PART ONE

RELIGION
CHAPTER ONE

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH

The religious state of the world today cannot be captured in a single image, if that was ever possible. In the West, particularly in Europe, there are two contrary phenomena. The one is religious weakness caused by decline, especially of the Christian religion; the second is religious strength as a result of resurgence, especially of Muslim religiosity. The long-term outcome of these two developments, whether they will influence each other and what effect that would have, are unpredictable, although there are plenty of opinions. One is that religious weakness will persist in the West and will probably drag Islam down with it. Another is that Muslim strength will persist and will pull the Christian groups upwards. A third view is that the two religions exist independently, and if they continue to develop will do so independently in whatever direction, upwards or downwards, linear or curvilinear.

Irrespective of the predictive value of such opinions, they make religious research in the West a complex but also a fascinating enterprise. The diversity of religious phenomena – that of decline and ascendance – is the feature of the religious landscape that hits one in the eye. I do not fool myself into thinking that I can reduce this variety to a few clear insights, nor is that my intention. All I hope to do is to sketch in broad outline both the religious phenomena themselves and some strategies for researching them.

This chapter first examines religious weakness in the West, more especially in Europe, to demonstrate that this is not a superficial, short-lived phenomenon but the outcome of a far-reaching process stretching over several centuries. It is by no means clear at this stage whether it entails a ‘transformation of religion’. Added to that is the problem created by the strength of Islam and its influence on Western society, specifically from the perspective of cultural and religious integration. These two developments make religion in the West a complex and variegated phenomenon (1.1).

Next I propose some strategies that can be used to direct research into the variations of religious weakness and strength. Here I settle for