PART III

RELIGION AND CONTINGENCY: SYSTEMATIC APPROACHES
1. Introduction

Currently, there is a growing awareness of the contingency of religions and philosophies or visions of life. In particular, relatively new factors, such as migration and individualization, have considerably contributed to the fact that people give more diverging answers to the question of the meaning of life than they did before. Although the European religious landscape has never been a monolithic unity, its shape has changed dramatically since the second half of the twentieth century. In the first place, the number of non-Christian communities of faith, as well as the number of their members, has increased considerably, mainly as a consequence of the influx of non-European citizens; the rise of Islam in Western Europe is the most striking example of this development. Secondly and more importantly, the processes of individualization and “detraditionalisation” have fundamentally changed the religious landscape in the Western world: a growing number of people “construct” their own, individual religion or philosophy of life by taking various elements from heterogeneous religious and philosophical traditions and reassembling them into new, highly personal views of life. Concrete examples of this are the growing interest in New Age, esotericism etc. By and large, people perceive religions more and more as contingent social or personal constructs; consequently, they consider the legitimacy of religious truth claims as completely void or at least as limited in time and place to the group of their respective adherents. Moreover, this conclusion is reinforced by the research results of the social sciences and the history of religions, highlighting the contingent origins and history of all religions, as well as the contingency of the psychological and social factors that determine religious views of life.