

# World Christianity & American religion

selected by [Philip Jenkins](#) and [Grant Wacker](#)

This review appears in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue.

## In Review



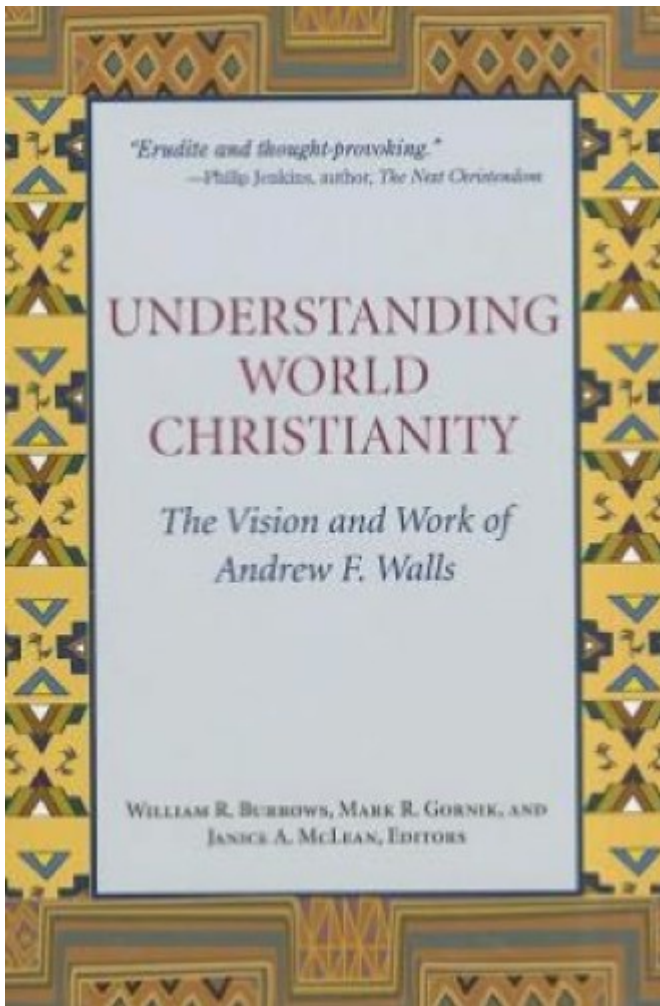
## **HOMIES + HERMANOS**

**GOD AND GANGS IN  
CENTRAL AMERICA**

ROBERT BRENNEMAN

### **Homies and Hermanos**

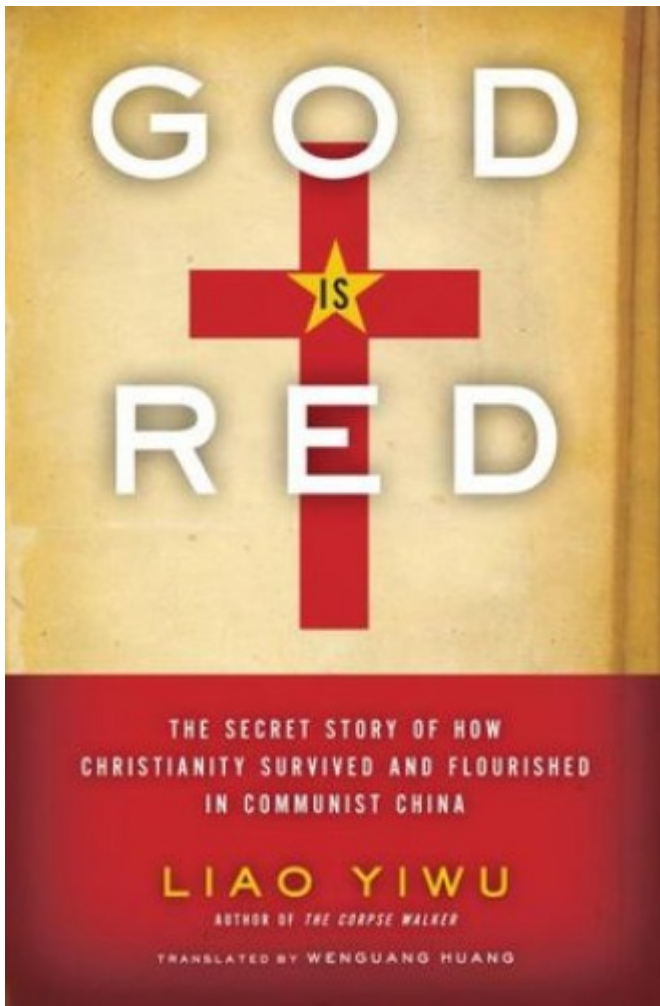
by Robert Brenneman  
Oxford University Press



