

INTRODUCTION

Beyond Supersessionism

IN 1933, GRACE MULLIGAN WAS PASSING THROUGH RURAL ALABAMA when she happened upon the Manderlay plantation. A white woman of refined tastes and social conscience, Grace was traveling with her father and his posse of upmarket gangsters. The cars in their caravan slowed, and then stopped, as a black woman hailed them and asked for help. “They’re going to whip him,” the distraught woman cried. Grace discovered a community of African-Americans who had never been informed that slavery had been abolished decades before. As she entered the Manderlay plantation to investigate, Grace took it upon herself to inform the black residents of Manderlay that they no longer were slaves and were now free. Grace abolished the rules of the plantation, “Mam’s Law” and reorganized the community into a democratic polity. She remained at Manderlay to facilitate the transition from slavery to freedom, overcoming various difficulties along the way. Her efforts paid off, and the new community reaped a bountiful harvest. But Grace’s success was short-lived: the community soon imploded with 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. *Manderlay* allegorizes a structure that is pervasive but almost

never acknowledged in political theory and political theology: a supersessionist logic. The world is amiss, fallen; some redemptive force, with its origins both inside and outside the world, is needed to make it right. Supersessionism within Christian theology has been forcefully criticized and largely abandoned in academic theology after the Second World War. But supersessionist logic, in many guises, remains regnant in political thought. The time to question its supremacy, and to offer an alternative, is long overdue. There is a political theology underlying much political theory, and that political theology must be reconfigured.

Political theology, understood as the discussion of religious concepts in a political context, has been stifled by a limited theological vocabulary. Political theology, as well as adjunct discourses such as theories of secularization, has focused on shifts between “immanent” and “transcendent” conceptions of God, noting how these correlate with different political structures. The requisite fix to the fallen world comes either from outside (in sovereign God or sovereign king) or from within. Such political theology reduces theology to the practice of pointing outside or pointing inside. Reducing the richness of theological tradition to two vague gestures leads directly into the trap of discarding Law in favor of Grace, for it focuses on modes of redemption rather than modes of living and acting, religiously or politically.

I take religious language seriously, and I do so in a way that retains the rich legacy of Jewish and Christian reflection on and refinement of religious concepts without subordinating those concepts to an overarching theological narrative. We gain something of value when concepts like tradition, liturgy, and sanctity are made available for political theorizing, but we lose something of value when such concepts are stripped of their religious heritage. We also lose something of value when every mention of concepts like tradition, liturgy, and sanctity brings with it unwanted commitments that are specifically theological. Some middle path must be possible: it is precisely the task of this book to identify and traverse that path.

As political theology has gained traction in the humanities, the supersessionist logic undergirding the field has gone unquestioned. Keywords in recent essays and books on political theology include *ontology*, *infinite desire*, *reenchantment*, and *the political*. The project of this book is to offer a new vocabulary. Instead of “ontology,” I focus on social practice. Rather than

focusing on what there is, I focus on how things are or what people do. Instead of “infinite desire,” I focus on specific goal-directed actions, desires that can be sated. Instead of “reenchantment,” I focus on sober appropriation of religious language for political analysis and action. Instead of “the political,” I focus on specific personal and collective practices of politics.

It might seem as though detaching religious language from religious thought, from comprehensive stories about how the world is and how we ought to act, would lead to a project that is rhetorical rather than substantive. Religious language evokes a special affective response: am I simply attempting to harness the political potential of that affect? No: it is the current discourse of political theology, the discourse that needs to be reconfigured, that is using religious language in a purely rhetorical sense. Subtly in Carl Schmitt’s work, and less subtly afterward, the observation that there are historical correlations between religious thought and political thought has led theorists to offer religious redescriptions of our world in order to push political thought in the direction the theorists desire. Schmitt quietly laments the loss of the transcendent relationship to religious-political sovereignty in an age of immanence; latter-day political theologians expose the “enchantment” underlying modernity, or the “infinite desire” expressed in actions, or the possibilities of an alternate “ontology,” to motivate political change. These dulcet phrases are evocative because of a theological ground from which they are plucked, but away from that story they quickly wilt. Their force is relative to the theological stories that form their background; they lack independent standing.

In contrast, my interest is primarily in the practices to which religious concepts refer, not in harnessing the affect that religious language produces. My interest is in the social world, richly textured with practices and norms. Religious concepts help describe that texture. While pragmatists blithely gesture at the primacy of social practice, pragmatists’ allergy to conceptual analysis and to metaphysics assures that this gesture remains unarticulated. Social practices and norms must be rigorously distinguished and individuated, their workings carefully analyzed. The most interesting recent work from both “pragmatic” (e.g., Robert Brandom) and “Continental” (e.g., Judith Butler) theorists has moved toward this approach. Only once that complex texture of the social world is acknowledged can we understand

the usefulness of religious language in naming practices of political significance. Tradition, liturgy, sanctity, revelation, prophecy, faith, and love are all ways of exploiting the difference between practices and norms, and it is with such specific concepts, not with supersessionist logic, that the work of political theology must begin.

