

Review

The Head beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice, by Brian Collins. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. x + 310 pp., \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-61186-116-7 (pb).

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Collins begins, appropriately for a book in the series ‘Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture’, with a juxtaposition of India’s contributions to many of the world’s religions and the violence which has pervaded it throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing on the terminology of René Girard almost immediately, Collins declares: ‘Religion, in addition to India’s gift to the world, is also often the scapegoat for India’s violence’ (p. 2). The connection between Girard and India established, he offers the twin aims of his book: (1) how Girard’s mimetic theory of sacrifice can contribute to Indology, particularly of Hindu myth and ritual from 500 BCE to 500 CE (p. 3), and (2) how applying the Hindu traditions can offer ‘corrections or nuances’ to Girard’s, often Eurocentric, work (p. 8).

The remainder of Collins’ introduction presents a crash course in both mimetic theory and the intellectual history of its most famous proponent. Initially coming across as more about mimesis than Hindu mythology (or even as a straight apology for the work of Girard), the introductory pages also offer an overview of the colonial origins and influence of Indology. Amid the historical and methodological questions and concerns, Collins also engages modern examples in violence and Indological controversy; and he does so with a humour and charm characteristic of the book as a whole. Particularly striking is his description and analysis of the kerfuffle surrounding Wendy Doniger and her 2010 *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (pp. 26–28).

‘Rivalries’, the first official chapter, is aptly named. Continuing the trend of the introduction, it begins with a focus on Girard’s work—particularly *Sacrifice* (2011), Girard’s thoughts on mimetic sacrifice and the Brāhmaṇas- and the currents in thought and history which led to its development. From the rivalry of British and French interests in India to the struggles of Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935) (whose *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmanas* was the direct

progenitor of Girard's *Sacrifice*) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), the direction taken is informative and interesting, but rather convoluted. Collins himself acknowledges the tendency of his arguments to 'wander afield' (p. 81). Even so, in addition to his knowledge of Girardian history, Collins demonstrates a robust ability for textual analysis and mythic interpretation. He discusses the rivalry of the asuras and devas, the Vedic struggles of Indra and Viṣṇu, and the sacrifices/murders of Prajāpati and Puruṣa with a clarity that pervades for the remainder of the book.

The next two chapters, 'Priests and Kings, Oaths and Duels' and 'Epic Variations on a Mimetic Theme', see Collins present both a theory of an archetypal sacrificial figure who ultimately unmasks the sacrifice and analyses of the epic *Mahābhārata* that support that theory. Drawn primarily from the **bhlagh(s)-men* of Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) and the *homo sacer* of Giorgio Agamben (1942–), Collins posits the role of a lycanthropic outsider who becomes a scapegoat in the contest of sacrifice. Supporting the existence of such a figure in Hindu myth and ritual, Collins argues, is the development of Vedic sacrifice from a combative 'two-sacrificer model' to a nuanced 'one-sacrificer model', a model whose (figuratively) 'expelled' second sacrificer reappears as the substituted 'other' (pp. 135–36).

While he draws from a sizable number of myths, Collins focuses primarily on the *Mahābhārata* to describe how his 'other' (former) sacrificer-turned-victim operates in Hindu tradition to critique the very sacrificial system. He argues for three such critiques in the epic: the expelled and lycanthropic (that is, not quite *human*) 'other' returns to exact revenge on his persecutors (the 'Śaiva critique'); the ultimately random assignment of sacrificer and victim in light of the utter supremacy of the divine (the 'Vaiṣṇava critique'); and the final, heroic option of removing oneself from the sacrificial system altogether by refusing to play any role in it (the 'existential critique') (p. 147). Collins' argument for the possibility of approaching Hindu myth through the lens of mimetic sacrifice becomes more and more cogent as he brings forth layer after layer of examples.

For the final two chapters, 'Meaning: The Secret Heart of the Sacred' and 'Yajñānta: The End of Sacrifice', Collins begins by turning from a mythic emphasis to one on ritual. Discussing how several Brāhmaṇas refer to various severed heads which need to be buried beneath the Vedic altar, Collins reiterates his Girardian approach. 'The heads under the altar', he argues, 'attests to the violent relations that lie hidden beneath the surface of the bloodless single-sacrificer model of classical ritual' (p. 198). Revisiting, then, some of the myths he had addressed earlier, Collins also incorporates the work of J. C. Heesterman (1925–2014), of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), and of the ancient philosophical school of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā in his schema of the operations of the Vedic sacrificial system. When he ultimately returns to the two aims stated at the beginning of his book—to read Hindu myth through Girard and Girard through Hindu myth—it is abundantly clear he has tackled the first one, but

to what extent he has addressed the second is less so. Though Collins does return to the question of how Indology might nuance mimetic theory (p. 247) he never seems to answer it in a way which explicitly overcomes Girard's heavy Western orientation.

One gets the distinct impression that this book is too short. As a textual analysis of Hindu myth, or as a study in the development of Girard's mimetic theory, or as a presentation of often understudied writers in philosophy and Indology, Collins' work would excel. However, though his ability to synthesize seemingly disparate material and to apply a methodology in a new way are clear, Collins never seems to have enough room to situate all the pieces he has brought into play. Still, it is a thought-provoking, unique, and witty work operating in largely uncharted territory. *The Head beneath the Altar* can benefit both scholars of mimesis and Indology, and it ultimately provides inspiration for both to expand their borders beyond their established frames of reference.