

# The Social God and the Relational Self, by Stanley J. Grenz

reviewed by [Roderick T. Leupp](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

Stanley J. Grenz, a prolific Baptist theologian and ethicist, has launched what may be the most ambitious project in the current revival of trinitarian theology: his six-volume *Matrix of Christian Theology*. Grenz's initial volume might be expected to tread the familiar ground of theology "properly so-called," either dealing with the doctrine of God or theological method. Instead, owing to Grenz's postmodern sensibilities, the opening foray is an exposition of theological anthropology. To follow are volumes dedicated to each of the three triune persons, ecclesiology and eschatology.

To conduct a "trialogue" among canonical scripture, the history of Christian theology and contemporary cultural currents is Grenz's stated goal. One undoubted trend, traced in his 1996 *Primer on Postmodernism*, is "the demise of the centered self." The Enlightenment promotion of a definable and certain human essence has crumbled. What Grenz calls "a social personalism" has taken its place and is the best, and probably only, hope for the future of Christian theology.

Traditionally, the proper subject of theological inquiry is first the divine and then, if at all, the human. But since postmodernity has changed the rules for theological engagement, it is no longer possible to speak of the divine without at the same time speaking of the human, although the reverse isn't necessarily true. In postmodern terms theological anthropology is simultaneously conducted "from below" and "from above."

Since it is now widely agreed that the human is known by the relational company it keeps, the relational is theology's proper starting point. Since the social view of the Trinity stresses precisely this component in the divine life, relationality is the place where theology and anthropology meet. Among the different forms that the relational can take, the social occupies a privileged place.

Indeed, so closely allied are they that without much alteration of meaning Grenz's title could be reversed: *The Relational God and the Social Self*. The relational and the social are virtually synonymous, although the relational may imply the self relating to itself in ways the social cannot. Both the relational and the social are validated in the trinitarian perichoresis, which is the mutual indwelling of the triune persons each within the others.

Grenz is extremely well read and brings to bear many resources from philosophy and psychology in addition to the expected theological and scriptural material. The three parts of this volume are each self-contained, yet at the same time closely related. The first reviews some of the recent advances in trinitarian theology, highlighting in deft summaries the work of people like Hegel, Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, the Orthodox John Zizioulas and the late Roman Catholic Catherine LaCugna.

This is followed by a masterful summary of the theological-philosophical quest for the self, outlining the seminal contributions of Augustine, Boethius, Descartes, Locke and Kant, among others. All of this anthropological digging shows us not only where we have been but how we have come to a dead-end. The turn inward started by Augustine leads more or less directly to the "convertive piety" of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.

The book's second part is a careful and at times painstaking explication of the biblical evidence for the *imago dei*. Grenz correctly concludes that the scant Old Testament evidence culminates in the "glory" Christology of the New Testament, which presents Jesus Christ as the true image of God. This image is meant to be not only relational but communal. The Holy Spirit is the builder of Christian community, participation in which is the life of the ecclesial self--a major theme of the book's third section.

Very few theologians are capable of this high level of synthesis. The literature of theological anthropology is greatly enhanced by Grenz's nuanced and sophisticated argument. There are, though, areas for improvement, or at least rethinking. Grenz's seemingly uncritical acceptance of the postmodern diagnosis means that his work at times veers toward anthropological theology. The tension between "from below" and "from above" sways toward "from below." Given the analytical tools he uses with such skill--philosophy and psychology--this may be unavoidable. But many of these sources--Kant, for example--would have helped Grenz propound a stronger doctrine of sin and evil, not to mention the Bible. While not utopian, this volume is certainly

optimistic, which may represent some departure from the postmodern ethos.