IT IS TEMPTING to read *Manderlay*, released in 2005, as a tale that speaks to the contemporary U.S. administration's blind zeal for spreading democracy, or, more generally, as a critique of the efficacy of liberal politics. Grace is confronted with oppression: a community of black people is living in slavery. At the moment she happens upon the community, one of the black people is going to be whipped. While her father argues that it is merely "a local matter" that is "not our responsibility," Grace says that "we" (white people) have created the situation and so have a "moral obligation" to fix it. Grace, with the support of her father's gangsters, informs the former slaves that they have rights. She tells them that each human being has inherent worth and dignity that must be respected. "They can now enjoy the same freedoms as any other citizen of this country," Grace proudly announces. She creates a forum for democratic participation in the governance of the community, complete with a system for voting.

Indeed, Grace not only creates the political institutions that she thinks are necessary for ending the oppression of the former slaves; she also tries personally to reach out to them. She buys an easel and paints for one young man (because his face "possess[es] an artist's sensitivity") and proudly presents the supplies to him with the words "because we believe in you." But her high hopes are soon dashed: Grace discovers that she has confused the artistic young man with his brother. Timothy, a strong-spirited former slave, looking on, notes facetiously how all black men look alike. The attempts that Grace, as representative of liberalism, makes at recognizing differences within the community of Manderlay fall short.

Moreover, the newly constituted liberal democratic polity miserably fails. First, it implodes, with its newly "liberated" members using the democratic processes just established to their own advantage and in "inappropriate" ways (voting on when a jokester can laugh at his own jokes; sentencing to death a woman accused of stealing food). Then, after the initial troubles

seem resolved, the community self-destructs. Set off by the theft of the harvest profits, Manderlay goes up in flames. Liberalism has failed. Empowerment did not end oppression; it merely transfigured oppression.

It is also tempting to read *Manderlay* as a Nietzschean critique of values, complementary to the critique of liberalism. Not only does liberal politics not work, but it is based on values with suppressed, dark origins. Before Grace arrives, Manderlay is ruled by the noble and powerful. The whites at Manderlay have guns and whips, in addition to their fair skins and civilized culture. With the help of a priestly class, Grace and her entourage, the weak overthrow the strong in a “slave revolt.” The priestly class institutes its own set of rituals to secure its power: democratic community meetings, votes, and celebrations replace inspections and whippings. At first, the former slaves are wary of Grace and her entourage, but eventually they forget the founding moment of their community and seem to live in harmony, not only with Grace but also with the white former slave owners. Grace, as Nietzsche diagnoses the Judeo-Christian consciousness, is plagued by *ressentiment*: “The sins of the past are sins I cannot and do not wish to help you erase.” As Grace later puts it, “Manderlay is a moral obligation, because we made you.”

But history is not complete. There is still a noble man—strong, physical, cunning—who has not been entirely domesticated by the slave revolt. Timothy appears to have just the sort of character that Nietzsche holds in high regard. When he hears Grace talking about “moral obligations” and “truth,” Timothy memorably responds: “Luckily, I’m just a nigger who don’t understand such words.” He has a haughty attitude, replying cuttingly to Grace’s apparent desire for gratitude: “When we were slaves, we were not required to offer thanks for our supper, and for the water we drank, and for the air we breathed.”

Timothy is classified by Mam’s Law as a “Proudy Nigger,” and he is said to come from a line of ancient African kings (“that old-fashioned morality,” we are told). However, at the end of the film it is revealed that, in fact, he is actually classified as a “Pleasin’ Nigger,” a “chameleon,” who is “diabolically clever.” He could “transform [himself] into exactly the type the beholder wanted to see.” Nietzsche writes that the character type he endorses is “necessarily a great actor” whose goals are “achieved by the same ‘immoral’ means as any other victory: violence, lies, slander, injustice.”¹

Timothy tricks the community in revolt against the “slave” values brought by Grace—values which he never accepted. The community disintegrates and the strong, who have hidden their power until then in the mask of “pleasin’,” reveal themselves.

Here we find the standard critique of liberalism advanced in recent political theory. Liberalism, as the continuation of Socratic-Judeo-Christian values under another name (according to Nietzsche), faces an inherent contradiction which is bound to explode in internal rupture—what Sheldon Wolin calls “Nietzsche’s prophecy of the disintegration of the liberal-democratic state.”² The liberal project does not end oppression; it simply replaces one set of values with another while the masses remain subordinated to an aristocratic elite. This new set of values is particularly pernicious because it advances under the label of universalism, providing a “tolerant” umbrella for all points of view. It is agonism, not suppression of conflict, which holds the potential to affect a decisive switch out of an oppressive problematic, many critics of liberalism contend. This agonism is a performance, its achievement always “to come.”

