

H-7.-a-764

KADOC Studies on Religion, Culture and Society 6

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The Transformation of the Christian Churches in Western Europe

1945 | 2000

La transformation des églises chrétiennes en Europe occidentale

Leo Kenis, Jaak Billiet & Patrick Pasture, eds

Leuven University Press

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Leuven University Press/Presses Universitaires de Louvain/Universitaire Pers
Leuven
Minderbroedersstraat 4 bus 5602, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

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ISBN 978 90 5867 665 8
D/2010/1869/8
NUR: 694

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The Transformation of Christian Churches in Western Europe

An Introduction

Patrick Pasture & Leo Kenis

The Western European religious landscape underwent major changes after World War II. Not the least of these relate to the Christian churches. While admittedly the Christian churches were not as omnipresent as they once had been and their position had been undermined by the development of rationalism and secularism as well as through the great socio-economic transformations of the nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century in major parts of the continent they still, or rather once again, occupied a central position in society, though admittedly not everywhere nor among every social group or class: urban centres and middle and working class were usually far less religious than peasants in the countryside, though religious patterns varied widely throughout Europe and the dichotomy between secular industrial areas and pious countryside is far too simplistic.¹ In large parts of Europe, including some major urban and industrial areas such as the Rhineland, Christian churches indeed profoundly influenced the lives of millions, probably more intensively than ever before in history, regulating daily life patterns up to the most intimate. Women especially felt appealed by the churches, though men too were given a role in the ideal religious lives promoted by the Christian churches.²

The theory of functional differentiation argues that politics and economy (as well as other spheres) dissociated from religious tutelage, though it actually also means that while politics secularised, religion and economy depo-

1 McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe*; Idem, *Religion and the People of Western Europe*.
2 Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Idem and Buerman, "Feminization Thesis"; Pasture, "Beyond the Feminisation Thesis".