

an icon, even *almost* an individual. She draws attention to how the inspiration of this image can be traced to various possible sources including ancient Andhra art, the Sarnath Buddha, the Aśoka cakra, South Indian temple architecture, the Aukana Buddha in Sri Lanka, the Gommateśvara image at Sravana Belgola, and a more general penchant for colossal images of all hues in contemporary India.

The book talks about how the ancient Buddhist sites of Andhra are currently being marketed by the state government as attractive tourist destinations. It examines how tourist brochures have constructed a fantasy of Andhra Buddhism, promising spiritual progress to visitors, in a manner that tries to appeal to Indian and international Buddhist pilgrim-tourists. Becker also undertakes a detailed documentation of how Amaravati was transformed in the course of the performance of the Kalachakra ceremony here by the Dalai Lama in 2006. We see how alterations to the stūpa, and the area and activities around it have, over the years, led to the creation of a landscape marked by a hybrid, international Buddhist idiom. While discussing these developments of the recent past, the author succeeds in maintaining a scholarly rigour, both in terms of the questions she asks and in her analysis.

Naturally questions remain: What about the period between the third century and more recent times? What about the relationship between the Buddhist establishment and the Śaiva Amareśvara temple nearby, which has been a thriving religious establishment for many centuries? How has the privileging of Buddhist elements in Andhra's ancient heritage led to the erasure of other histories? How does pan-Buddhist solidarity intersect with more specific Buddhist identities such as those of the Tibetan diaspora and the Indian neo-Buddhists, and what is the precise role of these different Buddhisms in the modern reinvention of ancient Buddhist sites? Becker's book shows how Buddhist sculpture and monuments have always been important elements in the creation of new kinds of communities and identities. The fact that the new capital of the recently bifurcated state of Andhra Pradesh is going to be built near the site of ancient Amaravati will create a modern city in which Andhra's ancient Buddhist past will, no doubt, be given pride of place.

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BRIAN COLLINS:

*The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice.*

(Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture.) x, 230 pp. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015. \$24.95. ISBN 978 1 61186 116 7. doi:10.1017/S0041977X15001238

*The Head Beneath the Altar* is Brian Collins' first book, yet it demonstrates a ripe scholarship seldom found in first publications. Collins belongs to a small group of young scholars that are reading closely the intricate and often labyrinthine Vedic literature and other Indian sources. He does this not only in light of the primary and secondary literature on Indian sacrifice, but drawing from "sidelong glances into Christian theology, contemporary philosophy and Greek, Iranian and Scandinavian literature" (p. 3). *The Head Beneath the Altar* is part of the series edited by William A. Johnsen on violence, mimesis and culture which was born out of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. This international association engages critically with René Girard's theory on violence and religion, which attempts to explain sacrificial violence, and ultimately

violence in general, as the subconscious repetition of the original murder of the victim as scapegoat. According to Girard all rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the institutions of mankind can be drawn from ritual.

It is in this vein that Collins' book engages with the topic of sacrifice and violence, bringing Girard's mimetic theory into conversation with the ancient Vedic, epic and (to a lesser extent) Purāṇic literature. The book, in Collins' words, has three concrete aims, as follows: "reading Hinduism through mimetic theory, and the second aim, reading mimetic theory through Hinduism . . . the third and final aim [is] a reexamination of mimetic theory for scholars whom it might be of good use".

The reader will find that these three aims have been thoroughly achieved by Collins. The author clarifies myths mainly from the Brāhmaṇas and the *Mahābhārata* by examining the Sanskrit texts and the earliest Indian accounts on ritual and sacrifice. However, he clearly engages with the material with a particular agenda: to discuss and prove Girard's mimetic theory. Collins appears to aim to prove that Hinduism offers a valid alternative to the anti-sacrificial worldview contained in the gospels proposed by Girard. In order to do this, he looks for myths within the Hindu traditions and contrasts them with a broad range of material from Western sources – from Dumézil, Hegel, Freud, Derrida and other philosophers, to films such as *The Godfather*. Implicitly Collins is also offering a critique of French Orientalists, in particular of Sylvain Lévi, whose translations of the Brāhmaṇas were the sole source for Girard's engagement with Indian sacrifice.

While Collins' comparative mythology is certainly more careful than many of the works published on the subject, it remains an elaborate postmodern application of Girard's scapegoat theory to the Indian myth. Collins mentions that he is not interested in defending Girard from his critics (p. 21), and at the same time he writes that he wants "to 'rehabilitate' mimetic theory for scholars working in the field of religious studies, where Girard has been dismissed for so long that his name has largely disappeared from the mainstream academic discourse [. . .]" (p. 16).

