

## The Understanding of Sikhi in Western Academia\*

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### Abstract

This paper revisits the issue of how the Sikh community and its core beliefs are understood in the Western world. A key influence on this understanding has been the work of scholars – both Sikh and non-Sikh – situated within Western academic institutions. As a reference point, the paper begins with a summary of the evolution of Sikh tradition that seeks to encapsulate key features of the community’s core understanding of itself. The paper then focuses on several examples of problematic scholarship, such as the claim that Guru Nanak was a “*Sant*,” and the claim that the current core Sikh identity emerged only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It concludes with a discussion of the extent of circulation of problematic interpretations of the Sikh community, and their impact on the understanding of Sikhi in Western academia and beyond.

### 1. Introduction

This paper begins with the premise that an academic approach to the study of Sikhi, despite its limits, is necessary and important. If one accepts this premise, then Sikh Studies – covering not just religion, but also language, history, politics, society, culture, art, economics and more – must have a firm place in the universities of North America. Despite the conflicts and disappointments that have arisen in the early attempts to create this place for Sikh Studies, the strong presence of Sikhs in North America means that the community will inevitably be an object of academic study, and the community itself must participate as fully as possible. Religious belief and scholarship – even if the latter is inherently reflexive in the case of Sikh scholars studying their own community – are *not* incompatible. Belief, or faith, does not – and should not – rule out scholarship. Our goal as a community should be to enhance our self-understanding, and the understanding of others, without any fear for our faith.

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\* This paper draws on my inaugural Guru Nanak Lecture, delivered at San Jose State University in 2003. In writing this paper, I have engaged primarily with the work of scholars based in Western academia, and I apologize in advance for not citing the many important scholarly contributions of those based in Punjab. I am grateful to Inderjit N. Kaur for her careful reading of an earlier draft, and her detailed, insightful comments. Remaining shortcomings are my responsibility alone.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, for those readers who are not Sikhs, or scholars of Sikhs and Sikhi, I summarize something of what we know of Guru Nanak, his life and his teachings. Since the nine successors of Guru Nanak were one in spirit with him, and since their teachings form an integrated whole, in Section 3, I say something about them also, again briefly. Having provided this overview, in Sections 4 and 5, I address what are, I think, two major academic issues. The first is, how original was Guru Nanak, and was he the founder of Sikhism as a religion? The second is, how different is the Sikhism of today from that of the past, whether that past is the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the 18<sup>th</sup>, or the 19<sup>th</sup>? To the typical Sikh, these questions may seem pointless, since the answers are obvious: first, Guru Nanak had a divine revelation and consciously transmitted it to his successors and followers, and second, the essence of Sikhism has been preserved from the time of the Gurus, with the institution of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh being the only truly significant addition. Yet university scholars of Sikhism in the West have had the following to say on these two issues.

#### On the origins of Sikhism:

The pattern evolved by Guru Nanak is a reworking of the Sant synthesis, one which does not depart from Sant sources as far as its fundamental components are concerned. (McLeod, 1968, p. 161)

The system developed by Guru Nanak is essentially a reworking of the Sant pattern... (McLeod, 1968, p. 151)

#### On the nature of Sikh identity:

For much of its early history the Sikh movement...had shown little enthusiasm for distinguishing its constituents from members of other religious traditions... (Oberoi, 1994, pp. 48-49)

...for much of the nineteenth century...most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities...several competing definitions of who constituted a Sikh were possible. (Oberoi, 1994, pp. 24-25)

One might just dismiss such views as being contrary to tradition, or conventional wisdom, or to our beliefs, but that approach offers no refutation in the world of academia. My own view, based on studying the evidence that we have, and on the judgments of different scholars, is that both these views are mistaken, from a purely scholarly perspective. Tradition and conventional wisdom may oversimplify, and they may not stand up completely to the skeptical analysis of an historian or social scientist (whether empiricist or post-modernist) but they are actually closer to history than the fashionable revisionism illustrated by the above quotes. My conclusions emerge from a careful reading of historical sources, and a careful application of academic methods. I am not alone in these conclusions, but the claims of McLeod and Oberoi continue to have wide circulation. In Section 6, I address why this is so, and implications for future scholarship. Section 7 provides a summary conclusion.

