Miles, Todd L. *A God of Many Understandings?: The Gospel and a Theology of Religions*. Nashville, Tenn.: B & H, 2010.

Todd Miles’ book *A God of Many Understandings?: The Gospel and a Theology of Religions* represents an evangelical attempt to develop a exclusivistic theology of religions that is both thoroughly grounded in exegesis and centrally focused on a traditional understanding of the gospel. Miles is a theology professor at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, having earned his PhD at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Endorsements of the book come mainly from evangelical theologians, including Tom Schreiner and Bruce Ware.

For Miles, a primary impetus for writing this book is his concern that increasing numbers of evangelicals are taking a pneumatological approach to a theology of religions, leading to broader acceptance of inclusivism. He feels like such theologies compromise the gospel, forsake sound Scripture hermeneutics, and minimize the centrality of Christ in salvation. Though he spends time reviewing and critiquing the various forms of inclusivism and universalism, his primary goal is “to present a positive model for how a Christian theology of religions should be developed” (4). However, Miles also has a narrower objective. He wishes to refute what he sees to be a tendency among some inclusivists to dichotomize the work of the Spirit and the Son.

Chapters 1–6 review some of the critical issues that divide the various positions, particularly focusing on non-exclusivist theologies. Miles suggests that non-exclusivists are too driven by emotion, tending to emphasize a few key verses, and isolating God’s love above his other attributes (114). In addition, he finds evangelical inclusivists highly influenced by Catholic writers. Accordingly, significant attention is given to tracing some of the historical arguments that found such thinking. For example, Vatican II marked a definite shift to the result that non-Christians were said to be capable of salvation even if they are ignorant of Christ and the Church. This move accords with popular notions of pluralism. This philosophy rejects the exclusivity of Christ for salvation by either reducing all the religions to some common set of ideas or by “obfuscation,” the idea that “ . . . privileg[ing] one religion over another [is] ultimately in coherent and unsustainable” (141–48).

Miles returns repeatedly to a few ideas. First, inclusivism rests on the separation of ontology from epistemology; in particular, they affirm that Christ is necessary for salvation, but it is not essential that people know or profess his name. An honest conscience expressed by good works is sufficient. Second, at a most basic level, the disparate views are not merely about Christology. They emerge from divergent conceptions of God, including the implications of monotheism and the will of God. Finally, pneumatologically based theologies of religion often argue as follows: Since the Holy Spirit is everywhere, then one should expect his saving power to manifest in unpredictable ways, most notably through non-Christian religions.

In the latter half of the book (chapters 7–9), Miles directly addresses the relationship between the Spirit and Christ. From this, he makes some conclusions about a biblical theology of religions and its import for missions. He defends a Christocentric “starting point” for biblical theology, at the same time highlighting the fact that his theological method differs from that of inclusivists. Citing Jesus’ own words in Luke 24 and elsewhere, Miles argues that the entire Hebrew canon points to Christ (262). Not only this, but Miles, opposing Amos Yong, grounds Scriptural authority on ontology (“what it is”) rather than function (“what is does”) (269). He therefore adds that pneumatological approaches to a theology of religions unwittingly create tension between the Spirit’s illumination and his inspiration of Scripture (269–71). On these bases, Miles’ exegesis seeks to minimize subjectivity and harmonize the entirety of Scripture. In the end, he appeals extensively to many texts in order to show that the Holy Spirit, in both the Old and New Testaments, aims to glorify Christ in all he does. It is fallacious to speculate any sort of independence between Christ and the Spirit such that one could imagine the Spirit saving people apart from Christ’s being glorified in their hearts. This being the case, Miles warns against any ministries that do not aim to make Christ’s name explicitly known. Churches or missionaries that remain silent about Christ, settling only for social justice, can hardly be called “Christian.”

Mile’s presentation is thorough, fairly represents his opponents, and demonstrates sound exegetical method. Some might argue that he spends too much time reviewing the ideas of other people; if so, it is for the purpose of clarity, since he rightly suggests that these theological differences tend to surround how one interprets the Bible and the assumptions one brings to a text. The author makes clear from where in the Bible he gets his ideas. As a result, readers find a remarkable contrast between Miles’ work and the speculative assertions and assumptions of others, like Clark Pinnock and Yong, whom he often cites.

The book does a fine job exposing the problematic logic that plagues inclusivistic thinking. For instance, the notion that the Spirit’s universal influence bestows salvific value on world religions has a peculiar implication, that of “grant[ing] Muhammad the status of genuine prophet and the Qur’an as containing genuine prophecy” (202). Also, he challenges annihilationism, posing the question whether “the finite time of punishment . . . actually atone for the unbeliever’s sin and satisfy God’s holy justice? If it does . . . then how is it just that the unbeliever then be annihilated?” (133). Further, in rebutting Samartha, he shows the problem of subordinating exegetical objectivity to ethics when trying to discern the Spirit’s presence; after all, if the Spirit is so free that theological criteria for recognizing him is impossible, then it would seem that all assertions about the Spirit’s activity in one’s life is pure subjectivity (160). Also, Miles flattens the universalists’ argument from obfuscation (that God is “ineffable and unknowable”) when he says, “Of course, such as claim is ultimately self-refuting because if God is truly unknowable and truth claims about Him cannot be made, we cannot know He is unknowable” (171–72). Finally, Miles shows the historical precedent claimed by inclusivists is more imagined than real. Thus, inclusivist appeals to the *filioque* are irrelevant to their theology since that debate was not about the Spirit’s relationship to the Son, but more accurately, the relationship between the Father and the Son.

