
Theology is a word that some may find hard to define. In one sense, it is one’s understanding of who God is. In another sense, it is a specific discipline in Christian (or any other religion for that matter) scholarship. What makes this two-fold meaning especially intriguing is that latter only finds expression in an explication of the former. The task of a specifically Christian discipline of theology has at its core the intention of explaining who God is. This task is enormously important. A.W. Tozer expresses this significance well when he writes that “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ What one thinks about God, however, does not happen in a vacuum. It is often the result of presuppositions, cultural context, and the influence of theologians that have gone before that affect one’s theology. In *20th Century Theology*, authors Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson seem to grasp this difficulty well, arguing that “theology describes faith within a specific historical and cultural context, and therefore it is unashamedly a contextual discipline” (9). With this in mind, the authors attempt to survey the prominent theologians and theological movements of the twentieth century, not only for the purpose of survey, but also interpretation, in order “to tell a story, the story of theology in a transitional age” (9). Grenz, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Care/Regent College (at the time of publication), and Olson, Associate Professor of Theology at Bethel College, intend to appeal to an audience of both graduate seminary and undergraduate liberal arts students (10).

**Summary**

The authors organize this work around a fundamental theological theme: transcendence

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and immanence. The authors argue that a proper theology ought to balance these two issues because “an overemphasis on transcendence can lead to a theology that is irrelevant to the cultural context in which it seeks to speak, whereas an overemphasis on immanence can produce a theology help captive to a specific culture” (12). Consequently, following a chapter on the roots of this imbalance in the Enlightenment, the authors present a survey of twentieth century theology in nine additional chapters that trace the pendulum swing from immanence to transcendence and back again, finally balancing in chapter ten.

Grenz and Olson discuss the effects of the Enlightenment on theology primarily through an analysis of five Enlightenment principles: reason, nature, autonomy, harmony, and optimistic belief in progress (20-22). They conclude that the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason led to a “new immanence” that led the way into the twentieth century (23).

Chapters two through ten follow a common pattern. For each chapter, the authors begin with the historical context of the movement that they will go on to discuss. This brief introduction to each chapter serves as a continuous narrative throughout the book to lead the reader from the close of the nineteenth century up to the late 1980s. The second feature common to all chapters is the discussion of primary theological figures and movements of the time period. In chapter two, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Albrecht Ritschl are representatives of the nineteenth century emphasis on immanence. In chapter three, Grenz and Olson move to transcendence in Neo-orthodoxy with appraisals of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Chapter four returns to an emphasis on immanence in the liberal traditions with discussions of Paul Tillich and process theology. Chapter five continues the trend of immanence in the radical movement and identifies Dietrich Bonhoeffer and secular theology as the significant theologian and theological movement respectively of the
period. Chapter six then offers appraisals of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, key figures in the “theology of hope” and the transcendence of the future. Chapter seven notes how liberation theologies such as black liberation theology, Latin American liberation theology, and feminist theology led to a renewal of immanence. Chapter eight returns to transcendence with the new Catholic theology of Karl Rahner and Hans Küng, while chapter nine maintains the theme of transcendence in narrative theology. Finally, chapter ten concludes with a relative balance of immanence and transcendence in the evangelical theology of Carl F.H. Henry and Bernard Ramm.

In discussing each of these significant theologians and theological movements, Grenz and Olson give a brief biography (or history in the case of movements), followed by a summary of several of the main points of each one’s theology, and concludes with a critical analysis. The authors are careful to notes strengths in all of the positions, though they are unafraid to offer numerous critiques when necessary.

The final section of the book is a brief conclusion attempts to summarize the story of twentieth century theology by means of a short chronological narrative of how the theologians and theologies discussed in the previous chapters shaped the study of theology and its ebb and flow from immanence to transcendence and back again.

**Critical Evaluation**

The consistency of Grenz and Olson’s approach to each chapter is a significant strength of this work. The reader is prepared in each chapter for the short narrative and the appraisal of various theologians and theologies, which include short biographies, summaries of main points of theology, and positive and negative criticism. This format helps the reader deal with each theologian individually, considering his or her positions and contributions and weighing the
authors’ critiques, but always forces the reader to do so in the context in which these theologians or theological movements found their voice. Thus, while one may be critical of Barth’s understanding of the Word of God or his apparent universalism, the reader should be able to recognize the significant contribution that Barth made in once again making the Bible relevant as a word from God. Writing the work with this chronological, narrative framework in mind also helps the reader trace the contours of the movement. For example, the reader has already been introduced to Barth and his influence, but this become secondarily important when the reader comes across the authors mention of how Moltmann studied with teachers “strongly influenced by Barth” (173), while Pannenberg studied with Barth himself in Basel (187). The addition of these important details in the life of each of these scholars helps the reader understand both the historical and theological context in which they made their decisive entrances into the theological landscape.

