Vincent W. Lloyd, The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 242 pp. $22.95. ISBN 978-0-8047-6884-9 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Jordan Rowan Fannin, Baylor University, Waco, TX Jordan_Fannin@baylor.edu

Supercessionism, Vincent Lloyd tells us, is a political problem. A mistaken “supercessionist logic” persists as the lifeblood of political theology, which remains regnant in political theory. His project, then, is to reconfigure this logic and redeploy a chastened political theology in better service to political theory.

The individual chapters on virtue and religious practices depend for their intelligibility on a thorough understanding of the larger argument of the whole. That argument proceeds according to Lloyd’s claim that “there are two kinds of politics: on the one hand, the politics of Law and Grace; on the other hand, the politics of the middle” (187). The focus of his work is to elucidate the errors of the former and to unburden its vocabulary, freeing it for good work in the latter.

Understanding his terminology is key. First, supercessionism functions as the meeting place of two supercessionist stories: the theological (Grace imposed from outside, abolishing Law, and setting its captives free) and the political (liberal democracy comes to liberate the enslaved and oppressed). The religious has become secular; the theological, now academic (64). In both stories, the supercessionist duality necessarily brings about either stasis, that is, “pure immanence,” or fantasy, “pure transcendence” (45). Eschewing both stasis and escape, Lloyd opts for the messy, for tension, for “the ordinary.” He exhorts us to seek the “middle path,” what is “between”; not the ideal but the “conduits of the holy into the ordinary,” “the difficult work of living” (45).

The second term, Grace, is also used singularly. It takes many forms, but it stands in as the image of supercessionist logic in each. The titular problem with Grace is that it is the mindset which “fixat[es] on a lost object in the past” and a self-projected, desired object in the future (15). This “unending fixation” sees only an irrecoverable past or an always-distant future (19). It obscures the ability to see, and, most important, to analyze the reality of the present. It is “to forget what the world is” (13).
By identifying “the Grace of their favored variety” for each virtue, practice, or thinker—for proponents and critics of liberalism, for pragmatists, and even for lovers, liturgists, and modern filmmakers—he can unmask it as such.

After the descriptive task that always ultimately implodes the duality of Law and Grace, Lloyd proposes the constructive task of analyzing the “practices and norms” (more key terminology for Lloyd and the locus of his interest) of the social world to discover the truth of political life. The ordinary, he states, is political, and right vocabulary, right naming, is “the way back” to the ordinary.

By vacating supercessionist logic from his chosen virtues and concepts in turn, each now has “political potential” with the heritage, but not the baggage of its former self (45). Moreover, they can serve his task of returning us from political concepts to human experience—a prescribed exit from an ontological focus on “what there is” and a return to the phenomenological and “what one does” (153).

Ultimately, Lloyd does not recommend specific actions, positions, norms, or practices; rather, he is interested in reconfigurations and redescriptions that do not allow us to escape to beyond or before, but always result in return. We continually return to the middle, but now, freed from the enchantment of Grace, new possibilities are visible, are available. Supercessionism is precisely the thing that obscures them. The highest virtue of Lloyd’s work is his acknowledgment that this return is difficult, even tragic, work.

His major claims are well argued and his redescriptions are often compelling and richly supported with readings expertly woven from religious, political, philosophical, and literary sources. Yet, the strength of his claim that redescriptions is needed, and the extent to which his new narrations are more fitted to this world, require us to accept his understanding of the “conventional,” “everyday” definitions and use of the Christian terms in question. However, there are more than a few places where his redescriptions are a misfit. Among them we are told that faith is “an excess of belief.” He continues, “Faith is about improper beliefs, beliefs that go beyond what ought to be believed… Faith causes arguments” (50). Hope fares even less well. Hope is not to be considered a virtue but a rhetorical technique. It “convinces listeners to overlook the tragic. It smoothes over the rough edges of social norms, disappearing apparent conflicts and filling in apparent gaps” (75).

Overall, his project could be strengthened by a more focused, theological description of each of his terms so that what he endeavors to redescribe and repurpose is a real opponent. If the Christian sense of Grace, love, or hope does not partake so starkly in the yearning for past or future,
fixation on an ideal object, or imposition from without, then two weaknesses emerge in his argument. First, he underestimates their potential to inform political theology *without* being thus evacuated and, second, the supercessionist problem he sets up may not be the challenge he thinks it is. Law and Grace may not, after all, take us from the world he (very nobly) wants us to engage. Absent a more robust description of the theological depth of the terms he employs, then redeploy, I wonder if Grace is truly the “problem” he believes it to be. Nevertheless, Lloyd’s voice, passion, and textual dexterity are proof enough that he has uncovered rich ground here and inspired us to accept his worthy challenge of return and care—for our language, for our politics, for our world.

This text addresses a reader with a certain level of familiarity with the philosophical tradition ready to hand, and therefore may find its best work as a supplementary text to an upper-level political science, philosophy, or ethics course.