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# Engaging Theology in History: Problems and Prospects

## ABSTRACT

An understanding of Christian theology can help historians to deepen and clarify the meaning of their work and to find their proper voice in today's crowded marketplace. Knowledge of Christian theology deepens our understanding of the past by opening up alternate and under-explored dimensions of human experience, it offers a counter-narrative to the largely rationalist constructions of historical work that have dominated western thought since the Enlightenment, and it helps to clarify and better articulate historians' work as interpreters of the past. In the first part of this paper, I will describe some of the contemporary factors that hinder a constructive dialogue between history and theology before explaining why the close relationship between the two subjects should nevertheless encourage us to look at them comparatively. Then, in the second part of the paper, I will explore the relation between

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history and Christian theology more concretely by showing how theological work that has aimed to propel Christian-Jewish dialogue has helped to better formulate a position in my study of Sri Lankan migration history. Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from a deeper engagement between theology and history is that historians should strive to reach as clear an understanding as possible of their chosen interpretative frame.

**Keywords:** Christian theology, history, Jewish-Christian relations, Sri Lankan migration

“No historian can be indifferent, or neutral, to the challenge and claim of Truth.”

G. Florevsky

It might seem as if history is well placed among the liberal arts to interpret dynamic global shifts and to situate them within a clarifying perspective, to better read ‘the signs of the times’. After all, historical writing is by nature synthetic and involves the bringing together of knowledge and ideas from different disciplines. Yet, as with the humanities in general, there is talk of a crisis in the discipline that is related to concerns about its usefulness amid the speed of modern life and thought. What can archival research into the distant past, it is argued, tell us about a world that is accelerating so swiftly towards the future? Where is the value in developing theories and working on problems that belong to a wholly different era? Rather than extemporizing on the virtues of a retooled historical discipline to fit the purposes of today’s modernity, such questions are best engaged by first re-examining the foundations of the discipline. While others have taken the opportunity to explore avenues in the history of the philosophy of history, this essay will take a less studied route back to history’s origins, in Christian theology. I would like to argue that an understanding of Christian theology, just as much if not more than an understanding of Hellenic philosophy or Enlightenment rationality, would help historians to deepen and clarify the meaning of their work and find their proper voice in today’s crowded marketplace.

Why should ‘we’ historians study theology? By way of outline, three reasons can be offered at the outset. Firstly, knowledge of Christian theology can deepen our understanding of the past and present by opening up alternate and under-explored dimensions of human experience. In a way that is perhaps inconceivable today, for many in the past the Christian perspective was the most decisive and unifying aspect of their lives, giving meaning and coherence to their thoughts and actions in the world at large. A good example is provided by the field of Church missionary expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which has so often been seen as a tool of “cultural imperialism.” As has been forcefully argued by historians of the Church, such a view has been built on a set of assumptions about the unidirectionality and undesirability of “Western influence.” The view also seldom addresses the relevance of theology to the various and multifaceted missionary movements themselves. For instance, while noting that theological ideas “did not occupy their own quite separate,

autonomous sphere” in the “evangelical marketplace,” the British historian Andrew Porter comments that

For many missionaries [the] significance or irrelevance [of the link between Christianity and civilization] depended on their understanding of the relationship between the interpretation of Christ’s last command and Christ’s second coming. Pre- and post-millennialists held very different opinions and as a result differed fundamentally in their approach to missionary strategy. Interpretations of prophecy and millennial views also led direct to interpretations of contemporary events in the light of their place in the divine plan for the world . . . . Missionary approaches to the question of racial difference, and hence to the training of converts, the organization of local churches, and episcopal authority, were likely to be strongly influenced by attitudes to the biblical account of creation. More than most of their contemporaries, missionaries tended to accept the universality of human nature implicit in a single act of creation.<sup>2</sup>

Study of Christian history can therefore help to complicate and deepen our understanding of the past in a way that is more in keeping with the untidy reality that engaged the men and women of earlier times.

