I want to express my thanks to Fordham University and to Father McShane for their wonderful hospitality. Most especially I want to express my gratitude to Father Ryan for inviting me to share some thoughts with you about the very provocative topic he has chosen as the theme of his spring public lecture.

I am glad to have the opportunity to think again in the categories delineated by H. Richard Niebuhr. I believe they are useful in articulating a clearer understanding of the Jewish tradition and in exploring the ways it is and is not analogous to its sister traditions of Christianity and Islam. I confess I find myself again, as I was in the fall McGinley lecture, providing a footnote to Father Ryan. But I think, too, that there will be instances where I formulate the issues, even the same data, somewhat differently from Father Ryan. More consequentially, there will be places where I find that the Jewish experience diverges significantly from the Christian experience of “Christ and Culture” and hope that these may prove of interest. I will not take the easy way out and say, “‘Christ and culture’—boy, is that not our issue!” I will assume that Niebuhr is using the term “Christ” here as a metaphor more generally for religion so that he could have examined Buddhism and culture in Japan, or, as I do here, Judaism and culture.

I begin my response where any proper Jewish discussion of religious issues must begin, with the Bible. And I feel called upon to stress that, even as any number of American fundamentalist spokesmen make use of the Bible to sustain the patterns of the existing cultural order, the Bible was, on the contrary, in its original setting, very powerfully in opposition to the prevailing culture. From a long inventory, I mention just a few. In a cultural
setting where polytheism was the norm, biblical religion grew to assert a monotheistic belief. In a world where the gods were the subject of extensive mythology, the Bible\(^1\) presents us with virtually no discussion of G-d, save in interaction with human beings.\(^2\) In terms of religious practice, the Bible was consistent in repudiating the rites of Israel’s neighbors. In a world where religious practice was identified with the worship of idols or images, the Bible vehemently opposed such practices: explicitly so in the second commandment, consistently throughout the Bible and most sardonically in Isaiah 44. In a world that was tolerant of human sacrifice, the Bible was clearly in opposition. Perhaps we can hear this as the subtext of the story of the binding of Isaac.

Possibly most consequentially countercultural of all, biblical religion represents a reconfiguration of the very concept of religion itself. In a way that its neighbors did not, Israel elevated ethical concerns to the central place in religious life. In a world defined by social hierarchy, Israel’s major tendency was to advocate social equality. In a cultural context that deferred to the powerful and prominent, the Bible betrays a preferential prejudice for the poor. The very notion of positing the foundational experience to be, not royal derivation, but the escape from slavery is representative of this tendency.

It is when we move beyond the Bible that the question of the relation of Judaism to culture becomes most provocative, especially in relation to the experience of Christianity and Islam. To state my hypothesis at the start, I would argue that it is in the question of the relation of faith to culture that the Jewish experience is most disjunct from these other two traditions. This is because while each of them has, in various times and places, had the experience of constituting the dominant culture, Judaism has not, since the end of the biblical period, enjoyed the same kind of cultural hegemony. Quite the reverse. Indeed I was tempted to subtitle this
section of my remarks, “‘Judaism and Culture’? You’ve got to be kidding!” It seems to me that the history of Judaism in the Diaspora has almost universally been one of unremitting opposition and resistance to the dominant culture.

The strong countercultural valence of post-biblical Judaism serves, as Father Ryan has already noted, as the engine of the story of the Maccabees and the attendant Jewish celebration of Chanukah. These events rest on the repudiation of Hellenism, the dominant Greek inspired pattern of culture and, by extension, add a religious imprimatur to the rejection of assimilation into the dominant cultural patterns. Imagine the experience of a Jewish child participating, year after year, in a celebration in which one of the primary themes is the rejection of prevailing cultural patterns. Think of the impact such an experience must have on the religious self-understanding of that child.

The story of Jewish life in Christian Europe is one of persistent opposition in the face of overwhelming, and often lethal, cultural pressures. The stubborn maintenance of religious and social patterns even while living as a statistically insignificant minority is perhaps a paradigm of faith antithetical to culture. Emblematic of this are the Marranos of Spain who insisted on living a secret Jewish life, even at mortal risk in opposition to the decrees of the Inquisition and the temporal powers. In more recent times we see this withdrawal from the dominant culture concretely represented, as Father Ryan has already elaborated, in the creation of specifically Jewish enclaves in places like Crown Heights in Brooklyn or Kiryas Joel in Rockland County or the rigidly Orthodox enclave of Meah Shearim in the midst of a more modern Jerusalem. Nor can we ignore the Refuseniks, the Jews of the Soviet Union who insisted, at great personal peril, on creating extensive networks of secret Jewish religious and cultural lives in radical opposition to the official atheism of their government.
I do not wish to overstate this case. But it seems that a fair reading of Jewish history would suggest that its dominant mode put it consistently at odds with the prevailing culture. Would I then find no resonance with Niebuhr’s typology of the agreement of faith and culture? Clearly such agreement did exist in those instances, and they are not a few, where the predominant culture was itself Jewish. We are reminded that the great twentieth century Jewish thinker Mordecai Kaplan identified Judaism as a “Civilization,” 7 i.e., as culture.

