

## Book Reviews

theories about language and the power of scripture as the Word of God in a modern context, liberal evangelicals' commitment to social reform as an expression of piety and an outgrowth of Christian conversion, the liberal evangelical curriculum at the Union School of Religion and its struggle (and ultimate failure) to maintain a distinct evangelical identity, the emergence of a prophetic and confrontational fundamentalist style in New York City as exemplified by the ministry and public preaching of John Roach Straton, and a concluding chapter on Harry Emerson Fosdick's doomed efforts to maintain a robust form of liberal evangelicalism at Riverside Church. It is hard not to read this book as a declension narrative, despite Bowman's assertion that liberal evangelicals did not capitulate to modernity or did not see themselves as "selling out" to a secular culture. Almost all of the figures he looks at or the liberal attempts to combine a prophetic commitment to social reform, a priestly emphasis on pastoral work, and personal spiritual conversion and growth end in disappointment or failure or a loss of a distinctive evangelical identity, which they had sought so assiduously to retain. So rather than demonstrating that evangelicalism is robust when it imagines itself diverse, Bowman's work instead demonstrates the difficulty liberals encountered who wanted to maintain an evangelical identity and how hard it was to occupy a treacherous middle ground. That seems to be the fate of liberal evangelicalism narrated in this very important if not quite persuasive book.

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COLLINS, BRIAN. *The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. x+310 pp. \$24.95 (paper).

This book takes its lead from the work of René Girard. Girard argues that desire is mimetic—we want what others want—and that this leads to violence, which is mimetic too, resulting in collective violence against an arbitrary victim. This has a cathartic, socially binding effect, for which the victim is retrospectively held responsible and hence elevated to special, sacred, status. For Girard this is the origin of religion, with sacrifice being a functional reenactment, and mythology a diverse representation, of collective murder.

Brian Collins applies Girard's theories to early Hindu myth and ritual, aiming to enrich our understanding of the latter and to allow a better assessment of the former. Combining these aims, Collins argues that Hindu texts contain a critique of both sacrifice and the scapegoating mechanism to stand alongside the critique that Girard sees embodied in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, who exposed the victim's innocence once and for all.

Girard's work has engaged with India only belatedly, in the book *Sacrifice* (East Lansing, MI, 2011), which is a study of Sylvain Lévi's monograph *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmanas* (Paris, 1898). After introducing his own project, Collins describes the colonial and Indological rivalry between Britain and France, which then forms the context against which he discusses Lévi's monograph and, in turn, Girard's reception of it. Collins thus engages with Hindu texts via Girard's own engagement. Girard sees the figures Prajâpati and Puruṣa as two aspects of one character and one sacrificial role—Prajâpati the alleged sinner put to death for incest, Puruṣa the positive, creative result—and Collins suggests that this bifurcation persists in post-Vedic texts, not least in the pair of Indra and Viṣṇu.

The book's main focus is the abjected side of this equation. After showing, through a convincing reading of myths of Mitra, how one might be dragooned into the

murderous commune on pain of being victimized oneself, Collins leans slightly uncritically on Jan Heesterman's theory, whereby an ancient sacrificial system featuring rival sacrificers became the Vedic ritual system featuring a single sacrificer. In those terms, the abjected victim persona is identified with the defeated (and then discarded) second sacrificer and then with a transcendent outsider figure "that embodies the self-deconstructive potential of the sacrifice" (136, 239) and that takes many forms, including the werewolf, the *vrātya*, the *homo sacer* (a term taken from Roman law via the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben), and the character Śunaḥṣepa in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* story that Collins deems "by far the most radical critique of sacrifice in the Sanskrit tradition" (130). Śunaḥṣepa, an innocent youth, is to be sacrificed, but he engineers a miraculous escape from the sacrificial post by verbal means.

When Collins focuses on the *Mahābhārata*, he finds within it three generic critiques of sacrifice. The "Śaiva critique" (these labels are apparently nonsectarian) proceeds by depicting—as in the story of Śiva wrecking Dakṣa's sacrifice—the abjected outsider's violent, uninvited return. The "Vaiṣṇava critique" exposes the arbitrary nature of victim (and victor) selection: when the narrative rationalizes the executions of Jarāsadha and Śiśupāla, tokenistic moral justifications are quickly overtaken by reference to the sacred mystery that is the divine plan. And the "existential critique" is embodied in the character Karḍa, who although being structurally a loser never sees himself as a victim and heroically insists on a course of action that is proper and meaningful for him.