The second and third reasons why we should study theology are to do with concretizing the past of history to better know its formation and dominant perspectives. Studying the development of theology, especially in its encounters with secularizing impulses since the Eighteenth Century, can be helpful because it offers a counter-narrative to the largely rationalist constructions of historical work that have dominated western thought since the Enlightenment. In this sense, Christian thought adds to that growing field of perspectives that helps to balance the partial and provisional nature of Euro-centric narratives of temporality. Perhaps conversely, however, studying the origins of Christian theology can also help historians to clarify and better articulate their work as interpreters of the past. For example, wider knowledge of early Jewish ideas about time can open new perspectives on the relationship between experiential cycles and singular events.

Before exploring these two points further, I will first describe some of the contemporary factors that hinder a constructive dialogue between history and theology. I will then explain why the close relationship between the two subjects should nevertheless encourage us to look

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Porter, “Church History, History of Christianity, Religious History: Some Reflections on British Missionary Enterprise Since the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Church History* 71:3 (September 2002) 581-82.

at them comparatively. Then, in the second part of the paper, I will explore this relation more concretely by showing how theological work that has aimed to propel Christian-Jewish dialogue has helped to better formulate a position in my study of Sri Lankan migration history. Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from this encounter is that, since historical research cannot take place without some prior understanding in order to proceed with an interpretation of the past, historians should strive to reach as clear an understanding as possible of their chosen interpretative frame.

## ISSUES FOR HISTORIANS ENGAGING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The first issue in seeking to engage Christian theology is, and always must be, the identity of Jesus to the historian. As the theologian Georges Florovsky argued,

. . . a historian, precisely as historian, that is, as interpreter of human life as it has been actually lived in time and space, cannot evade the major and crucial challenge of this actual history: “*Who do men say that I am?*” (Mark 8:28). For a historian, precisely in his capacity of an interpreter of human existence, it is a crucial question. A refusal to face a challenge is already a commitment. A refusal to answer a certain question is also an answer. Abstention from judgment is also judgment. An attempt to write history, evading the challenge of Christ, is in no sense a “neutral” endeavor.<sup>3</sup>

While Florovsky’s argument might be extended to all kinds of commitment, whether religious or philosophical or social, there is no question that the scope and the limits of theological engagement in history will be primarily determined by the historian’s beliefs. However, contrary to our modern assumptions, such a commitment does not imply ideology-bound stasis through passive obligation but it is rather the sign of our endowment to engage in a dynamic sphere: “commitment is a token of freedom, a prerequisite of responsiveness.”<sup>4</sup> By acknowledging where we stand, we will be better placed to *respond* rather than merely *react* to situations.

Following from this foundational point, and equally without doubt, theological writing is a matter of inspiration and the interpretation of revelation. Theological knowledge, like

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Florovsky, “The Predicament of the Christian Historian,” in *Christianity and Culture* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1974): 53-4.

<sup>4</sup> Florovsky, “Predicament,” 52.

Scripture, does not aim to be ‘objective’ or ‘unbiased’ according to the goals of historical writing.<sup>5</sup> Theology is rather concerned with the relation to Truth, so that the theologian is tested in Truth’s presence. As such, the workings of theology may be categorized in modern terms as highly ‘subjective.’ Yet, if theology as such involves an encounter with an Other, then historical research may also be described in terms of an encounter: between the historian and the document of the past, which is always a document of lived reality. The core activity of both disciplines involves not merely *observation* but, prior to this, a conscious act of *interpretation*.

Indeed, while history and theology, for want of a better word, can be said to operate according to different ‘methodologies,’ their conventions with relation to textual material are quite similar. The theologian John McIntyre outlined some of the most basic similarities:

. . . they deal with problems of authority and evidence; they write about persons and movements; they make character assessments and they form moral judgements; they analyse and formulate concepts.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, both in their modern forms are not really a single discipline as such but the outcome of the overlap of a range of disciplines. Like history, theology is also “a field-encompassing field” that makes use of the insights of a variety of other disciplines, such as paleography, archaeology, geography, philology.<sup>7</sup> In this sense it may not be appropriate to speak of separate and enclosed disciplines, but at the same time, it reminds us that we need to tread sensitively through this terrain.