To advert again to the Bible, the Psalms betray an ideology of religious assent to the political prerogatives of the Davidic dynasty, as in Psalm 2’s depiction of God’s assertion to David, “You are my son, this day have I begotten you,” or the frequent citations, as in Psalm 18, of the divine promise that David’s descendants would sit on the throne “forever.” During the period of the first Temple we note the extent to which the priesthood was enmeshed with the monarchy. Perhaps it is this that is symbolized by the literally fraternal relationship between Moses, who held political leadership of the people, and Aaron, the first of the priests. Or perhaps it is embodied in the figure of Samuel who functioned as priest and prophet, two primary modes of religious authority, as well as judge, military/political authority, and who seems to have resisted the disentangling of those roles.

We see a similarly positive relationship between faith and culture in post-biblical Jewish life. It is present in the microcultures that constituted Jewish life of Eastern Europe, certainly as it is idealized in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *The Earth is the Lord’s*. What we know historically about these communities is that here was, in fact, a collective communal life—in other words a culture patterned by religious commitment and devotion. Certainly the reality of that vanished world was one in which there was a close association of the religious leadership with the wealthiest, presumably the culture-shaping, strata of that insular society.
The most prominent rabbinic leadership customarily married into the families of the social elite. We see a seamless integration of faith and culture today within the enclaves of Haredi and Chasidic life, notwithstanding or precisely as a consequence of, their alienation from the dominant culture.

Yet there have been instances of interpenetration of Jewish religion and the non-Jewish dominant culture. In Spain, during what Jews have called “the Golden Age of Spain,” Jewish religious life was fully integrated with the intellectual and political life of the Moorish-dominated society. In Germany, in the wake of the enlightenment and emancipation, German Jews prided themselves in what they imagined was a perfect harmonization of their “Mosaic persuasion” and the German culture in which they reveled. Today it is taken as a truism that in America we see what is often described as a harmonization of Jewish values with the ideals of the predominant culture. Such an idea was popularized by writers like Will Herberg in his *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*, in which Jewish values were perceived to be wholly congruent with the “civil religion” of Americanism. These congruent values mutually emphasized justice, equality, and self-discipline.8

Let us return to the instances in which Judaism itself provided the cultural context. Here we find examples not only of harmonization of faith and culture, but instances in which Jewish faith itself was opposed to (Jewish) culture. The Bible is, at the very least, skeptical of the institution of the monarchy. Indeed both Deuteronomy 17 and Samuel, in his role as prophet, explicitly warn the people against enthroning a king, and this despite the remarkable fact that much of the text may have found expression under the patronage of a one of the members of the Davidic dynasty. The prophets were unsparing in their critiques of various
kings, typified most powerfully by the prophet Nathan’s dramatic denunciation of David, or by Elijah’s imprecations against Ahab and his impolitic prediction of the king and his wife’s immanent and violent deaths. The prophets were similarly denunciatory of the sacrificial cult and the people’s empty, mechanical enactment of it. Countless examples from the prophets could be cited, most stirringly Isaiah 58: “Is this the fast I have chosen?” or Jeremiah mocking the people’s vain belief that the Temple would protect them from immanent attack by Babylonia (7:1ff). These are Biblical instances of Jewish faith against culture, even when the culture is Jewish. Examples could be cited from post-Biblical history as well.

It is the third of Niebuhr’s types that offers the greatest opportunity for provocative speculation. Is there such a thing as Jewish religion mediating culture? I would suggest that this is the very complicated project presented to Judaism today by the creation of the State of Israel. For the first time in two thousand years we see the establishment of a fully autonomous Jewish culture. This creates a very complex dynamic. At this moment, a small vocal minority with disproportionate political influence clearly would be delighted with the creation of a theocracy, i.e., they would determine the direction of that society and culture in the name of their interpretation of the religious tradition. The achievement of this goal would represent a perfect meshing of religion and culture, a full realization of Niebuhr’s second type.