## 2. Guru Nanak: His Life and Teachings

Guru Nanak was born in Punjab, in northern India, in 1469. He learned to read and write (rare accomplishments at the time), engaged in normal boyhood pursuits, and went to work as he reached manhood. He married, had two sons, had a mystical experience, what he himself described as a divine revelation, and thereafter traveled very extensively for many years, spreading his spiritual message, composing hymns expressing his divine revelation, and interacting with different spiritual traditions. He left traces of his travels and his teachings in many parts of India, and possibly beyond, though the historical record is often inconclusive. For about the last twenty years of his life, Guru Nanak settled in Kartarpur, on the banks of the Ravi, where he founded a new community of disciples. These were his Sikhs, his followers, his students.

There is strong evidence (Mann, 2001) that at least by the latter part of the Kartarpur period, and probably earlier, Guru Nanak had compiled a *pothi*, a book collecting his hymns. While the *pothi* itself was stolen in 1970, and its whereabouts are unknown, photographs taken earlier establish that its original first section contains Guru Nanak’s hymns, and only those, beginning with the *Japji*, which is the Sikhs’ morning prayer, and a fundamental statement of Sikh beliefs. Given Guru Nanak’s clearly stated sense of divine mission, in which his hymns were direct guidance from God, it makes eminent sense that these hymns would have been early on preserved in writing for the nascent Sikh community centered at Kartarpur (Mann, 2001, p. 10).

What is the essence of Guru Nanak’s message, as preserved in his own writings? Again, I provide a bare summary.<sup>1</sup> Foremost is the unity of God. Furthermore, God is formless, timeless, beyond all attributes. However, this is not a monistic view of the divine, but something much more personal, a loving God, a God of all creation, but who has a special connection with humans. Humans have a special consciousness, which allows them to achieve union with the divine, but they are impeded in this by their *haumai*, their sense of ‘I-ness’. Yet the *Hukam*, the divine order, resides within all humans, and they can understand the *Hukam*, indeed the *Nam* (the divine Name) itself, through the *Sabad* (the divine Word), which is conveyed in the teachings of the Guru.

Yet Guru Nanak’s teachings are much more than a message of individual, interior devotion to God. While humanity as a whole has a special place in creation, Guru Nanak rejects the hierarchy of the caste system as having any significance for individual liberation. He also rejects the pessimistic view of life and the negative view of women that are characteristic of Kabir and many of the other *Bhagats* of the time (Vaudeville, 1987, p. 38): this is categorical and explicit in his teachings.

Also, Guru Nanak, while recognizing the snares of family attachments, “approves of the life of a householder who can cultivate detachment and devotion.” (Grewal, 1969) While Guru Nanak’s ethical teaching may sometimes be subsidiary to his central

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<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I run the risk of oversimplification, or even neglect of important nuances – I ask for forgiveness in advance.

religious message of how humans can connect with God, his work is filled with examples of positive ethical guidance. Grewal (1969) puts it thus:

Naturally Guru Nanak lays a good deal of stress upon the individual's actions. He exhorts men to adopt good speech...he emphasizes the need of helping oneself...[but not] for one's mundane activity...The thief, the gambler, and the slanderer shall inevitably receive punishment; so shall be punished those who indulge in illicit sexual intercourse...one must earn one's livelihood honestly. One should cultivate true humility and be of service to others. (pp. 184-185)

Perhaps the best-known statement of Guru Nanak in this respect is his assertion that truth lies above all, but higher still is truthful living. There can be no clearer statement of ethical guidance.

It is worth elaborating on the role of community in Guru Nanak's worldview and teachings, since this is less well understood by many scholars than is his basic theology. Gurinder Singh Mann, based on a close reading of Guru Nanak's hymns (and specific lines and passages, which I shall not give), has provided a clear assessment, which I quote at length:

In Guru Nanak's case, ... meditation is one critical piece in an otherwise larger vision of life that constituted the basis of the community at Kartarpur. For Guru Nanak, three key virtues – meditation on the divine name (*nam*), charity (*dan*), and purity (*ishman*) – are prerequisite to a successful search for liberation. ...Guru Nanak's commitment to hard work and service to humanity as the two enduring assets in pursuit of liberation ... further emphasize the significance of social context in the attainment of spiritual goals.