Besides questions of individual belief, commitment, and inspiration, there is another set of issues that might hinder the work of historians engaging with Christian theology. Primarily this is to do with how, in Europe at the very least, the Christian tradition has become increasingly irrelevant to everyday life, to the point where it is coming to be seen as *part of the problem* rather than part of the solution to society’s problems.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, the growth of

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, according to Michel de Certeau, such a distinction can help “to recognize the ideologies that are already invested in history itself.” M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 21.

<sup>6</sup> John McIntyre, “The Uses of History in Theology,” *Studies in World Christianity* 7:1 (2001) 2.

<sup>7</sup> McIntyre, “Uses of History,” 14.

<sup>8</sup> I’m thankful to Dr. John McDade for providing this formulation and other insights in this paragraph. The recent ‘new evangelization’ movement within the Catholic Church seeks to reawaken the faith in traditionally

such views directly limits the attraction of theological reasoning and the impact of theological work, and it is no surprise that theology as an academic discipline is becoming marginalized even within a contracting academic humanities establishment.<sup>9</sup> From a Christian point of view, it might be helpful to think of this as the sign of a diminishing but perhaps more vibrant spiritual community, as witness the notable parallels with the situation of the dispersed Jewish people in the centuries following the early Common Era.

Another obstacle to a fruitful collaboration between theologians and historians working in the Western tradition approaches the same situation from a different perspective: ‘Western’ historical reasoning, considered to be ‘Judeo-Christian’ in its foundations, is being increasingly challenged by non-Western and hitherto marginalized groups. The gradual opening of ‘black’, ‘feminist’, ‘subaltern’, and other views of the past has helped to fragment a historical discipline that had come to conceive of itself until the latter half of the Twentieth Century largely as a unified endeavour, summarized by one historian as ‘the secularized theological view.’ Modern historians are sometimes accused of refashioning this development of nineteenth century historiography into a single ‘celestial perspective’ in the name of a global history that takes account of the diverse multicultural perspectives that have emerged since that time. But a historical discipline that can adopt “multiple vantage points, a coexisting cluster of perspectives” must first strive to clarify its origins, processes, and meaning in order to respond constructively and in dialogue to new challenges. The project of ‘global history’ cannot be wrested out of a partial reading of Western historiography.<sup>10</sup> To better grasp the dynamics of the modern relation between history and theology it is instructive to look at how theology has been challenged, since the eighteenth century, by historical criticism.<sup>11</sup>

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Christian parts of the world, such as Europe. See Benedict XIV, *An Apostolic Letter Issued motu Proprio, Establishing the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization* 21 Sept. 2010. Web. 29 Dec. 2012. <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20100921\\_ubicumque-et-semper\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html)>

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the data on the Jesuit-run Heythrop College in Jeevan Vasagar, “University Funding Cuts: Which Institutions are Worst Hit?”, *Guardian Datablog* 17 Mar. 2011. Web. 29 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/mar/17/university-funding-cuts-institution-hefce-universities>>

<sup>10</sup> See the quotations in Roxann Prazniak, “Is World History Possible? An Inquiry,” in Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl and Peter Gran, *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 227.

<sup>11</sup> The overview in the following paragraph draws from the article by Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., “Faith and history,” in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *Modern Historical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): 210-13.