At the opposite extreme are those who are antipathetic to this theocratic program and whose aspiration is the creation of a wholly secular state and culture. In such a setting religion would be confined to the private realm, utterly cut off from the public square and non-determinative of the common life. Religion would be left to rail against the predominant culture: How terrible that stores are allowed to be open on Shabbat; Look at those impious
women in short sleeves; Men and women riding in the same bus, how degraded; How dare they sell bread on Passover? All would be examples of ‘Religion against culture’ in a Jewish idiom.

But it is here, in the midst of the still emerging culture of Israel, that we find the most promise for the emergence of a mediating role: a Judaism at one with the predominant culture but providing the chastisement of the ethical correctness of the way that society lives its collective life, reminding culture of the ethical values at the core of the inherited tradition. We have already seen some of the first tender shoots of this type of mediating Judaism in groups like Rabbis for Human Rights. The fact is that it is religious voices that are speaking most clearly for the rights of refugees from Darfur or demanding that menial laborers be treated with justice. All of this portends the unfolding of a Jewish future unlike anything we have known for over two thousand years. However, there remains one caveat.

Even as Judaism has, since 1948, come to live in the midst of what the earliest theorists of Zionism aspired to: a “normal” society and culture, the very context of that predominantly Jewish culture is in the process of changing dramatically. One approach to Jewish history has seen the Jewish people as the canary in the coalmine of human experience. Whatever befalls the Jews ultimately happens to everyone else. In this case the fact that so much of Jewish experience transpired in the context of a culture not their own now becomes a paradigm for all religious groups. As we enter the age of a globalized culture every religious community will now occupy a subsidiary status. The new global culture will not be dominated by any single religious perspective and will function essentially independent of all of them. Indeed, all of religious groups will be interacting with that culture from a minority posture: one dominant culture, many religious minorities relating to it in a host of ways. How
those various religious communities will respond to this new context in the terms of
Niebuhr’s typology can, for now, only be the subject of fascinated conjecture.

NOTES

1 This is the case at least after Genesis 1.

2 What does G-d do when not bothering with us?

3 Paradoxically related in a book which is not even included in the Jewish canon.

4 This is true, too, in the main, in cultural settings that were dominantly Muslim, though, as a rule, to a
lesser degree and, generally, less destructively.

5 More mundane examples abound, e.g., the widespread literacy of Jews (including women) in a
culture of predominant illiteracy and the establishment of alternative political structures that
categorized many of the Jewish communities scattered throughout Europe.

6 Whatever the historical reality of the situation of the Marannos, the fact that this episode in Jewish
life has attained mythic status and continues to be a live part of the Jewish telling of their own story is
suggestive of the self understanding of Jews and representative of a reflexive willingness to be
oppositional to the dominant culture.

7 A term that Niebuhr, himself uses, at times, interchangeably with culture.

8 Perhaps we can talk another time about the extent to which these particular ideals are realized in this
society and to the extent they are not; how Judaism would, again, be identified typologically as a faith
in opposition to the dominant culture. Perhaps this is an example of yet another of Niebuhr’s
typologies: religion playing a mediating role in culture, a subject to which we shall shortly return.
We can find similar examples of Jewish faith in opposition to Jewish culture in the various schisms within Jewish life. We see it in what historian Ellis Rivkin calls “the Pharisaic revolution” against the dominant religious/cultural patterns embodied by the Sadducees. This was not only a struggle over religious perspectives but was fraught with socio-economic overtones. Perhaps we see this same sort of cultural opposition in the struggle reflected in the Book of Acts and many of Paul’s epistles between that group of Jewish believers in Jesus who constituted the early church and the prevailing norms of Jewish life advocated by James the brother of Jesus.

A similar cultural disjunction is seen in the opposition of the Karaites against the prevailing culture of the Rabbinites. In Eastern Europe we see much the same phenomenon in the emergence of Chasidism as an expression of opposition to the dominant scholarly mode of Jewish piety and all of its associations with the social elite. And in Western Europe beginning two hundred years ago in 1810, the creation of Reform Judaism as a reaction against the then dominant norms of Jewish life as ultimately articulated by the movement that came to be called Orthodoxy can best be understood as a tear in the social fabric of the world of that culture.

Actually this was very much the subject of debate from the very beginning of the Zionist enterprise. While one camp—the political Zionists, represented by Theodore Herzl—aspired to a normal existence, to be a nation like all the other nations, another camp—the cultural Zionists, embodied in the work of Asher Ginzberg, called Achad Ha’Am—wanted to create a Jewish state that embodied values at odds with the normal states with which its adherents were all too familiar: a “light to the nations” in a modern context and idiom.