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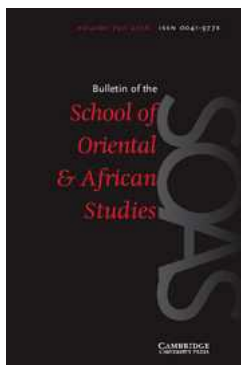
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Ajay K. Rao: *Re-Figuring the Rāmāyaa as Theology: A History of Reception in Premodern India.* (Routledge Hindu Studies Series.) ix, 156 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. £48.95. ISBN 978 0 415 68751 5.

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Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 79 / Issue 01 / February 2016, pp 197 - 198

DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X15001226, Published online: 07 March 2016

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0041977X15001226

How to cite this article:

Adheesh A. Sathaye (2016). Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 79, pp 197-198 doi:10.1017/S0041977X15001226

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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.

(Routledge Hindu Studies Series.) ix, 156 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. £48.95. ISBN 978 0 415 68751 5.
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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 "Maṇipravāla" modes of oral composition at play in Vedānta Deśika's *Haṃsasandeśa* – 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

particular attention to an episode of great theological importance for Śrīvaiṣṇavas: the surrender of Rāvaṇa's younger brother Vibhiṣaṇa to Rāma before the onset of their battle. In Chapter 3, Rao investigates how Govindarāja uses allegorical and double-entendre (*śleṣa*) readings to glean myriad theological meanings from the seminal “*mā niṣādha*” verse within Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, through which the sage curses a hunter for killing one of a pair of mating birds by spontaneously delivering a versified utterance that represents – according to the Sanskrit tradition – the first occurrence of man-made poetry. For scholars of Sanskrit commentarial literature, this chapter is of particular value. Rao's close reading of how Govindarāja extracts devotional value out of what had originally been an aesthetically charged piece of poetry provides a breathtaking glimpse of how sophisticated and imaginative these medieval writers could become in their ambition to “re-figure” the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Chapter 4 situates Śrīvaiṣṇava poets and writers within the specific historical context of the South Indian polity of Vijayanagara in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, linking the intellectual activities of this influential Brahmin group to the rise of temple worship to Rāma at this very time and place. In doing so, Rao offers a compelling alternative to Sheldon Pollock's suggestion that the Rāma cult had developed as a response to the expansion of Islamic rule in India. Instead, this book connects the rise of Rāma worship to the emergence of Śrīvaiṣṇavas as royal preceptors for the Vijayanagara court – a partnership that fostered the production of the theologically inclined literary and commentarial works examined in earlier chapters.

At a few points in Rao's book, the reader might conceivably feel that the arguments are underdeveloped – further comparison with contemporaneous non-Śrīvaiṣṇava writers like Appaya Dīkṣita or Nageśabhaṭṭa, for example, could potentially have strengthened the claim that Vedānta Deśika and Govindarāja were markedly “Śrīvaiṣṇava” in their orientation. Equally valuable would have been to compare the nexus between Vijayanagara's rulers and Śrīvaiṣṇava intellectuals to similar partnerships in early medieval imperial formations, or to place the entire study within the context of recent work on the history of early modernity in South Asia. On the other hand, *Re-figuring the Rāmāyaṇa* must be applauded for having accomplished the formidable task of opening up a vast South Indian archive for new comparative, contextualized analysis. This book indeed is best seen as a kind of “*bīja*” or seed for three future lines of research: the engagement between Sanskrit and Maṇipravāla literary cultures, the development of the Sanskrit commentarial tradition, and the impact of Śrīvaiṣṇava culture more generally on the pre-modern state in South India. Inspired by the insights of Rao's work, such projects are sure to sharpen our understanding of the interplay between religiosity and Sanskrit literary culture within the intellectual history of premodern South India.

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KIYOKAZU OKITA:

Hindu Theology in Early Modern South Asia: The Rise of Devotionalism and the Politics of Genealogy.

(Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs.) xv, 284 pp. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978 1 107 04213 1.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X1500124X

This book examines what can happen when changing political circumstances lead a careful religious thinker to seek authority in a theological tradition that does not