Tillich’s understanding of Judaism is an important topic, which is established by numerous biographical details, including the reason for his break with the Nazi government and ensuing emigration to the United States in 1933. Tillich’s ecumenical activities with Jews are well known, but how his theological method may have contributed to this has not been fully explored.

Tillich’s evolving understanding of the history of religion exhibits two distinct but complementary forms of dialectical relationship. Both forms maintain continuity between Judaism and Christianity, especially in contrast to the so-called “German Christians,” who sought to eliminate the Jewish roots of Christianity, and any ongoing influence of Judaism in the life of the church.

The first is a “historical dialectic of progression,” which initially appears in his two Schelling dissertations, and persists into Volume One of his Systematic Theology. This is a conventional view in that Judaism serves as a foundation for Christianity. However, Tillich’s adds a distinctive element by having “contradiction” drive the dialectical process. The second is an “ontological dialectic of balance,” which holds that the fullness of the divine reality is expressed in the permanent polar tension between the priestly/mystical/vertical/"Is," and the prophetic/critical/horizontal/"Ought." I have called this Tillich’s “dialectic of the Holy.”

Tillich elevated the prophetic dimension of Judaism, typically referred to as “Jewish prophetism,” to be a participant in both forms of dialectic. Jewish prophetism emerged, significantly, after World War One, as Tillich rejected the religious nationalism of his early adulthood, first appearing in The Socialist Decision in 1933. After World War Two and the Holocaust, Tillich conferred a more permanent role upon Jewish prophetism, as one pole of the “dialectic of the Holy.” This initially appeared in the 1952 Judenfrage lectures, and persisted into Tillich’s final formulation of the “religion of the concrete spirit” from 1965.

Tillich’s Jewish prophetism is inadequate as a starting-point for inter-faith dialogue, because it fails to address the fullness of Judaism’s own self-understandings. However, to the extent that a prophetic and critical aspect is present in any religion, it will endure in a transformation to a more adequate expression of the divine.

The paper will have two parts, with the first part summarizing the above material, as an overview (~ 5 pages). The second part will focus on two lectures from 1963 and 1965, which express Tillich’s mature understanding of the history of religion, focusing on his method of “dynamic typology” as applied to the religion of the concrete spirit (~ 7 pages).

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