

Discuss the influence of a significant philosopher, theologian, or writer on the history and development of religious thought.

Few modern theologians have had more influence on contemporary American evangelical thought than Greg Boyd. While he might not hold the legendary status of John Calvin or Martin Luther, his works have influenced American evangelicalism in significant ways. Through his scholarship and popular outreach, particularly with regard to his work on open theism, Boyd has built a bridge for evangelicals who wish to maintain a belief in the traditional tenants of their faith while simultaneously questioning the ardent position on scriptural inerrancy that has become the shibboleth of evangelical culture.

In 1994, a handful of evangelical scholars published *The Openness of God*, a work questioning classical presuppositions about divine sovereignty and foreknowledge and pushing open theism forward as a hot topic of debate within evangelical circles.¹ At issue in this debate are biblical passages testifying that God changes his mind, experiences regret and surprise, and hopes for a future that does not come to pass. The debate became so emotionally charged that the Evangelical Theological Society—despite having just two doctrinal qualifications for membership, neither of which mention divine sovereignty or foreknowledge²—brought to a vote

¹ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Some of the information and research found in this paper were borrowed from Richard Garrett Ham, Jr., “A Scriptural and Philosophical Evaluation of the Open Model of God as an Ontological Necessity and Its Compatibility with Evangelical Theology” (undergraduate honors thesis, Ouachita Baptist University, 2007), accessed December 4, 2018, https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=honors_theses.

² “About the ETS,” The Evangelical Theological Society, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://www.etsjets.org/about>. “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

a motion to remove Clark Pinnock and John Sanders from its membership rolls.³

Before the vote, Boyd wrote an article in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* defending open theism as a viable theological system consistent with evangelical theological presuppositions.⁴ Boyd is at the forefront of the debate among evangelicals interested in the subject due to his persistent involvement in controversies attracting widespread attention,⁵ the plethora of books and articles he has published⁶ (many with a popular bent⁷), his position as a megachurch pastor,⁸ and his appearances in popular secular media outlets, such as the *New York Times*⁹ and CNN.¹⁰ Boyd's attempts to bring his message beyond the academic community to

³ David Neff, "Dispatch from Atlanta: What Fireworks?" *Christianity Today*, November 1, 2003, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/novemberweb-only/11-17-41.0.html>. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed., *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002).

⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, "Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 223-44.

⁵ For example, popular evangelical writer John Piper pushed for Boyd's termination as a faculty member at Bethel College for Boyd's adherence to open theism. See John Piper, "We Took a Good Stand and Made a Bad Mistake: Reflections on the Baptist General Conference Annual Meeting, St. Paul," *Desiring God*, July 5, 2000, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-took-a-good-stand-and-made-a-bad-mistake>.

⁶ See, for example, *God at War: The Biblical and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001); "The Open-Theism View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001); *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

⁷ See, for example, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); *Is God to Blame: Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

⁸ Boyd is the senior pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. See "Staff Members," Woodland Hills, accessed December 7, 2018, https://whchurch.org/staff_member/.

⁹ See Laurie Goodstein, "Disowning Conservative Politics, Evangelical Pastor Rattles Flock," *New York Times*, July 30, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/30/us/30pastor.html?ex=1154491200&en=34ccb5db8fcf8eca&ei=5087%0A>.

¹⁰ See "God's Christian Warriors: Greg Boyd," Cable News Network, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/international/2012/08/23/amanpour-christian-warriors-b.cnn>.

everyday believers has compounded his influence on evangelical thought.¹¹

Explaining scriptural teaching in a consistent, coherent form is vital to a faith tradition that revolves around the Bible as the ultimate guide for faith and practice.¹² For this reason, Boyd's claim to take scriptural teachings about the divine nature seriously helped secure open theism's place within evangelical thought. In his writings, Boyd, building on the works of other scholars, such as Terence Fretheim,¹³ attempts to explain these passages in light of related philosophical questions, such as whether God foreknows free acts before they take place and why God would create evil individuals, like Adolf Hitler, despite foreknowing the future atrocities they would commit.¹⁴

The traditional understanding of God's foreknowledge dictates that every event that has ever taken place or will ever take place in creation has existed as a settled fact from all eternity. God, therefore, possesses knowledge of future events as certain as his knowledge of past events. Hence, any knowledge that God might have of possibility exists as "might have been, never as what might be."¹⁵

Boyd, however, questions these teachings, influencing the way a generation of evangelicals thinks about God. He argues that, while God is omniscient, the future consists of

¹¹ See generally Boyd's blog, Reknew, <https://www.reknew.org>, and his books meant for a popular audience. See supra, note 7.