The problem concerning the identity of Jesus, referred to earlier as central in determining the depth of the historian's engagement with Christian theology, can be said to have undergone many reformulations over the centuries. New difficulties arose with historical criticism of the Bible in the eighteenth century, whose undermining of traditional views of Scriptural authority involved asking questions based on "evidence, probability, and plausibility." Serious challenges to theology raised by historical criticism were addressed, albeit with unstable results, by resort to Kantian epistemology, which secured "noumenal compartments beyond the reach of history." In the early Twentieth Century, Ernst Troeltsch uncovered how the presuppositions of historical research, particularly the notion of a necessary causal "correlation" between events and their surrounding context, had effectively prevented "*in advance* any claim to absolute or final truth in ethical and religious matters." That is to say, historical criticism had removed entirely the authority of scripture to determine truth with respect to biblical history. Twentieth century Neo-Orthodox (or dialectical) theologians opposed to liberal theology's efforts to align faith with truths generally accessible to culture worked on the basis of the Kantian schema, thus leaving themselves inevitably open in the changed climate to charges of unhistorical reasoning. Rudolf Bultmann went further by applying Heideggerian philosophy to argue that the essence of Christian faith was an "understanding of existence," thus making Christian faith independent of particular historical claims. Others responded to Bultmann by launching 'new quests' for the historical Jesus in which the "understanding of existence" became the core of belief. Adopting an approach reminiscent of Hegel, Wolfhart Pannenberg tried to return to a conception of faith as knowledge rather than as "contentless 'self-understanding'," seeking proof for Jesus' resurrection and thus maintaining theology's position alongside other academic "sciences." Other trends have taken over theology since the 1970s (hermeneutics, liberation and political theologies, narrativist approaches). Yet the problems raised in the nineteenth century and earlier remain unresolved and these are from start to finish concerned with the relation between theology and modern history with respect to truth claims about past events.

If we look further back into the human past, we can find more fundamental connections between history and theology. There, in the inauguration of Jewish temporality, we can see how deeply the origins of history and theology are interrelated; indeed, they illuminate each other. The history of Christian theology, as well as the history of Western history, could be



said to have begun with the Jewish experience of time, which was fundamentally linked to God's action on earth. Indeed, as John L. McKenzie has argued, it was the transcendent power of Yahweh breaking into Jewish life through His covenant promise that introduced meaning into the originally cyclical time experience of Jews and other ancient peoples.<sup>12</sup> It marked the Jewish experience as being fundamentally different from that of other ancient peoples'. The Jewish understanding of their relation to a single and preeminent God might be as significant to the Western understanding of time and history as the Greek concern with verification.<sup>13</sup>

## AN EXAMPLE: CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS AND SRI LANKAN MIGRATION

### *Sri Lankan histories and migrations*

An example from my own historical research will help to show how engagement with modern studies in systematic theology—in this case, constructing post-supremacist narratives of Biblical history—can illuminate and help to progress historical research in other fields. The field in which I am working is the relation between overseas Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Tamil populations in the past forty years. To explain the subject in detail, it would be helpful to begin with a brief overview of Sri Lankan history.

For more than a thousand years, the island of Sri Lanka has had a majority population of mainly Buddhist, Sinhala speaking people and a large minority population of mainly Hindu Tamil speaking people. While these two groups often lived in separate kingdoms on the island, they shared many things in common, including customs, practices, and even rulers.<sup>14</sup> During the period of British colonial rule, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to Sri

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<sup>12</sup> John L. McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought," in Raymond E. Brown, S. S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S. J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990): 1284-1315. For an alternative reading based on Jewish rationalization and theodicy, see Samuel Moyn, "Jewish and Christian Philosophy of History," in Aviezer Tucker, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 427-36.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* (6<sup>th</sup> ed., New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007): 13-16.

<sup>14</sup> I have deliberately avoided nuance in this picture to come more quickly to the point of my research. For more on the crucial period of early British colonization, see Sujit Sivasunderam, "Ethnicity, Indigeneity and Migration in the Advent of British Rule to Sri Lanka," *American Historical Review*, 115. 2 (April 2010): 428-52.

