Religion and Power in Europe: Conflict and Convergence

edited by

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Preface

Religion and Power in Europe: Conflict and Convergence is the second volume published by the Thematic Work Group 3 of the pan-European Network of Excellence for interdisciplinary historical research, CLIOHRES.net. The Work Group deals with religious and philosophical concepts, or rather, with how religious practices and beliefs have had and continue to have many important functions in European society, not only on a theological or moral plane, but also on that of political and social organisation and definition of identities.

Religious faith is both a private and a public matter. Today, choices of religion and what that choice means subjectively for the individuals concerned may be the object of public declarations and manifested with or before other people, or it may be considered a very private and reserved – or even personal and secret – matter. Nonetheless, many people who have no knowledge of whether their colleagues or neighbours are believers (and in what), agnostics or atheists, appear to be willing to accept simplistic accounts of the essence of this or that faith: most commonly in the framework of supposedly inevitable incompatibilities between the world's most widespread religions.

Human beings of any religious or irreligious tendency are normally aware that they and their own fellows may be moderate or extremist, conservative or innovative, fanatical or tolerant, sceptical or credulous. It does not take a huge leap of the imagination to see the same wide variety of attitudes characterises believers in other religions and the non religious too. But we do not always take that leap, to our detriment.

To deal meaningfully with their very delicate and complex topic, the research group decided to move on the more concrete and objective plane of how religion 'works' in societies, rather than on the treacherous terrain of 'belief'. As a transnational, transgenerational and transdisciplinary group, the members brought their many viewpoints and diversified knowledge and experience to bear on a certain number of subtopics: ways in which 'religion', or rather religious beliefs, hierarchies, and devotional practices have contributed, from ancient times to the present, to delineating and characterising social groups, while contributing to the legitimization and organisation of political entities – whether city-states, monarchies, nation states or empires. For example, in the first year it was shown how in *ancien régime* European societies the sacramental moments in the lives of the Christian majorities were also of special interest to the state – which did not itself normally register births, marriages and deaths but delegated this essential statistical and civil function to parsons and their parish registers. Until quite recent times (and in some countries even today) adhesion to the official religion was essential in order to enjoy even the most elementary civil rights.

The present volume brings to the academic and general public the results of the Thematic Work Group's further reflections and research, which form a part of the second stage in the overall strategy of the CLIOHRES network. In the second year of the project, all work groups were to identify "connecting themes" in their thematic areas, themes not only useful for comparison, but also suitable for linking future efforts of