## **Understanding World Christianity**

The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls

edited by William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik and Janice A. McLean  
Orbis



## **God Is Red**

by Liao Yiwu  
HarperOne



Summoned  
*from the* Margin  
HOMECOMING OF AN AFRICAN

Lamin Sanneh  
*Foreword by* KELEFA SANNEH

**Summoned from the Margin**

By Lamin Sanneh  
Eerdmans

RELIGION

*in* CHINA

SURVIVAL & REVIVAL  
UNDER COMMUNIST RULE

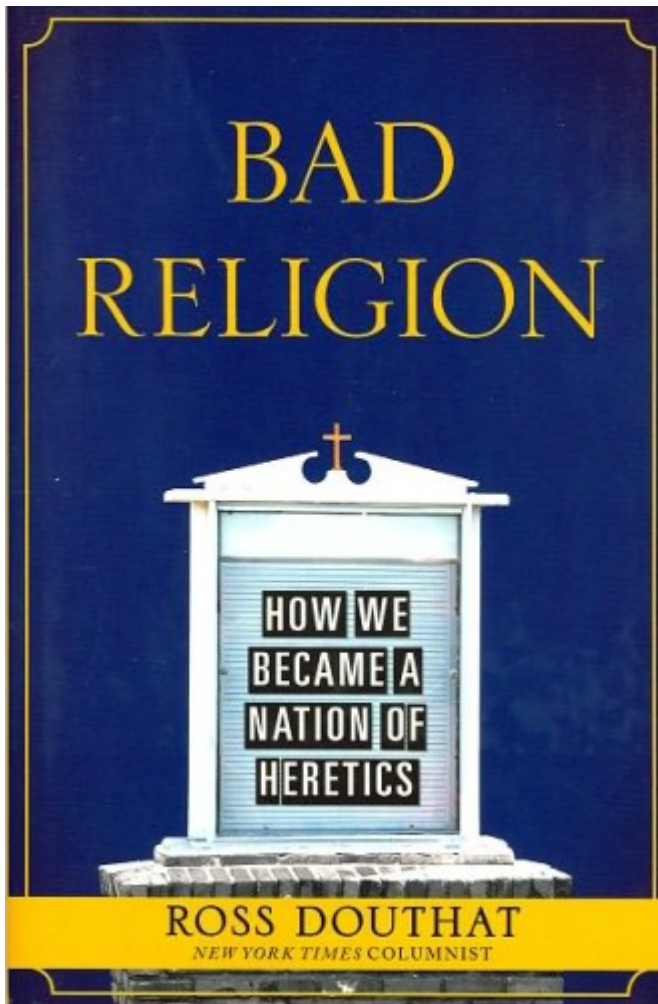


FENGGANG YANG

## **Religion in China**

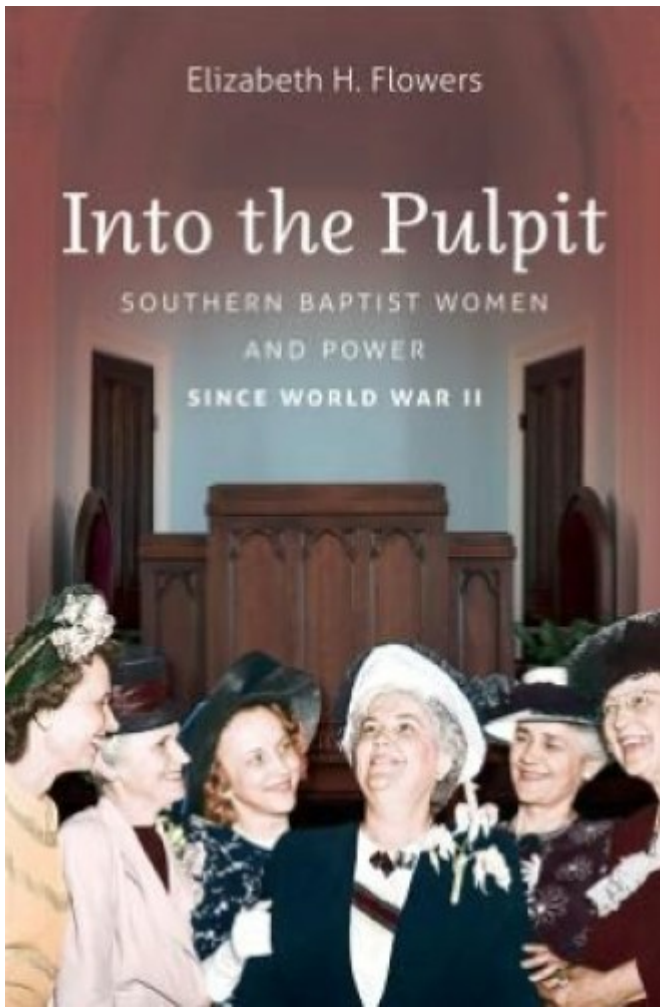
by Fenggang Yang

Oxford University Press



## **Bad Religion**

By Ross Douthat  
Free Press



## **Into the Pulpit**

by Elizabeth H. Flowers

University of North Carolina Press





# GOD AND THE ATLANTIC

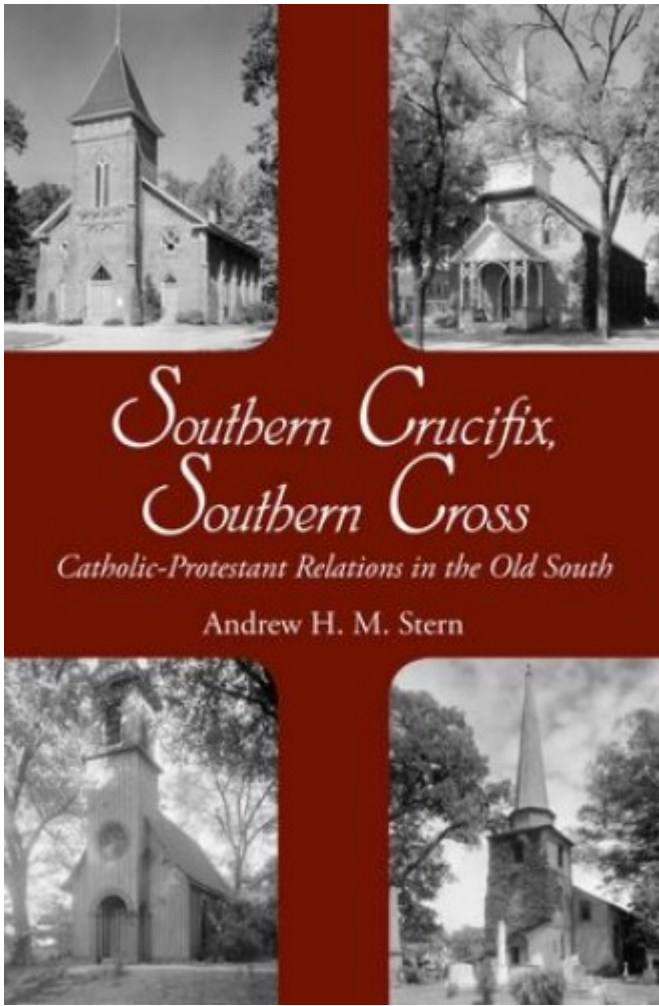
*America, Europe, and the Religious Divide*