However, reading *Manderlay* in this way misses what is most interesting about the film: its critique of political theology. *Manderlay* calls into question both the political theory of liberalism and the political theory of many of its critics. In reading *Manderlay*, we must not overlook what is most obvious. The main character is named Grace. Grace is the name of the protagonist in all three films in von Trier’s American-themed trilogy. Two of von Trier’s earlier films, *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Breaking the Waves* (1996), while not featuring main characters named Grace, feature female protagonists of a similar type. In each case, the female protagonist feels as if she is sacrificing herself to help others. She imagines herself as pure and selfless, putting the needs of others in front of her own and making of herself a gift to them. In *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves*, this sacrifice results in the death of the protagonists, a death intended to give others a better life (acknowledged at the end of *Breaking the Waves* by the ringing of supernatural church bells). In *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, the sacrifice apparently misfires. It results in the deaths of some of those Grace is trying to benefit as a direct or indirect result of her intervention. But in these cases, Grace is still aligned with Christian grace. When she is first informed of the

persistent slavery at Manderlay, her slave informant describes Manderlay as “this godforsaken place.” Grace’s arrival at Manderlay is an (attempted) gift to the inhabitants of the plantation, intended to improve their condition, to help them form a new community.

Grace is not the only explicitly theological word that plays a central role in *Manderlay*. In addition to Grace, there is Law. Referred to as “Mam’s Law” (from Mam, the plantation mistress, its supposed author, played by Lauren Bacall) and regarded as “almost sacred,” we first encounter this Law when Mam, moribund along with—likely, because of—the dying way of life she represents, asks to speak privately with Grace and requests one favor from her, “one woman to another” (to which Grace responds that gender offers no privilege). Mam asks Grace to destroy the book of Law kept under Mam’s bed. It contains the rules and customs by which the plantation operates, “well-filled with bizarre and vicious regulations,” we are told by the narrator. Grace flatly refuses, asserting that any decision should be made in public, by the community as a whole: “It’s my view that anything, no matter what, is best served by being brought out into the open.” By bringing it out into the open, Grace can demystify the Law, destroying its authority—through her own authority.

As Grace encounters difficulties guiding the liberated plantation, she considers revealing the book of Law to the community. She is convinced by Wilhelm to wait, accepting his advice that the community might not yet be ready. After the community has gone up in flames, as Grace is departing, she delivers the book of Law to the community as a parting “gift” (her gift: to overturn, to turn over, the Law). The film dramatically reveals that Wilhelm, the elderly former slave who had seemed most sympathetic to Grace and her project, had written the Law: “I wrote Mam’s Law for the good of everyone.”

Wilhelm had tried, long ago, to formalize the best customary practices of the community. Each of the apparently meaningless or simply oppressive regulations had a significance which was, on his view, in the best interest of the community. All slaves had to line up in a particular part of the plantation each day because that was the only part of the plantation that had shade during the hottest part of the day; paper money was prohibited so it would not be gambled away; cutting down trees in the “Old Lady’s Garden” was prohibited because they blocked the wind from covering crops with

dust; and the slaves were divided into categories (e.g., Group 1, “Proudy Nigger”; Group 2, “Talkin’ Nigger”; Group 5, “Clownin’ Nigger,” each receiving different amounts of food and permitted different liberties) because this allowed for the best organization of the plantation based on the psychologies of its members. These categories kept the plantation “in an iron grip,” according to the narrator, who here identifies with Grace. After Wilhelm explains the advantages he perceives of the Law, Grace retorts, “Damn it, Wilhelm, they’re not free!”

Simply by looking on the surface, at the relationship between “Grace” and “Law” in *Manderlay*, we can begin to understand what the underlying political theological project of the film might involve. Before Grace comes to Manderlay, the plantation was ruled according to the Law. Grace overthrows the Law. She says that the Law no longer matters. She thinks each former slave, regardless of his or her “group,” should receive the same amount of food; she thinks it silly that the former slaves line up on the parade ground each day; and she suggests that the “Old Lady’s Garden” be cut down in order to improve the decrepit cabins in which the former slaves live. We cannot help but think of the Christian narrative: Old Testament Law overturned by New Testament Grace.

The results of Grace’s attempt to overthrow the Law are calamitous. A dust storm destroys most of the crops that the community had planted because, in violation of the Law, Grace encouraged the community to chop down the trees in the Old Lady’s Garden. With the abolition of the “groups” into which the slaves had been categorized, those who, by their “psychology,” were prone to take advantage of others did so. Wilma steals food from a dying baby and Timothy steals money from the community as a whole. Both acts result in further violence. One is reminded of the violence that Walter Benjamin suggests lies at the foundation of the law. For Benjamin, law-making violence is hidden by the law, and the law is sustained by law-preserving violence. When the law is suspended, such as in a general strike, law-making violence is exposed. Benjamin seems to relish this violence, aligning himself with an anomic apocalypticism and praying for a messiah to sweep away worldly law with divine violence. In *Manderlay*, it seems as though we witness the moment at which Law is superseded by Grace—and we witness the violence that necessarily ensues.