Lankan independence in 1948, these populations were brought together largely for bureaucratic-administrative purposes and they lived for much of this time without widespread conflict with each other. After British rule ended, beginning in 1956, there were a number of episodes of political violence between groups belonging to the two communities. The worst of these were riots that took place in 1983, after a Sinhalese crowd became angry at delays to the funeral proceedings of a group of Sri Lankan soldiers killed by Tamil Tiger rebels in retaliation for the assassination of a Tiger leader. During the five days of violence that ensued, Tamil businesses and property were systematically targeted by groups of Sinhalese in and around Colombo and up to 3000 Tamils are reported to have been killed, with many more displaced from their homes. In the on-off civil war that ensued, the main point of contention was between separatist Tamils who claimed an ethnically and linguistically autonomous state encompassing the north and east of the island and Sinhalese majoritarians who wanted to preserve the administrative and political unity of the island under direct control from the southern capital, Colombo.<sup>15</sup>

Since colonial times, Sri Lankans had also migrated away from the island in search of work, mostly to destinations in and around the Indian Ocean. However, by the 1950s there was a small but significant migration to Great Britain and other western countries. This migration intensified after the 1980s and the beginning of the war. My initial research on this subject involved an oral historical project centred on the Tamil migrants that had arrived in London during the 1950s and 1960s. I discovered that many of these older migrants had a lot of Sinhalese friends, indeed that some had even married Sinhalese and that it was normal for the two ‘communities’ to mingle in such ways. Given this context of friendship and reciprocity, there has been concern about the growing distance between later generations of Sri Lankan Tamil- and Sinhalese- speaking migrant populations, many of who hardly knew anybody from the other community. I perceived a widespread feeling of distrust, which was becoming reflected in the narrative of the construction and alienation between two sets of fully-fledged political communities drawn along ethno-linguistic lines since Sri Lankan independence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the representation of this history see L. M. Ratnapalan, “Like an Albatross Around the Neck: the Impact of Theorizing Sri Lankan Tamil Migration History Around the 1983 Riots” (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> An important early study of this subject is E. Nissan and R. L. Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” in Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990) 19-44.

One way to engage what appeared to be this historically over-determined story of separate trajectories was to identify what they had in common: a shared past. The Sri Lankan novelist Ambalavanar Sivanandan had led the way here with his attempt to do this in his novel *When Memory Dies* (1997). He showed, through the fictional history of three generations of a family in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka, how opportunities for reconciliation had arisen between Tamils and Sinhalese, but that self-serving individuals and groups had intervened to end well-meaning peoples' hopes by playing on divisions to gain power. Other accounts that I had read complicated and challenged my understanding further. For example, the anthropologist Valentine Daniel argued that transformations in Tamil migrants' orientation towards the past, in which the violence of the Sri Lankan state towards Tamils became increasingly apparent, can be seen as representing a 'radical break' with nationalism as a guiding ideology. The 'radical break' in his analysis is coincident with the riots of 1983 and the beginning of armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Daniel seemed to be saying that there was no space for a shared past between Sinhalese and Tamils, since it had only ever been a figment of the nationalist imagination.<sup>17</sup> While I was unconvinced by the argument's ahistorical reasoning about the past, the originality of its conception made it difficult to criticize on its own terms.

### *Jewish-Christian relations*

While grappling with such thorny questions of nationalism, identity and diaspora, through attending a course of seminars I became interested in theological issues concerning Christian-Jewish relations. In brief, I was introduced to work that had been carried out by Christian and Jewish thinkers to come to terms with scriptural as well as other problems in the historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The insights gained from this encounter with modern Judeo-Christian theology proved to be decisive to my research on Sri Lankan migration history.

In general terms, I learned a number of things from studying Christian-Jewish relations:

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<sup>17</sup> The thesis appears in E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

1. *Some thinkers were more interested in the harmony between religions than with Christian-Jewish dialogue as a problem to be approached theologically.* For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' aim in his writing on the subject appeared to be to establish that Judaism permits the Other, that is to say, Christians, Muslims, and other ethnic-religious groups.<sup>18</sup> It is a kind of phenomenology of difference, with the goal being to build up a shared religious witness in a secularized society.