¹² Clark Pinnock, who helped spark the open theist movement, played to evangelical fears of Christian "liberalism" when, in his defense of open theism at the Evangelical Theological Society, he stated, "You have just made a very liberal move... You have constructed your belief from philosophy first and only second checked it with Scripture." "Editorial: God vs. God," *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/february7/30.34.html>.

¹³ See, for example, Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁴ See Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.

¹⁵ Boyd, "The Open-Theism View," 13.

both certainties and possibilities and, consequently, some aspects of the future remain unsettled—or open—even to God.¹⁶ God’s omniscience, therefore, supplies God with knowledge of both settled events as settled and unsettled events as mere possibilities, such that God does not know all aspects of the future with certainty before they come to pass.¹⁷ The theory has proven both intriguing and controversial—as the debates surrounding the subject at the Evangelical Theological Society show.

Boyd’s influence, however, extends beyond open theism. His *Myth of a Christian Nation*¹⁸ and sermons leading up to its publication thrust him into the national spotlight as an important voice regarding the role of evangelicals in the American political landscape.¹⁹ He has also been a source of renewed interest in the *Christus Victor* atonement theory among evangelicals.²⁰ Recently, he has waded into the issue of biblical violence and the trouble it creates for evangelicals and their often inflexible view of scriptural inerrancy. In his *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Boyd argues that believers should interpret passages of divine-ordered

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷ Despite Boyd's effort to maintain his belief in divine omniscience and divine omnipotence—insisting, for example, that God alone determines what aspects of the future to leave open and what aspects to settle—the reaction to Boyd and other proponents of open theism has been intense. (Often a theologian’s influence is compounded by the reaction he or she evokes. After all, the Council of Nicaea would likely not have occurred but for Arius nor Trent but for Martin Luther.) Paul R. House, for example, has argued that “American Christianity is currently engaged in a crucial debate over the doctrine of God” and that “nothing less than the biblical, orthodox doctrines of God and of salvation are at stake.” Paul R. House, “Introduction,” in *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, and Evangelicalism*, ed. Paul R. House and G. A. Thornbury (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 15.

¹⁸ Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹⁹ *Supra*, notes 9 and 10.

²⁰ See Gregory A. Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23-49. See also *God at War* and *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, *supra*, note 6.

violence in light of the act of divine sacrifice on the cross, thereby creating some flexibility in biblical interpretation that is atypical within evangelicalism.²¹

Unlike other great theologians throughout history, such as Augustine of Hippo or Karl Barth, it is too early to determine the lasting power of Boyd's influence on the development of religious thought. He is a contemporary and continues to produce works. Yet, his influence upon evangelicalism is significant, and the influence of evangelicalism on American culture, for better or worse, remains substantial. Through his writings, Boyd has shown another way to those believers who take the tenants of their evangelical faith seriously—the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus, the divine inspiration of Scripture, the importance of a personal relationship with God²²—but wish to use the Bible as a guide for faith and not a tool for politically-charged ideological fights or a controversial flashpoint in the debate between religion and science.

Boyd has provided a scholarly basis for interpreting Scripture more freely, for engaging with broader society with mercy and humility, and for emphasizing Christ as the interpretive lens through which to interpret the Bible. His teachings about God and Scripture emphasize a dynamic, relational model between God and the world at a time when evangelicals are struggling with their identity within the wider Christianity community and within American society as a whole. As a result, his influence will likely remain imprinted in evangelical circles as the movement continues to evolve.

²¹ See generally Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, supra, note 6. In contrast, consider the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which takes a more ardent view of biblical interpretation and inerrancy. Article XII, for example, even affirms ancient presuppositions about the natural world found in Scripture, denying that “scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.” See “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” 1978, quoted in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 49.

²² See generally Packer, supra, note 21.

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