Given the importance of Girard's work for religious studies, the project this book describes is overdue, but the book itself is rather diffused. Collins writes that "the reader will have noticed by now (and hopefully with minimal annoyance) that my argument tends to wander afield" (81), but if he is aware of the possibility of annoying the reader, he needs to ensure this is counterbalanced by concrete gains. While reading the book I often wondered how the current topic related to the overall argument; beginning with the largely uninformative contents page, the signposting is poor throughout; the "Summary of Arguments" at the beginning of the final chapter comes far too late, and its titular plurality is revealing. I am still not sure that the penultimate chapter—"Meaning: The Secret Heart of the Sacred"—adds substantially to the book's overall argument. Throughout the book there is evidence of wide reading and bold, creative analysis, but the presentation could have been more direct and accessible.

In "wandering afield" Collins also risks not doing justice to the topics along the way, which involve some of the most intriguing passages in the Sanskrit corpus. He sometimes seems too quick to embrace particular views: along with Heesterman, Georges Dumézil is another example; even if Dumézil's conclusions were unproblematic, the Indo-European angle might still seem superfluous to the project. And in many cases, inevitably, significant secondary literature is not mentioned. Perhaps this is partly because the framing project—of trying to relate Girard's work to Hindu materials and seeing what happens—encourages creative interpretation. Indeed, that frame might encourage Collins to read contests, rituals, and violence as sacrificial wherever possible, rivalry as mimetic, and punishment as scapegoating, despite more straightforward interpretive options. And if looking through a Girardian lens may tend to allow the discovery of what one seeks, the concept of *yajña* (sacrifice) compounds this by having a similarly encompassing semantic range, apparently being applicable, in the history of Hindu thought, to almost any kind of human activity. So when Collins identifies three critiques of sacrifice, it is not clear that these are necessarily best labeled as critiques of *sacrifice* or exactly what is being said about them by labeling them thus.

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Despite these perhaps predictable concerns, the ethical dimension of Girard's work makes Collins's project extremely attractive and I suspect underscores his penchant for unearthing representations of the victim. It comes through strongly in the book's final pages, where Collins suggests that we ourselves can undermine sacrificial thinking by following Karḍa's example and by revisiting Vivekananda's Vedāntic universalism: "it is only by becoming the *mleccha* ourselves, by becoming the *homo sacer*, that we can overcome scapegoating" (250).

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CREEGAN, NICOLA HOGGARD. *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xi+206. \$58.00 (cloth).

This book explores the problem of evil in Christian theology, with particular although not exclusive attention to the suffering of animals. That the term "suffering" is appropriate here—rather than simply physical pain—is central to Nicola Creegan's argument. She cites extensive research about animal behavior (ethology) that tells us that many nonhuman species are sentient, intelligent creatures with complex emotions and capabilities. Many experience both physical and emotional suffering in ways that are similar to humans.

It is important to Creegan, further, that this suffering precedes the emergence of humans as a species. Predation, illness, and injury caused suffering in countless animals before *Homo sapiens* evolved; it cannot be attributed to human sinfulness but is part of the fabric of the creation. This poses serious questions: "Is God really a loving God? Does God care about animals who suffered for many eons before humans came to be? By what power can humans escape their deep-seated drives? *Why* does God do it all this way when in the end—in Christ, God reveals Godself to be loving and to demand love?" (2). This is the old problem of theodicy, with an added ingredient: the suffering of nonhuman animals. Pursing the question of evil in light of animal suffering, Creegan hopes, can help us acknowledge both the thorough goodness of creation and the pervasiveness of evil throughout it, from the very beginning.

Creegan draws on a combination of theological and scientific resources. She is particularly interested in alternatives to the interpretation of evolution as a random, purposeless process that emphasizes selfishness and competition. The standard Darwinian approach, she asserts, "does not see the pattern of darkness and light, for evolution is characterized as much by love and cooperation and symbiosis as it is the opposite; it is as purposeful as it is seemingly random" (156). Creegan's characterization of the "standard paradigm" (106) in Darwinian evolution is oversimplified and not always fair. Like Christian theologians, evolutionary biologists are a diverse lot. Many pay a great deal of attention to the reality and value of cooperation, altruism, and other positive social traits. The notion of nature as "red in tooth and claw" is simply not as widespread as Creegan suggests (106). Even more problematic is her challenge to another aspect of the Darwinian "standard paradigm"—its rejection of teleology in evolution. Other Christian thinkers, including the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin, have ascribed a purpose to the process of evolution, and most have been roundly rejected by serious scientists. Creegan relies heavily on the work of Christian scientists such as Simon Conway Morris. While many of these are serious scientists and not to be dismissed easily, their arguments for a teleological or purpose-driven evolution are far from generally accepted.

However, teleological interpretations of evolution cohere with the theological interpretation of evil that Creegan advocates, in which all of existence, past and present, participates in God's overarching plan. To explain this plan, she uses the