

S.J. Grenz, *The Social God and Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. ISBN 0-664-22203-X (345 pp.)

Out of the enchantment of the trinitarian renaissance of the past few decades a number of seminal and highly influential works have appeared which challenge the received tradition in a number of ways. One such work is that of Baptist theologian, the late Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*. In 1994 Grenz published his systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994). In that work it was made explicit that the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation for any truly Christian theology and hence the concept of community was adopted by Grenz as his explicit integrative motif; that which holds together in coherent fashion his entire theological enterprise. Since then Grenz has explored the postmodern turn of western civilization and sought to bring Christian theology into dialogue with the philosophical challenges postmodernity raises. This resulted in a number of works, most important of which was his *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, with J.R. Franke (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), in which an entire Christian epistemology was outlined, largely based upon a trinitarian – community oriented theology. While *Theology for the Community of God* contained many unique insights it was largely a work aimed at the undergraduate student, thus, it was more a survey of theology from a community centred perspective. The book currently under review is not a survey of the literature nor is it aimed at the undergraduate student. This book represents volume one of a projected six volume series entitled *The Matrix of Theology*. The express aim of this series, Grenz tells us, is constructive, it ‘involves portraying Christian beliefs as a comprehensive, coherent whole, as well as relating the Christian belief mosaic faithfully and relevantly to contemporary culture’ (ix). Other projected volumes would have included the doctrine of God, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Hence a new, more informed, and positively constructive theology is initiated by Grenz in this volume. No claim to comprehensive coverage of each topic is maintained, rather, ‘each volume seeks to engage with the most far-reaching challenge the postmodern context raises for the specific section of the theological corpus under study’ (x). As many readers will know, Grenz passed away unexpectedly earlier this year (March 11), making this and the second volume on the doctrine of God the only volumes in the series to see publication.

The Social God and the Relational Self is a work of theological anthropology viewed in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Because God is a ‘social God’, a social unity made up of three persons in one being,

the image of God in humans is inherently social as well. This leads Grenz to re-examine views of human sexuality; male and female, views of ecclesiology; the body of Christ, and views of community more generally; the social-cultural identity of beings, individuals, souls, and the self. According to Grenz, the postmodern turn has resulted in a profound realization that we are social creatures on the one hand, and yet on the other we experience isolation and what he refers to as the 'dissipation of the soul'. These are the issues postmodernity raises: What is the soul? What is the self? How do I define myself from another? In theological language these questions have to do with one thing, 'an intellectual experiment that seeks to extend the insights of contemporary trinitarian thought to theological anthropology, with the goal of developing a social or communal understanding of the concept of the *imago dei* as a response to the dissipation of the self in modernity' (3). This is a highly engaging and timely foray into what it means to speak of being human in today's world.

Grenz divides this work into three sections; Context, Texts, and Application. Context deals with trinitarian theology and the self in modern thought. Texts provides a comprehensive survey of what the Christian tradition has meant by the *imago dei*, but then goes further by examining the significance of the incarnation for an understanding of true humanity. The fundamental contention of the work is that the image of God is ultimately an eschatological concept, it is what the human person is to become rather than simply what they currently are. A comprehensive biblical theology is provided from which Grenz develops part three of the book, the Application, a new social conception of the image of God that may be understood from within a thoroughly postmodern context characterized by relationality in community.

There is much in Grenz's work to commend but it is not without criticism. One wishes Grenz had interacted more thoroughly with the theological anthropology of Eastern Orthodoxy, particularly as he applies the concept of *perichoresis* to God and human social constructions. If Grenz wishes to replace a substance ontology of God with a relational ontology, many would want to see a more robust delineation of his theology in light of the criticisms levelled at the similar theologies of Moltmann and Pannenberg. Finally, I for one wanted Grenz to clarify his position on biological evolution, surely a constituent feature of the postmodern mind. However, as one would expect from Grenz, his work spans the disciplines of theology, sociology, psychology, biology, epistemology, and many other sciences besides. Along the way the biblical text is interacted with in detail along with the best in the Christian tradition. This really is a seminal work and would have

provided a profound introduction to successive volumes in the series. One can see where Grenz may have wanted to develop other theological *loci* like Christology or pneumatology, and for that we are in his debt. The task of developing these other *loci* will, however, fall to the many who will take up Grenz's social vision of God and the self in His image.

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