scope, as they don't make comparative gestures towards the study of monasticism and asceticism (Catholic, Lutheran, Brahmanic, Taoist). I would have liked to have seen an effort to find interesting parallels to the role of family in Amish, Mennonite, Hasidic, Sufi, Yamabushi, or other religious communities that blur the line between monastic communities and non-cloistered, non-celibate, family-oriented, and orthopraxic communities more broadly. The communities that Gray and Meeks look at, for example, seem closer in comparison to Sufi brotherhoods like the Naqshbandi or Qadiri than to Catholic Carthusans, Cistercians, or Dominicans. Clarke and Wilson both seem to establish the Catholic tradition as normative in the history of monasticism, but they do not state why. Furthermore, they do not makes a distinction between cenobitic, anchoritic, mendicant, and itinerant approaches to monasticism. Moreover, there were no sustained overtures to theoretical studies on the social-psychological, soteriological, bio-genetic, economic, and phenomenological studies of monasticism and asceticism by Agamben, Flood, Weber, McGinn, Derrida, and several others. In this way, the two books have limited use in the fields of Religious Studies, Contemplative Studies, or the Sociology of Religion. Still, for students and scholars of Buddhist Studies they are ground-breaking and speak to exciting ways of rethinking the male-dominated and eremitic characterizations of Buddhist monasticism that have become normative in the field.

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The Head beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice. By Brian Collins. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture Series. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 310. $24.95 (paper).

In *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), the literary and cultural theorist René Girard argues that the murder of a scapegoat is the foundation on which all human culture rests. According to Girard's "mimetic theory," our natural penchant for mimesis engenders rivalry, with one person desiring what another possesses. When untrammeled mimetic aggression spreads, many rivals join forces to attack a random victim; such is the primeval scene from which sacrifice is born. For Girard, rituals of killing, accompanied by mythic narratives that hide acts of violence, constitute the origins of religion. Since the publication of his seminal book— during a year that also saw the publication of Walter Burkert's *Homo Necans* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), which traverses similar territory—scholarly interest in the nexus of violence and religion has steadily increased and diversified. For a small circle of "Girardians," however, mimetic theory continues to inform a wide range of studies on human culture. When it comes to literature, the Girardian strategy has affinities with what Paul Ricoeur has called the "hermeneutics of suspicion": Girard and his acolytes read against the grain, sifting through texts for signs of a cover-up. Through this lens, myths do not reveal truths—they conceal crimes. With *The Head beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice*, Brian Collins turns mimetic theory loose on the fertile terrain of Vedic sacrifice and makes a case for the relevance of Girard's ideas to the study of Hindu myth. It is a stimulating monograph that should appeal to scholars of comparative mythology, ritual studies, Indology, and the sociology of religion.

Girard's oeuvre is chiefly concerned with cultures of the Judeo-Christian West. He regards the Gospels and especially their accounts of Jesus's crucifixion as a revelatory criticism of the scapegoating that undergirds the "archaic" (that is, pre-Christian) religions rooted in sacrifice; after the Gospels, he argues, the violent origins of human culture become increasingly difficult to conceal or defend. A key question raised at the outset by Collins is therefore whether mimetic theory "works" beyond the Christian context (p. 15). Late in his career, Girard turned his attention to just this question in a series of lectures on the Vedic Brāhmaṇas (*Sacrifice*, tr. Matthew Patillo and David Dawson; East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2011), finding in these stories of sacrificial rivalry between gods and demons ample confirmation for his theory of religion and violence. While modestly framing his own

project as a study of these lectures, Collins aspires to much more: he aims to uncover a multifaceted "critique of sacrifice" embedded in a broad array of Sanskrit texts, and then to leverage this Indian evidence as both an affirmation and realignment of Girard's key ideas. On the one hand, Collins' reading of the Vedas and the epics affirms the basic stance that mimetic aggression births sacrificial religion. On the other, he suggests that through its own indigenous critique of sacrifice, Indian sacred literature proffers a homegrown alternative to the Gospel critique, thereby inviting a realignment of certain aspects of mimetic theory from a non-Western perspective.

