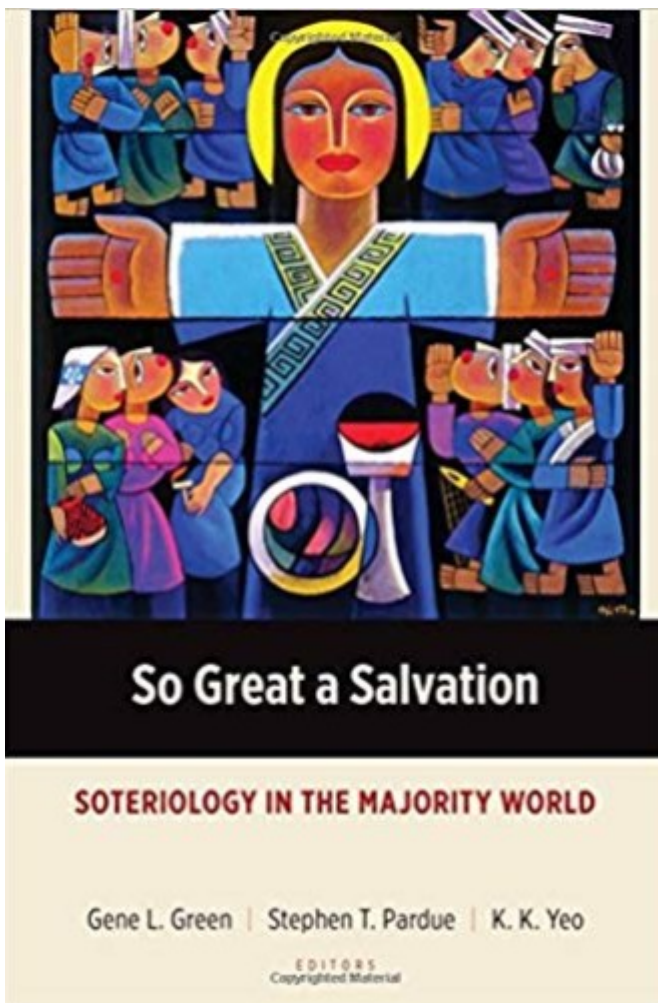


Take & read: New books in global Christianity

Faith's core and its manifestations across cultures

selected by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

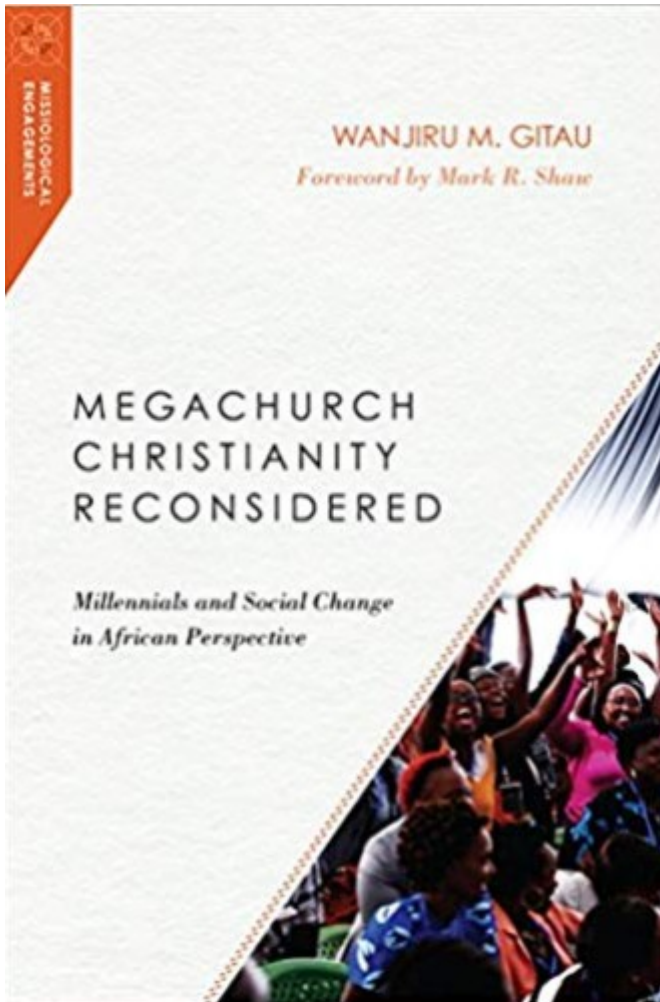
In Review



So Great a Salvation

Soteriology in the Majority World

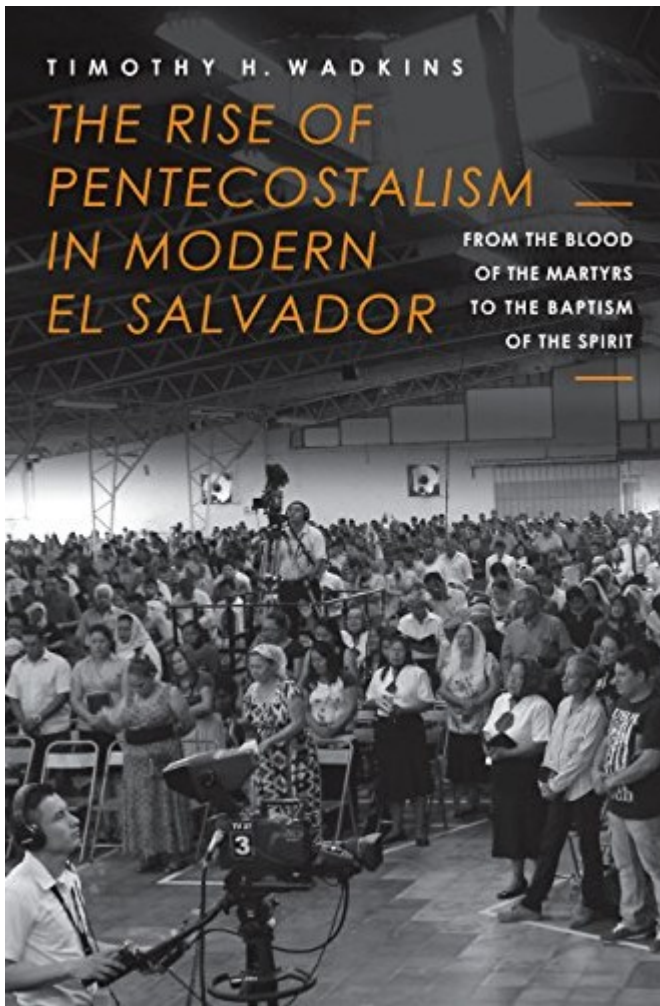
edited by Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo
Eerdmans



Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered

Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective

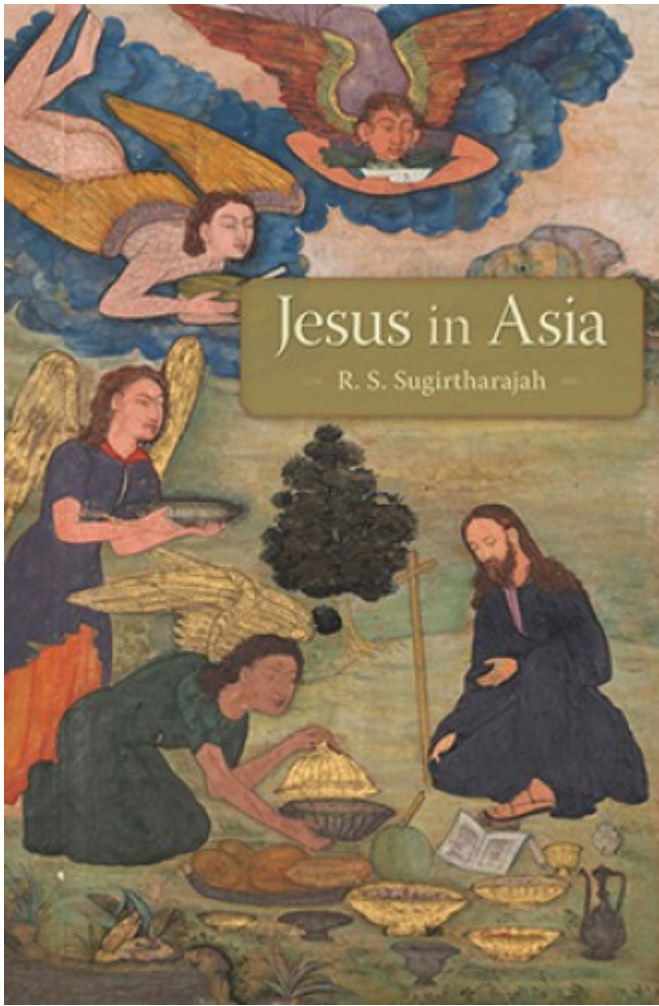
by Wanjiru M. Gitau
IVP Academic



The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador

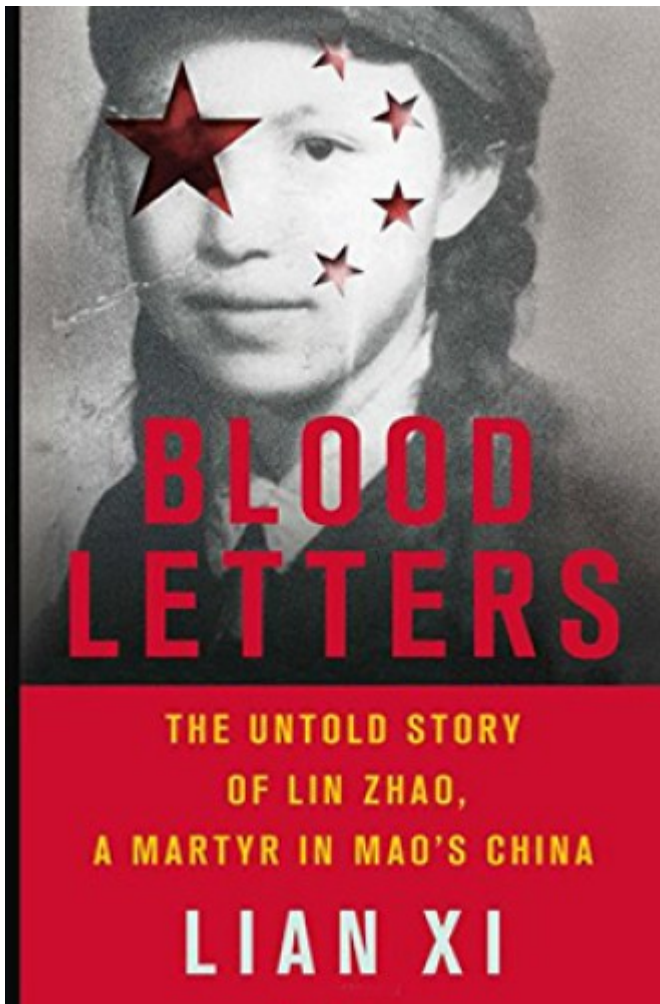
From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit

by Timothy H. Wadkins
Baylor University Press



Jesus in Asia

By R. S. Sugirtharajah
Harvard University Press



Blood Letters

The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China

By Lian Xi

Basic Books

Several publishers now offer series of volumes on global Christian thought, and some are really rewarding. Particularly impressive is the Majority World Theology series from Eerdmans, which to date has presented collections of solid and intriguing essays by Global South writers on such enduring themes as Christology, the doctrine of God, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. (Appropriately, an eschatology title is expected at some future date.) The doctrine of salvation forms the subject of *So Great a Salvation: Soteriology in the Majority World*, edited by Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo. The nine contributors represent voices from various regions of the non-Western Christian world—Africa, Asia, Latin America, and

even North America, as Ray Aldred is a member of Canada's First Nations Cree people.

The individual essays in this volume are of uniformly high quality. But the book's most interesting feature is how—across the many subjects addressed and various approaches applied—the essays are so very different from what readers expect of a traditional Western collection. Western scholars might well discuss reconciliation, but rarely with the urgency and immediate relevance with which it is addressed by Sung Wook Chung in the context of the bitterly divided Korean peninsula. Likewise, many Latin American theologians are skeptical of any claims to salvation that fail to include an element of liberation in the sociopolitical realm. In Yeo's words, "The doctrine of salvation in the Majority World is not a theological construct or abstract idea, but a matter of life and death."

Although I am focusing here on one specific volume in the Majority World Theology series, I could equally have selected any of the others, as each has its particular virtues and insights. Together, they give an excellent (and encouraging) sense of where the academic study of global Christianity is going.

The Global South is an extremely broad category, making it nearly impossible to generalize accurately. Even so, there are some specific case studies that carry implications far beyond their immediate place and time. Around the world, some of the most spectacular growth has focused on megachurches, which commonly follow American models while wholly adapting to local conditions. Wanjiru M. Gitau has thus done a great service with her ambitious study in *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective* (IVP Academic, Missiological Engagements series).

Gitau offers a detailed observation of Kenya's booming Nairobi Chapel and its offspring, Mavuno Church, which have a strong contingent of college graduates and aspirational middle-class believers. As the title indicates, Gitau is especially concerned with the millennial generation, who find in the church maps of reality with which they can navigate their way through times of furious change and upheaval. The author's breadth of discussion is admirable, venturing as she does into matters of leadership and adherence, demography and social outreach, theology and church polity. The book is original and well-written, and her findings and observations cry out to be tested and replicated in other settings. This is a provocative example for rising scholars and researchers. For the general reader, it is also a crisp read. You

will likely read it in a sitting, and then reread it.