While the book may be intended for a wider scholarship interested in violence, mimesis and culture in general, the book will present challenges to the non-specialist scholar of Indian mythology. Collins includes obscure passages on Vedic myth and ritual that one wishes were better contextualized, so that those who do not know much about Vedic ritual and mythology do not feel quickly lost. The more learned reader may accuse Collins of cherry-picking the myths to suit his argument and transposing anachronistically his examples into modern institutions and theoretical edifices. Collins is perhaps well aware that as one of "Wendy's children", he may also be denounced for reading too much into the myths and may leave some readers wondering about his own "*bandhus*" (connections/correlations). A critique has been directed, most vehemently by Hindu nationalists, at Doniger and at some of her "children" on more than one occasion over the last few years. Indeed, Collins directly and cogently addresses this issue in his first chapter.

Jan Heesterman, whom Collins frequently cites in his book, is one of the most influential scholars to study the relationship between Vedic ritual and violence. However, it was precisely he who also examined the concept of *ahimsā* (non-violence) within Vedic ritual that later became so emblematic of Hinduism. Heesterman reminds us that scholars such as Schmidt had already found the idea of *ahimsā* present in the ritualistic thought of the Brāhmaṇas. Heesterman, therefore, argues for an inherent contradiction in Vedic thought "that defies human order and logic" (J.C. Heesterman, "Non-violence and sacrifice", *Indologica Taurinensia*, 1984, p. 127). This omission leaves the reader wishing that this concept – so relevant to the discussion on sacrifice and violence in the Indian context – had been explicitly fleshed out by the author's otherwise sharp analysis.

Despite the above-mentioned caveats Collins' book remains a remarkable first work of scholarship. One encounters in this book a unique balance between philology and broad theoretical conversations that is often lacking in the contemporary work of South Asianists. *The Head Beneath the Altar* can be recommended to scholars of religious studies and those interested in broader postmodern theoretical discussions. This book is also a great addition to the reading lists of graduate courses on topics such as violence, sacrifice and religion.

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AJAY K. RAO:

*Re-Figuring the Rāmāyaṇa as Theology: A History of Reception in Premodern India.*

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For today's readers, the religious significance of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is sure to raise a question of interpretation. Are we to think of this venerable Sanskrit epic as a product of a classical literary imagination, or should it be taken as a foundational theological document for Hindu devotional worship? Or perhaps both? Recent conflicts over Rāma's birthplace in Ayodhya or the dredging of Rāma's bridge remind us that this is no trivial matter, inspiring fervent and at times violent activism in contemporary South Asia. These conflicts have no doubt been exacerbated by the ruptures of modernity and colonialism; nevertheless the premodern genealogy of the bifurcation between literary and religious interpretation has remained elusive. We would, in other words, still like to sharpen our understanding of how the epic came to be so heavily theologized in the first place. In a new study of the reception of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in South India from 1250 to 1600, Ajay Rao has assembled compelling evidence that highlights the special role of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community of Tamil Brahmin intellectuals in reinterpreting this monumental but worldly epic poem as a coded testimony to the transcendent power of God and the soteriological value of surrender. As such, *Re-Figuring the Rāmāyaṇa as Theology* is a path-breaking and nuanced work, a welcome addition to the field of Indology that should inspire further context-sensitive historical research on the medieval life of the Sanskrit epics.

In this slim but densely packed volume, Rao examines an impressive array of primary sources, ranging from Tamil performance traditions, Sanskrit poetic and commentarial writings, temple inscriptions and other documentary evidence, in order to argue that the theological concerns of Śrīvaiṣṇava intellectuals had principally governed the reception of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the public culture of medieval South India. The opening chapter provides a cursory overview of Śrīvaiṣṇava intellectual history, the metaphysical and soteriological ideas involved in this philosophical school, as well as an account of the tradition of writing Sanskrit commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the role that Śrīvaiṣṇava writers played in its development. Chapter 2 presents an analysis of hybrid vernacular or "Maṅḍipravāla" modes of oral composition at play in Vedānta Deśika's *Haṃsasandēśa* – a Sanskrit messenger poem based on the *Rāma* story – as well as Govindarāja's influential Sanskrit commentary on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In both cases, Rao demonstrates how the introduction of distinctively South Indian methods permitted writers working in Sanskrit to superimpose Śrīvaiṣṇava ideas of divinity and surrender onto the Rāma story. Here, Rao pays