After summarizing the fundamentals of mimetic theory and outlining his argument, sources, and methods ("Introduction"), Collins devotes a chapter to the "Rivalries" of the Brāhmaṇas, with Girard's lectures as the point of departure. For Collins, the significance of Brāhmaṇa testimony lies in its depiction of sacrifice as an endless conflict, with the gods winning one day and the demons the next. The "arbitrariness" (p. 82) of this cycle with its constant substitution of victor for victim, he suggests, points to the mimetic foundations of Vedic ritual. The third chapter ("Priests and Kings, Oaths and Duels") offers a mimetic reading of the Vedas through the lens of Georges Dumézil's theory of the tripartite division of Indo-European society, stressing Dumézil's hypothesis of the priest as a sacrificial substitute for the king and the possible Indo-European antecedents of a rivalry between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas. To explain the rivalrous interplay of priests and warriors, Collins invokes Jan Heesterman's account (*The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993) of the development of Vedic ritual from a "pre-classical" paradigm characterized by violent exchanges between two warring sacrificers, to a "classical" one featuring the performance of liturgies for the benefit of a single sacrificer "consecrated" (*dīkṣita*) by priests. Following Heesterman, Collins posits a decline of the agonistic basis of sacrifice that leads to the marginalization of the warrior, even as certain antinomian aspects of this figure are memorialized in the *dīkṣita*'s role. Such is the genesis of what Collins calls the "Indian wolf-warrior cycle" (p. 84), wherein outliers such as the wandering Vrātyas threaten the stability of orthoprax ritual from its shadowy margins. Here, as throughout the book, a conviction in the mimetic prehistory of religion in ancient India guides Collins' sifting of evidence: whether it is the sacrificial violence between Indra and the Yatis as analyzed by Stephanie Jamison (*The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India*; Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991) or the saga of Varuṇa and the substitute victim Śunaḥśepa as recounted by David Shulman (*The Hungry God: Hindu Tales of Filicide and Devotion*; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), myths of violence enacted or deferred are taken to stand for "Vedic sacrifice" writ large. In pursuit of this theme of rivalry and bloodshed, Collins neglects other key aspects of Vedic ritual culture, notably initiation, sovereignty, and soteriology.

The next chapter ("Epic Variations on a Mimetic Theme"), which delves into the dynastic feud between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas and its consequences in the *Mahābhārata*, reminds us that if mimetic rivalries are what we seek, this Sanskrit epic offers a preponderance of material. Collins focuses on the trope of the "failed sacrificer" (p. 147), which he interprets as betokening various forms of indigenous sacrificial critique. When the spurned god Śiva attacks his father-in-law Dakṣa's sacrifice, for instance, this "Śaiva critique" (p. 147) points back to the mimetic prehistory of sacrifice by simultaneously casting both figures as scapegoats and rivals. By contrast, the "Vaiṣṇava critique" (p. 155) stresses the arbitrary nature of sacrifice: the god Kṛṣṇa (standing in for Viṣṇu) prevents the slaughter of the world's kings by Jārasaṃdha only to allow Yudhiṣṭhira to carry out the same plan on a much grander scale, in the form of the apocalyptic "sacrificial war" at Kurukṣetra (p. 157). Fusing elements of both is the "existential critique" (p. 138) embodied by the outsider hero and rival to the Pāṇḍavas, Karṇa, who exposes the hollowness of sacrifice by refusing to conform to its rigid structures.