The book helpfully gives application for interreligious dialogue and partnerships, not simply being content to reaffirm world evangelism (which of course is certainly reiterated in the book). Miles does not pit social justice against evangelism. Instead, he challenges his reader to consider the manner and motive of one’s ministry. Even if a person is not likely to deny Christ, a subtle temptation is to do good deeds (like Christ) without regard for his reputation, his honor in the world. Thus, while people should do socially oriented ministries and fund missionaries, the attempt should be made to make sure the end goal of these efforts is the overt exaltation of Christ.

Given the author’s particular ambition to respond to evangelical inclusivism, there is very little to hold against this book. In other words, the book squarely engages the major ideas and authors on the topic but from an evangelical perspective. Perhaps, what could be said might be true of many other books strong in analysis. A number of times, this reader saw ways the writer could have further strengthened his position. Miles quotes his opponents at their weakest points, but could have improved upon it by elaborating on their (unfortunate) consequences. For instance, on p. 202, when noting how Dupuis claims sacred texts from other religions are divinely inspired, it is helpful to see the implications of such a claim for God’s nature; it would suggest that God purposely contradicts himself (since the various texts themselves contradict). Similarly, Miles quotes Khodr’s suggestion that a religious martyr (whether Buddhist, Brahmin, or Muslim) “when persecuted for what he believes to be right, dies in communion with Christ” (206). Miles could have made more of this by asking whether Hitler or David Koresh—each who died for their belief—are thus “in communion with Christ.” Finally, because Miles observes the influence of Catholic thought on evangelical inclusivism, besides the summary given, Miles could have offered a bit more of a critique of Catholic views. This would serve to undermine the credibility of those sources shaping recent brands of inclusivism. An easy criticism would simply be that Catholic thought has been so full of contradictions that it can hardly be considered a reliable or consistent source. Miles explains that Pius XII “taught that participation in the Holy Spirit is impossible apart from the participation through baptism in the church, the body of Christ” (188); yet, later at Vatican II, one church document defended the idea that “The Holy Spirit is at work in *all* who are not Christians, including, then, those who have no knowledge of Christ of the teaching of the church . . . ” (190; Miles’ summary of document).

Moreover, Miles needs to examine a foundational problem that haunts inclusivistic and universalistic writings, namely, terminology. For example, in various places, such writers speak of other religious adherents having “authentic experience(s) of God” (202). Of course, this way of speaking begs the question. Miles does not directly challenge this use of vague language, which amount to bare assertions. While the author correctly identifies hermeneutics as the central issue in the theological divide, very close is the employment of ambiguous concepts, which then can be used to make any number of precarious implications. Another example is the repeated notion of the Spirit’s presence and his bearing on salvation through other religions. Regarding the Spirit, Khodr argues that “traces of His presence” exist in non-Christian religions; hence salvation can be found outside of Christianity (203–4). First of all, inclusivist writers never define what they mean by the Spirit’s “presence,” since one could say that the Father too is omnipresent, but no one makes the same claim (of non-Christian) salvation on the grounds that God the Father has always in all places. For that matter, what would the Spirit’s “saving” presence mean? Second, by “Christianity,” does he refer to Christ, the Church, a local church, or some part of Christian tradition? In short, Miles should further press home the necessity and requirement for others to define these most critical terms. Otherwise, all sides will continue to talk past each another.

The author poses a number of formidable challenges against inclusivism, placing the burden on the inclusivists to define their concepts, defend their exegesis, and find historical warrant for their proposals. Miles’ book will no doubt spur new questions, exposing more contradictions and generating more applications. This reader for one wonders how inclusivists would respond to a simple observation about their theology; namely, that it seems theoretically possible to have a world full of “anonymous” Christians (unaware of their being “Christians) or saved non-Christians without there being a single explicitly, professing Christian. If such a possibility exists, according to their line of thinking, how could it be that the Spirit in Christ would then ever honor God? It would seem that inclusivists think God’s honor is of little regard to him or to Christianity. If it means so little, would it be all the same if heaven has no overt trace of God? Would they say that God’s honor is an essential aspect of salvation or eternal life? I expect inclusivists would balk at these hypotheticals, but I cannot see how their theology makes these scenarios impossible.

In conclusion, Miles equips the reader to heed his later counsel, “We do not need to have all the answers. A simple ‘I do not know’ response is not a rejection of Christ, nor is it a denial that an answer to a specific question exists” (342). By his comprehensive use of the Scripture, explicit elaboration of particular texts, and clear logic, Miles avoids the constant speculation evident in other theologies of religion. In this way, *A God of Many Understandings* is a truly humble treatment of a difficult and sensitive topic. It is neither humble nor scholarly to admit ignorance only to continue in formulation whole systems of speculation. In contrast, this book stands as an example how rigorous exegesis and an unwavering commitment to (salvific) exclusivism need not be ecclesiocentric (i.e. tribal), ethnocentric, or presumptuous. Counter intuitive for some, genuine dialogue *requires* clearly demarcating what can be known from what is mere speculation. Accordingly, Miles simultaneously contributes to the goals of interreligious dialogue and world evangelization.