2. *The central issue in the dialogue concerning Christology has to do with the interpretation of the Christ-event.* Christology—"the words about Christ"—is how Christian faith understands the significance and identity of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Interpretation within this context consisted of the understanding, from both Jewish and Christian sides, of the meaning of Jesus' arrival—the 'Christ event'—in the context of God's plan of salvation for the people of Israel. Some theologians have even argued that, to be positively inclined towards Jews, one must lower one's Christianity; this makes a deeply Christological Christianity incompatible with a positive attitude towards Jews.

3. *There are psychological dynamics in dialogue, which are mediated by historical events.* We must be aware of these dynamics. For example, *Dabru Emet* ('speak [the] truth') a 2002 Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity collectively signed by a group of rabbis and intellectuals, was seen by some as an important compromise agreement and a way to move forward in Jewish-Christian relations. The eight theses that made up the main part of this document are:

Jews and Christians worship the same God.

Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book—the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").

Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.

Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.

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<sup>18</sup> For Sacks, the God of Israel "is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humanity," and this "*combination of a particular faith and a universal God*" can offer an alternative to tribalism and universalism. Jonathan Sacks, "The Other: Judaism, Christianity and Islam," *Future Tense* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) 71-88.

<sup>19</sup> J. McDade, SJ, *Christian Doctrine* (University of London Press, 2000) 4.

Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.

The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.

A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.

Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

Despite being largely well received, there was significant opposition from some Jewish authorities, including the biblical scholar Jon Levenson who argued that the problem with *Dabru Emet* was that its model for dialogue was the conflict resolution/diplomatic negotiation model. As such, all fundamental differences (including significant critical judgements from the respective religious traditions) were minimized, neglected, or denied altogether for the shared aim of agreement and even mutual affirmation.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these examples of the flexibility and ‘interdisciplinarity’ of theological dialogue, there also appeared to be two possible applications of theology/biblical scholarship to the history of modern diasporas and migrations, with which I was most concerned: the *archetypal* model and the *phenomenological-historical* approach. The former, which has been taken up by exponents of diaspora research, argues for working with but ‘transcending’ the Jewish diaspora among historic global migrations. Especially, this involves interpreting and evaluating features of other ‘victim’ diasporas (Armenian, African, Tamil, etc.) against characteristics portrayed in the historical exile of Jewish people from Babylonia and, much later, Judaea.<sup>21</sup>

A contemporary Christian theologian, R Kendall Soulen, took up the phenomenological-historical approach in his work *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*.<sup>22</sup> In this work, the author explains how the impetus for his study emerged out of the Christian Churches’ recent rejection of supersessionism, which means the end of ‘Christendom’ or the presumption of Christian theological and social triumphalism towards Jews. For Soulen, the problem was to

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<sup>20</sup> The original text of *Dabru Emet* can be found at: <http://www.icjs.org/dabru-emet/text-version>. For Levenson’s response: “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Commentary*, December 2001. Web. 29 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/how-not-to-conduct-jewish-christian-dialogue/>>

<sup>21</sup> See William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* 1. 1 (Spring 1991) 83-99. See also more generally Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> R Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). All quotations from this book will be referenced within the text.

understand how Christians might do this and remain “really Christian” (x). He argues that in order to do this, there needs to be a re-alignment of “traditional forms of Christian thought” with the God of Israel, “who is identified by fidelity to the Jewish people through time and therefore by engagement with human history in its public and corporate dimensions” (xi). That is, Soulen tries to overcome the standard model of Biblical history’s “latent gnosticism” by ascribing “theological integrity and significance” to God’s covenant history with Israel that is “antecedent to the economy of redemption in its prefigurative form” (110). This means Christian theologians taking as seriously the story of the religious community Israel prior to the birth of Christ as after his birth.