In the penultimate chapter ("Meaning: The Secret Heart of the Sacred") Collins confronts the issue of the meaning of sacrifice. Again Girard's mimetic theory serves as a touchstone, notably the idea that the ritualized reenactment of sacrifice generates its own meanings over time, slowly effacing the primal violence at its origins. In the Vedic context Collins detects a sign of this prehistory in the ancient codifications that stipulate the burial of severed human and animal heads beneath the sacrificial altar. On the question of whether these codifications point to real decapitations, Collins is cautious, offering a useful survey of scholarship on human sacrifice in India (pp. 31–41) and allowing for the possibility

that humans may have sometimes served as actual victims (p. 238). (The anthropomorphic head pictured on the cover of the book is a clay specimen used by Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala in their modern performances of Vedic ritual, where no victims of any kind are immolated.) At least in a symbolic sense, however, Collins agrees with Heesterman that the head beneath the altar "attests to the violent relations that lie hidden beneath the surface of the bloodless . . . classical ritual" (p. 198). The bottom line, for Collins and Heesterman alike, is that the displacement of conflict from Vedic sacrifice creates a void in which a wide range of meanings—language, myth, philosophy, and theology—may arise.

While situating his project as a study of myth and ritual in India over a thousand-year period from 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E., Collins offers the caveat that his "primary mode of analysis will be textual, not historical" (p. 3). Indeed, the book's stance throughout is pointedly *a*historical: like Girard and Heesterman, Collins makes an argument predicated on a loosely defined "prehistory," whose legacy reverberates in the historical cultures that follow. And while his reading strategy may be textual in that it takes the Vedas and the Sanskrit epics as the main frame of reference, its primary concern is not to systematically analyze the stratified testimony of these texts, nor to philologically engage text and language. Instead, Collins' approach is thematic and comparative: for instance, he invokes the work of medievalist Henry Charles Lea to frame the dynamics of rivalry in Vedic ritual (p. 96), Jacques Derrida on Greek ritual to decode the Brāhmaṇa story of Cyavana (p. 223), the "speculative realism" of philosopher Quentin Meillassoux to analyze the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā doctrines of Jaiminī (p. 231), postcolonial theory on climate change to talk about Karṇa's role in the *Mahābhārata* (p. 243), and so on. While sometimes disorienting, this approach makes for a fascinating read.

The Head beneath the Altar concludes with a short chapter ("Yajñānta: The End of Sacrifice") that aims to elaborate on the differences between Girard's critique of sacrifice and those Collins has assembled from Hindu mythology. Here, Collins acknowledges that his culminating ambition in interpreting Hindu critiques of sacrifice from the perspective of mimetic theory is to "articulate an ethical position" (p. 241) that will minimize the scapegoating, rivalry, and violence of mimesis in human culture. To this end, he returns to the epic hero Karṇa—who, he argues, transcends the mimetic structures of violence and sacrifice in the *Mahābhārata* war—to highlight his potential as a model for "universal singularity" (p. 241) in the modern context of global environmental catastrophe. In this way, a book that began as an analysis of how the old world has shaped religion concludes as an idealistic pitch for how religion might shape the new world. On the final pages Collins makes the case for locating "the end of sacrifice" in Hindu traditions of sacrifice, and more precisely in the Vedas as deployed by Girard in his *Sacrifice* lectures: because Vedic thinkers discerned the violence inherent in sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas, they were able to transcend "archaic religion" (p. 243) and produce the philosophical innovations of the *Upaniṣad*s. In the context of Indology, this assessment neglects recent work by Signe Cohen, Brian Black, and Patrick Olivelle, among others, which interrogates the conventional wisdom that the Upaniṣads represent a monumental turning point in Indian cultural history; more broadly, however, the conclusion leaves the impression that, avowed differences aside, Collins' work cannot escape its Girardian inspiration. In true mimetic fashion, one might say, Collins has fashioned a reading of Hindu myth to rival Girard's reading of Western myth.

The Head Beneath the Altar contains several tables, endnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

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A Less Traveled Path: Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra Chapter 2, Critically Edited with a Study on Its Structure and Significance for the Development of Buddhist Meditation. 2 vols. By Daniel M. Stuart. Sanskrit Texts from the Tibetan Autonomous Region, vols. 18/1+2. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House; Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 642; 377. €98.

Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra is a Buddhist *sūtra*, probably completed by the beginning of the fifth century C.E, centered around a description of meditation practice. It consists of seven chapters. Chapter