Despite these strengths, several weaknesses remain. First, the authors provide little discussion for the historical foundation of theology on the basis of a distinction between God’s transcendence and immanence. They mention Augustine’s influence on theology through the Middle Ages (16), but their brief couple paragraphs here do not adequately defend the value of organizing the work around these two theological poles. This decision is even more curious when one recognizes that few of the theological points that the authors discuss with respect to each theologian deal with the issue of transcendence and immanence directly. Most of the issues relate rather to Christology, the Trinity, the Word of God, or methodology, among others. Why organize an entire survey of twentieth century theology around a theological concept that was apparently not a primary concern for any of the theologians discussed? While transcendence and immanence are certainly applicable, they do not seem to be the most helpful organizing
categories. Moreover, there are at least two occasions where pressing this distinction leads to problems. In one case, with respect to black liberation theology, this commitment to transcendence and immanence forces the authors to miss some key areas for discussion. For example, the authors conclude that the impetus for black liberation theology was characterized by the immanence of God as they sought to understand “the presence of God in an oppressive situation” (209). Again, while it is true that one can explain an emphasis on God’s action on behalf of people an occasion of immanence, nothing in their ensuing discussion shows a conscious concern on God’s immanence. Rather, it seems that this occasion would better lend itself to a discussion of how the social gospel that the authors claim was swept away after World War I (62) was reasserting itself in these liberation theologies. The authors, however, make no such connection, likely on account of the overemphasis on God’s immanence.

This lack of focus is further problematic in their critique of black liberation theology. They argue that one reason black theology was problematic was because it was “ethnocentric…a theology by Blacks and for Blacks” (209). Conversely, they argue that up until this point “theologians, regardless of their theological orientation, perceived their efforts and their discipline in terms of the engagement in the quest for truth on behalf of all humankind” (209). What the authors omit, however, is the glaring issue that all of the theologians and movements they have thus far discussed have been almost entirely representative of Western European or American Caucasian males. Moreover, until the civil rights movement, few in the black (and female) communities had any voice in the theological discussion. As these Western European or American Caucasian males were writing to and for other Western European or American Caucasian males, it is difficult to agree entirely with Grenz and Olson that their theologies were a “quest for truth on behalf of all humankind” (209). Consequently, while black liberation
theology has a number of problems, perhaps one of which is its applicability only to blacks, the
authors’ argument is underwhelming.

One final critique should be mentioned. The authors are unclear anywhere in the book as
to what would constitute a “theologian” and thus warrant his or her conclusion in the book. The
general nature of twentieth century theology as a subject would seem to allow for “popular”
authors as much as it would for “scholars.” Moreover, the authors argue that “theology serves the
church in each generation and in each cultural setting by assisting the people of God in reflecting
on and applying the one faith of the church to the world in which contemporary disciples live
and engage in ministry in Christ’s name. Two critiques arise from these points. First, though the
authors note how theology serves the church, it is not clear in the book how the theological
movements impacted the church, only how they impacted the prevailing scholarly discussion of
the day. Second, if the discussion of theology is in fact, as it should be, related to the effect on
the church, then it is curious that there is no mention of perhaps the two most popular Christian
writers of the twentieth century: G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis. Though not “theologians,”
their work is profoundly theological and has made perhaps more influence on the church than the
majority of the scholars mentioned in the book. Thus, the fact that they are not mentioned in the
text, noted in the endnotes, nor even listed in the bibliography is curious.

Conclusion

Grenz and Olson’s work suffers in some respects from their decision to organize the
discussion around transcendence and immanence. Nevertheless, the content of the work as a
whole is clear, comprehensive, and helpful, and their attempt to organize such a broad topic as
the theology of the twentieth century under one interpretive lens is commendable. Their audience
of graduate seminary and undergraduate liberal arts students will find this book enlightening and
helpful, if not a little overwhelming in terms of amount of content, and it will continue to serve as a helpful reference tool for those seeking a brief introduction to the theology of various scholars in the past century.