

The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology

OVERVIEW

The Problem with Grace diagnoses a fundamental problem in the emerging field of political theology, and proposes a remedy. Currently relying on supersessionist foundations, opposing law and grace, fallen world and redemptive force, political theology must be reconfigured. To do this, *The Problem with Grace* analyzes the political relevance of specific religious concepts through critical engagements with Christian, Jewish, theoretical, and literary texts.

In 1933, Grace Mulligan happened upon the Manderlay plantation. She discovered a community of African Americans who had never been informed that slavery was abolished. She took it upon herself to inform the black residents of Manderlay that they were no longer slaves, that they were now free. She abolished the rules of the plantation, “Mam’s Law,” and reorganized the community into a democratic polity. At first, her efforts were successful, and the community reaped a bountiful harvest. But Grace’s success was short-lived: the community soon imploded in suspicion, blood, and flames, viciously turning on itself and on Grace. Lars von Trier’s film, *Manderlay*, ends as its fictional heroine, Grace, is fleeing the plantation. Grace came to replace Law – with unanticipated, disastrous results.

It is the contention of *The Problem with Grace* that much of the burgeoning field of “political theology” implicitly relies on the supersessionist logic allegorized by *Manderlay*. The ordinary, fallen world is opposed to some redemptive force. From Carl Schmitt’s classic work to Mark Lilla’s recent contribution, scholars interested in political theology have tracked the struggle between “immanent” and “transcendent” models of religion and politics. As God was thought to be outside the world, the locus of political authority was thought to be a sovereign apart from the world; as God was understood as working through history and community, sovereignty was understood to reside within a society. In both cases, the ordinary world is taken to be in need of redemption, religious or political: something is amiss in the world, and it must be fixed with help from outside or from within.

The academic discourse of political theology has ignored the troublesome – indeed, deadly – implications of supersessionism. *The Problem with Grace* develops an alternative approach to political theology, examining specific religious concepts (such as liturgy, prophecy, and tradition) and the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love), showing how they are useful for political theory and for political practice. The theoretical orientation of *The Problem with Grace* is informed by the recent interest, from a number of directions (Judith Butler, Robert Brandom, Jeffrey Stout), in the normative texture of the social world. *The Problem with Grace* analyzes religious concepts in terms of social norms rather than in terms of fallen Law or redemptive Grace. The result is a post-sectarian, post-secular political theology that is (as Gillian Rose once described herself) “too Jewish to be Christian and too Christian to be Jewish.”