THE MODERN PERIOD
Does culture express or defy the religious imperative? Do the patterns of the social order realize the divine plan, or do they represent that from which religion must separate itself, upon which religion stands in judgment? Fifty years ago, a thoughtful and profound theological analysis of the relationship, in Christianity, between religion and culture, H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951: Harper), formed of Christian theological language and traditions a highly systematic response to that question. The inquiry pertains in particular to religions engaged in constructing norms for the social order of the faithful. That matter, then, concerns, in the language of the respective faiths, the relationship between the generative symbol of a religion and the ambient culture that forms the framework in which that religion constructs its holy society. Does culture form a medium of religion or an obstacle thereto—thus Christ and culture?

Religions that speak to, make provision for, communities of the faithful respond to the issue. They further mediate relationships between those communities and the ambient universe beyond their limits—that is, all religions that rise above the utterly idiosyncratic and private—must address the same issue. Niebuhr defines the issue succinctly:

> Christians living with Christ in their cultures . . . are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them (p. 29).

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1 We know the social from the solipsistic by reference to the language rules that prevail. One can say, “My Judaism,” meaning, one’s private belief and practice, called, idiosyncratically, “Judaism,” which is not uncommon, and “My Torah,” which in most contexts of Judaic society would constitute an oxymoron. One can say, “the Torah of Moses,” or “the Torah of Rabbi Aqiba,” but the only “my” that works with “Torah” in Hebrew, the sole language that is native to Judaism, is God’s, as in “It is My Torah, do not abandon it,” of the governing liturgy.