Timothy H. Wadkins studies a broader canvas in *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador: From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit* (Baylor University Press, Studies in World Christianity series). Not long ago, studies of evangelical growth in this region were bedeviled by debates about interventions by the United States. Lost in those debates was the role of local believers themselves, who were reduced almost to the role of puppets. In more recent years, those regional wars and conflicts have subsided and scholars have studied the new churches more closely. Today, we see a fresh emphasis on how local Christians have assimilated ideas and institutions that were once brought to them from *El Norte*.

Wadkins's book is the fruit of long study and research, and it is wide-ranging in its treatment. Like Gitau's work in Kenya, Wadkins's study shows how Pentecostal successes in El Salvador can only be understood as a response to headlong social and cultural changes—modernization, urbanization, free market economic policies, and the resulting displacement and disorientation. His best material involves his interviews of local Pentecostal leaders, like Mario Vega, pastor of the teeming megachurch known as the Misión Cristiana Elim Internacional. It is fascinating to see how far Pentecostals like Vega have traveled toward social justice ideas once associated with the Catholic tradition.

That Catholic dimension recurs repeatedly: after all, Catholics originally christened the land as El Salvador—*the Savior*—so Pentecostals represent “the eruption of the Spirit in the land of the Savior.” Wadkins is strong on the history of the Catholic charismatic movement, which offers many parallels to the Pentecostal upsurge. Wadkins's work, like Gitau's, raises many questions that will guide the work of emerging researchers.

As Christian numbers swell in the Global South, theologians and biblical scholars are striving to reconceive long-held assumptions and to distinguish between the faith's authentic core and its local cultural manifestations. For many years, one of the stars of postcolonial biblical criticism has been the British-based scholar R. S. Sugirtharajah. Now an emeritus professor, he has distilled his wide-ranging research and thinking into an impressive volume on the theme of *Jesus in Asia* (Harvard University Press).

Sugirtharajah's focus on four key regions of Asia—China, India, Korea, and Japan—gives him abundant material. While he touches on some missionary attempts to place Jesus in an Asian context, his main focus is the thought of Asian scholars and theologians, particularly over the past two centuries. Among his subjects are Shusaku Endo, who is very well known, and many others who are far less so. Interestingly, not all of his subjects accepted Christianity, but they were all sufficiently fascinated by the faith of the triumphant European empires that they were anxious to comprehend its central figure. At the same time, Christian thinkers faced the dilemma of trying to contextualize Jesus in a local milieu, of making Jesus speak in a local voice without framing him according to the thought worlds of other faiths. Various writers produced “an Upanishadic mystic,” “a minjung Messiah,” and “Jesus in a kimono.” Arguably, the famous quest for the historical Jesus is about to enter a whole new phase.

Among many treasures, Sugirtharajah describes the biblical commentaries of Sri Lanka's Ponnambalam Ramanathan, who like many other Indian thinkers stressed Jesus' spiritual role as Cosmic Christ rather than as the rabbi of history. Such an approach opened the way to an avid interest in Gnostic and heterodox interpretations of Jesus, as these became available in Asia from the mid-20th century onward. Just as far from orthodoxy was Hong Xiuquan, who came to see himself as a messianic figure, and whose Taiping movement came close to conquering China in one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history.

With disturbing frequency, accounts of the global church address themes of martyrdom and persecution, but rarely as powerfully as Lian Xi's wonderful *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China* (Basic Books). Zhao's conversion to Christianity earned her a lengthy imprisonment before she was eventually executed in 1968, during the period of collective insanity that we term the Cultural Revolution. Throughout her sufferings, she stubbornly refused to give in to her interrogators or to submit to thought control or reeducation. An already dreadful imprisonment was made far worse by the onset of tuberculosis. So tough was she, so resolute, that you might even feel a momentary twinge of pity for the hapless interrogators who had to confront her. Did they draw straws?

Xi's account relies on an astonishing source, namely, the letters that Zhao wrote, often using her own blood, in which she discussed her faith and its political context, her hopes for democracy. He makes an excellent case for regarding her as a worthy counterpart of Bonhoeffer and Solzhenitsyn, placing her among the great Christian

believers of any era. Very literally, this is the story of a Christian baptized in blood. Xi also shows the potent influence Zhao wielded in later decades, inspiring dissidents and democracy protesters.

Blood Letters is an enthralling account of a heroic Christian woman, and every page clamors for quotation. Her life story underlines the message that no worthwhile account of modern-day Christianity can ignore the faith's pervasive transcontinental dimension, with its thinkers, dreamers, builders, and resisters.