Diversity was mainly composed of non-religious associative leaders (except Françoise Cartau, regional delegate of the Buddhist Union of France, who took a stance against the Muslim veil in schools). This Council did not address the issue of religious discrimination, which concerns mostly young veiled women likely to request assistance from the FMG.

¹⁰ Bordeaux was the biggest port in France before the French Revolution, and it owed its prosperity to the triangular trade routes of the 17th and 18th centuries and the development of Caribbean plantations (Victoire, 2004: 7-23).

¹¹ Interview on 22 July 2014.

¹² Interview on 22 July 2014.

¹³ Interview on 22 July 2014.

¹⁴ Documents provided by the municipality.

¹⁵ Interviews on 4 and 7 July 2014.

¹⁶ Interviews in July 2014.

¹⁷ Interviews on 8 July 2014.

¹⁸ Mgr Ricard wishes for the Catholic Church the ability to "contribute to the building of a true living together in France," and "not simply a comforting visibility," but "a social recognition that enables it to serve everyone without any exception" (*L'Express*, 6 February 2003).

¹⁹ Interview on 8 July 2014.

²⁰ Interview on 3 July 2014.

²¹ Interviews on 4 and 7 July 2014.

²² Interviews in July 2014.

²³ Interview on 7 July 2014.

²⁴ *Sud-Ouest*, 22 January 2014.