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A review of Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 242 pp. ISBN-10: 0804768846

The *Problem with Grace*, at a cursory glance, stands as one more entry in the ever-growing field of political theology—a field that invites the scholarship that takes seriously the role that religion has played and continues to play in political discourse. In this sense, Vincent W. Lloyd is a political theologian. Yet in another sense, *The Problem with Grace*, both in form and content, is a refutation of several of the primary assumptions of theological thinking, political philosophy, and the merging of the two in what stands today as political theology. His is a political theology that relies on the “ordinary” for its data, on supersessionism as its foil, and on the messy middle as its end. *The Problem with Grace* is a remarkable book that is unsettling in the best of ways, relevant with its scope and variety of cultural references, and ultimately constructive without resorting to theological niceties.

Supersessionism is the ideology in the basement of the house of political that began construction in the middle of the twentieth century, according to Lloyd. While some have been tempted to think that supersessionism was exorcised from scholarship after a thorough critique of the Augustinian lineage of Christianity “fulfilling” Judaism, they would be wrong. For Lloyd, supersessionism continues to rear its head in political theology, albeit in less overt ways and possibly with better intentions than that which seeks to persecute and exterminate. Nonetheless, the “time to question its supremacy, and to offer an alternative, is long overdue” (2). Before launching into his alternative, Lloyd argues that crass Christian supersessionism, when cast in to the more general theological concepts of “Law” and “Grace,” exerts its power in more subtle, though in no less damaging, ways. The overcoming of Law (read dictatorial and constraining) by Grace (read democratic and freeing) may seem a progressive process above reproach. But through a careful analysis of Lars von Trier’s film *Manderlay* and its engagement with secular and post-secular thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Mark Lilla, Charles Taylor, and Marcel Gauchet, Lloyd contends that the noble desires of many freedom fighters really camouflage another desire to have the external transcendent swoop in from the outside to save the flawed immanent. Hence “supersessionist logic remains at work” (10).

Lloyd is arguing neither for a resurgence of the Law nor against the currency of the terms “transcendent” and “immanent” when they are in interplay with each other. Instead, he favors “a political theology . . . without Christian presuppositions” of supersessionism that lifts up the ordinary experience of people as political subjects, especially when religion is used to mediate those experiences. It is extra-ordinary (and therefore unrealistic) to understand everyday life as constantly plagued with “big questions” (12) that can only be answered by a Grace-giving God. The ordinary life operates in between the “posited poles” (33) of transcendence and immanence and “in the middle,” we find that life is “textured, messy, viscous, difficult” (13). Yet Lloyd warns that the messy ordinary cannot be accessed through the observation of practice alone, as if theory has been the hindrance. “The ordinary is enchanted. It is stylized” (205), or the soothing image of ordinary practice that tells us that “everything happens

because it was supposed to happen" (213) conflicts with another, more accurate image of the ordinary "as jagged, chaotic, and unsystematic" (205). More insidiously, the enchantment of the ordinary typically defers to some transcendent entity (God, reason, tradition) for the bestowal of legitimacy. Or the move from practice to norms (and then back again) seems "natural" (213) when action is enchanted—the incongruous practice that flows from the ordinary has been superseded by that which enters from above to help it all make sense. The ordinary gets converted into the obvious, practices and the norms that guide them are not allowed to stray from common sense interpretations, and political problem solvers never have to reach into the crevices to extract solutions. Otherwise their solutions look less dazzling and pristine than desired.

Critique moves in the space between practice and norms. Hence political theology, if it is to retain its critical potency, must undermine the supersessionist tendencies of the enchantment that "fills the gap between practice and norms" (213). Lloyd chooses to expose the all-too-common supersessionism that resides in political theology by lifting up an antisupersessionist canon of political thought that can "make supersessionist logic self-destruct" (19). This canon, which includes Franz Kafka, Gillian Rose, Simone Weil, and James Baldwin, helps Lloyd flesh out traditional theological concepts, which he calls "theopolitical virtues" and "theopolitical strategies," such as faith, tradition, and revelation. And to help clarify the language and rhetoric of these concepts before using these unexpected resources, Lloyd relies on philosophy, sociology and religious studies to frame each chapter only to pit a literary author against the scholar.

For instance, in the "strategies" section, his chapter on revelation sets up conventional, yet supersessionist understandings of the concept only to knock them down with literature. Badiou's event discourse, specifically that involving St. Paul's fidelity to the "universality of the Christ event," is inverted by Baldwin, who refuses to replace failure with success: "The father is a failure, but allegiance to the failed father is the only option available" (157). Similarly in the chapter on faith, Lloyd uses Rose as a corrective to Robert Brandom's predicates of freedom. The discordance between practice and norms permits freedom for Rose; on Lloyd's reading of Brandom, freedom resulting from the taming of norms again mistakenly enchants the space between practice and norms. All of Lloyd's exhibits of antisupersessionism culled from literature and culture come together as a kind of postmodern pastiche rather than as a series with a telos. Consequently, he avoids supersessionism himself—it is difficult to imagine the "necessary failures" honored by Baldwin, Rose, and Kafka improving or surpassing the putative successes of supersessionist thinking. Political theology can truly contribute to political thought when it is allowed to gain a foothold in that middle space between Law and Grace, the transcendent and the immanent, practice and norms.

While Lloyd makes a strong case for the employment of improbable texts to do the work of political theology, his broad definition and general use of the term "supersessionism" raises several questions. Can there be a push toward freedom without superseding that which came before? Can the rough edges of the ordinary be smoothed somewhat without devolving into a fully enchanted

experience where everything happens for a reason? Can there exist some room in the middle for measured supersessionism—the kind that replaces the egregiously bad with self-evident good? And if not, it is unclear what critique is permitted to do once it lodges itself between practice and norms. Perhaps if Lloyd acknowledged that not all supersessionary acts are created equal (fulfillment theology hardly resembles Marx’s communist ideal) then the ordinary could be infused with a chastened sense of the ideal without sliding into the kind of supersessionism that he rightly rebukes.

These questions and concerns aside, the act of superseding is a violent act, and *The Problem with Grace* stands as an unflinching assault on its harms and persistence. By shifting the attention of political theology to those ordinary aspects of life and to intellectuals who are intent on letting the ordinary speak for itself, Lloyd performs a desperately needed service to the field of political theology—one that is anything but ordinary.

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