Two of Soulen’s “convictions” in treating the problem of supersessionism in Christian theology seemed to be of special relevance to a historian grappling with the relationship between event and experience in migration narratives. First, the “the effort to transcend supersessionism requires serious encounter with the theological claims of Jewish faith” (4). Here he enlists the views of the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, who suggests that “the doctrine of God’s incarnation in Jesus could be understood as a kind of intensification of God’s covenant with Israel” (9). From this perspective, Soulen is perhaps able to more forcefully argue that Judaism is different in degree, but not in kind, from Christianity. Second, “the systematic implications of supersessionism for Christian theology are best understood when attention is focused on the way in which Christians interpret the narrative unity of the Christian Bible” (4). By referring to three pairs of “pivotal Christian thinkers” from history, the author attempts to show how supersessionism is a “latent problem” that is connected with this standard canonical narrative, since it renders “the centre of the Hebrew Scriptures . . . ultimately indecisive for understanding how God’s works . . . engage creation in lasting and universal ways” (16).

Traditionally, the standard canonical narrative could be schematized as follows:



The post-supersessionist vision is an attempt to overcome the centuries imposed one-directionality of this model. In the Common Era, the ‘Old’ Testament has been reinterpreted in the light of the ‘New.’ Yet, as the interpretative power of the ‘New’ Testament grows, so

too must the power of the 'Old.' Soulen's conceptualization gives sensitive but decisive definition to the historian's observation that the past *continuously* shapes the present in unexpected and contingent ways. In the conclusion of *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Soulen argues that covenantal history beginning with God's promise to Abraham and continuing until His reign (the history of the people Israel) "is not an epiphenomenon of God's work as Consummator but the work itself" (176). These aspects of Soulen's approach to the relation between Jews and Christians helped me to better articulate my own concerns with the ways in which writers had interpreted the relationship between the past and the present with respect to ethnic/social conflict in Sri Lanka.

### *Re-conceptualizing historical narratives*

Returning to my own research in the wake of this study, I had a better framework for understanding modern Sri Lankan migration history. The new framework was guided by both specific insights I had gained from studying systematic theology and from the new perspective that it opened on the meaning of conflict in the modern world. With respect to cases of ethnic violence, it was noted that the symbolic resources of Christianity are centred on the death of the Son of God and the injunction to forgive. Cases of social violence and mass killing probably would not have surprised those, such as St. Augustine, who accepted the human proclivity to sin, but it continues to gravely disturb those raised on principles of human rationality and intrinsic goodness. In such a way, it seemed clearer to me than before that a lot of writing on Sri Lanka after the 1983 riots had been framed within the context of their 'otherness,' and indeed, the 'othering' of the ensuing civil war. To some extent, this had to be put aside in order to do historical research; what was important was not to allow the 'background reality' to overwhelm the perception of the past that had preceded it. Interpretations of the lead-up to those awful events in 1983 seemed to be obviously informed by a historical framework that was partially based on moral reasoning, and this clouded historical judgement.

Even more pertinent to my own research, such interpretations tended to frame the history of Sri Lankan migration before 1983 in ways different to the migrations after 1983. This touched on the problem of authenticity in diaspora/migrant populations, which the history of Christian-Jewish relations was also very much engaged with. The important point was to

show the ways in which the pre-1983 past had a real meaning and significance for people who lived then (and are continuing to live after that watershed), rather than making an instrument out of that past to somehow explain the later period. What was most impressive about Soulen and other theologians' work in Jewish-Christian relations was the way in which intellectual flexibility and freedom born of commitment had combined to yield greater sensitivity in approaching historical reconstruction in relation to a complex problem with emotional and psychological resonances.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In a later essay Soulen reflected on some features of Christian-Jewish dialogue: "concern among Jews and Christians to understand the canonical witness to covenant history anew, in ways that do not read the other out of God's history with the world, and that therefore propel both Jews and Christians to see each other as siblings—estranged but destined for reconciliation, and therefore already capable of fruitful conversation about ultimate things." R Kendall Soulen, "The Believer and the Historian: Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation," *Interpretation*, 53. 2 (April 2003): 174-86.



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