THOMAS ALBERT HOWARD

## **God and the Atlantic**

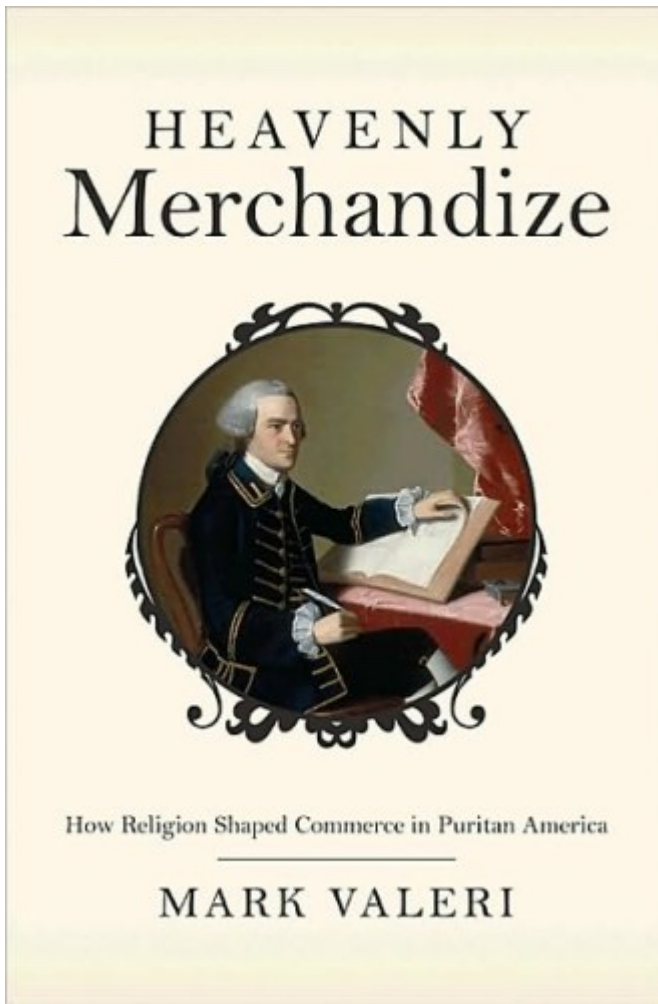
by Thomas Albert Howard  
Oxford University Press





## **Southern Crucifix/Southern Cross**

by Andrew Henry Stern  
University of Alabama Press,



## **Heavenly Merchandize**

by Mark Valeri

Princeton University Press

*Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*, by Robert Brenneman. A courageous scholar, Brenneman has undertaken extensive interviews with former members of some of Central America's most lethal street gangs who have converted to evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. These gangs forbid members from leaving *la vida loca* unless they have experienced a genuine and undeniable conversion, so these new Christians literally have a life-and-death interest in proving their sincerity, which adds an unusual element to the story. This well-written book reveals much about the appeal of contemporary evangelical churches. It also provides a terrifying picture of an impoverished and exceptionally violent setting.

*Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*, edited by William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik and Janice A. McLean. Given Andrew Walls's stellar reputation as a scholar of global Christianity, it's difficult to imagine a collection of essays in his honor that could be worthy of his achievement. I'm happy to say, though, that this book fully serves its purpose, including as it does splendid essays by some 20 top-notch writers. They range widely over Walls's lifelong passions, including Africa's place in Christian history and the transformation of scholarship to reflect the rise of post-Western Christianity.

*God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, by Liao Yiwu. As a dissident critic of the Chinese regime, journalist Liao was seldom surprised to find that the official picture of China's past and present was selective and tendentious. Even so, he was astonished to discover that Christianity not only still exists in that nation but is vibrant, expanding and deeply rooted among the masses. *God Is Red* offers a deeply impressive series of vignettes of the Christian experience, including unforgettable stories of individuals' courage in the face of excruciating suffering. The book is at once heartbreaking and profoundly stirring.

*Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*, by Lamin Sanneh. Sanneh is one of the finest contemporary scholars of Christianity worldwide, and this autobiographical account is richly informative about the making of his worldview. He writes of his long and often arduous journey, both literal and spiritual, from a poor Muslim village in Gambia to the West's elite academic institutions. Particularly fascinating are the story of his Christian conversion and his thoughts about Islamic-Christian dialogue.

*Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, by Fenggang Yang. Even according to estimates on the low end, Chinese Christianity is vast, with at least 75 million adherents, despite ruthless and repeated official attempts to destroy religious faith of all kinds. Using market theory, which looks at factors of supply and demand, Yang shows that Chinese people have a powerful thirst for spirituality that Chinese authorities can only barely fulfill with various cultural events such as artificially cultivated folk rituals and officially sponsored Buddhist and Daoist revivals. People keep coming back to various forms of Christianity, chiefly because of the faith's clear and explicit moral guidelines. Yang's arguments about the factors driving religious change in China demand our attention.

*Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, by Ross Douthat. In one of the most heralded—and controversial—studies of American religion published in the last decade, *New York Times* columnist Douthat argues that the mainstream Christian tradition in the United States has descended from a high position of cultural and prophetic authority in the 1950s to a swamp of heretical faiths in the 2000s, as figures like Billy Graham, Martin Luther King Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr and Fulton J. Sheen have yielded to figures like Glenn Beck, Dan Brown, Joel Osteen and Oprah Winfrey. The book seamlessly weaves history, sociology, theology and cultural criticism. The message is forcefully and brilliantly delivered.

*Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II*, by Elizabeth H. Flowers. In this elegantly crafted work, Flowers explores the role of women in the post-World War II history of the Southern Baptist Convention. Though women constitute the majority in the largest American denomination (of a total membership of some 16 million), they have received little attention from scholars. With remarkable empathy, Flowers explores both moderate and conservative women's stories through their own self-understandings. She supplements this approach with analysis of multiple variables, including change over time, class and status differences, and theological gradations between and within factions. The book places a topic of acute contemporary concern in long historical perspective.

*God and the Atlantic: America, Europe, and the Religious Divide*, by Thomas Albert Howard. Sometimes fine jewels come in small packages. In this slim, prize-winning work, Howard addresses a large, complex and significant topic with remarkable economy of words. Tracing many Europeans' long-standing anti-Americanism to their even longer-standing dismay about American religion, Howard discerns two sources of that alarm: confessional traditionalists who have decried American religion's apparent chaos, crassness and lack of historical consciousness, and secular progressives who have criticized it for its apparent resistance to science and its credulity about the supernatural. Howard shows that at the same time, some exceptionally thoughtful and perceptive figures, such as the historian Philip Schaff and the philosopher Jacques Maritain, have applauded the distinctive vitality and freedom they discerned in the American religious landscape.

*Southern Crucifix, Southern Cross: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South*, by Andrew H. M. Stern. The important story of the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in the Old South remains curiously understudied. Drawing on impressive research in musty archives, Stern challenges the entrenched assumption that the

two groups were always at each other's throats. He traces their interaction in realms as diverse as education, worship, slavery, civic pride and health care, showing that the two groups commonly treated each other not only with respect but also with genuine admiration. Winner of the Anne B. and James B. McMillan Prize for writing on southern history and culture, the book sparkles with gems of insight and flashes of wit, and Stern has an eagle eye for the telling quotation.

*Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America*, by Mark Valeri. Drawing on diaries, correspondence, sermon notes and business registers, Valeri tracks the evolution of Puritan views about the relation between Christian ethics and business practices from the 1630s to the 1730s. He uses the theological and economic trajectories of six wealthy Boston merchants to show how early Calvinist proscriptions against sharp-dealing practices, such as usury and the exploitation of scarcity, as well as the lucrative enticements of the slave trade, gradually won explicit theological sanction. Winner of the coveted Philip Schaff Prize of the American Society of Church History, Valeri offers a nearly picture-perfect example of how to weave colorful narrative biography with astute thematic analysis.