In Guru Nanak's view, the community does not simply provide a passive backdrop for an individual's search for liberation; it is very much a part of that agenda. He believes in the individual's obligation to work toward collective liberation. ...A successful individual is one who attains liberation for himself or herself but who in addition assists in the liberation of everyone around. (Mann, 2001, pp. 6-7)

I summarize the overall situation at the time of Guru Nanak's death by quoting another scholar:

... by the time Guru Nanak breathed his last the nucleus of a new social group had come into existence with an acknowledged Guru to guide its social and religious life according to a pattern set by the founder and in the light of ideas expounded by him. (Grewal, 1990, p. 41)

Let me also emphasize that, in addition to this core group described by Grewal, which was marked by physical and spiritual proximity to Guru Nanak and his teachings, Guru Nanak also left a widespread influence to varying degrees throughout India, a result of his extensive travels that had made him known far and wide in his lifetime. That wider influence has persisted to this day.

### **3. After Guru Nanak**

Guru Nanak passed on in 1539, after a remarkable life of seventy years. Before his death, he appointed his successor, Guru Angad, who became the second Nanak in spirit and in spiritual role. In this transition, the role of Guru and Sikh were interchanged, a theme that has persisted in Sikh history and tradition. It is recorded that Guru Nanak gave his successor the *pothi* that contained his hymns, and this was “a symbolic marker of the succession of authority.” (Mann, 2001, p. 37)

We know that Guru Angad used the signature Nanak for his hymns, affirming the continuity of spirit. We know that Guru Angad, in his writings also maintained the continuity and consistency of their message for the followers of Nanak. We also know, from the songs of praise of the bards, Satta and Balvand, as recorded in what became the Sikh scripture, that Guru Angad maintained a *langar*, or community kitchen. Mann describes the *langar* as follows:

This institution established food sharing as a central feature of Sikh piety, an unequivocal emphasis on social and gender equality within the community, and a forum for service. The food was cooked in one place and all participated in its preparation, and then, irrespective of caste or gender, all partook of it together (Mann, 2001, p. 9)

It is also plausible that, given Guru Angad’s role as a sustainer of the Sikh community, and the long development of Kartarpur, the *langar* was very likely an innovation of Guru Nanak himself. In any case, it stands out as a practical expression of egalitarianism, particularly striking in contrast to a Hindu society where food sharing across castes was considered one of the worst forms of pollution.

The period of the next three successors of Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan, saw a substantial expansion of the Sikh community. Guru Amar Das expanded the collection of Sikh hymns (believed to be partially extant in two volumes of what is known as the Goindval Pothis), organized it further, and, in his own writings, made it clear that the teachings of Nanak and his successors constituted a particular belief system, to the rejection of *kachi bani*, or “spurious writings” that involved belief in incarnations of God. (Mann, p. 36) Guru Amar Das’ hymns include words addressed to Hindu and Sufi religious elites, inviting them to avail of the shelter of the Guru’s teachings for liberation (Mann, 2001, p. 13). As is well known through Sikh historical accounts, Guru Amar Das also nominated twenty-two individuals to lead congregations that were far from his seat at Goindval, and to deal with local issues. This decentralization is an indicator of the institutional success of the community of Sikhs.

Institutional consolidation and expansion continued with Guru Ram Das, who founded the town that became known as Amritsar, one of the Sikhs’ most sacred places. Guru Ram Das and his successor, Guru Arjan, wielded temporal authority that encompassed ever more followers and a spreading geographical area. Guru Ram Das, in his hymns describes a community that is flourishing materially in concert with its spiritual advance. In fact, he emphasizes that, *if* one lives with devotion, as a Sikh of the Guru, material success is a positive aspect of life. Again, one sees a clear continuity with the life-affirming values of Guru Nanak.

The increasing influence of Sikhism under Guru Arjan, and a change in the attitude of the Mughal authority when Jahangir succeeded Akbar, led to a major blow to the Sikhs, when Guru Arjan was martyred, in 1606, at the orders of Jahangir. Thereafter, there followed almost two centuries of increasing chaos in the Punjab, and the near-extirmination of the community at the hands of the Mughals and their vassals. While non-hereditary succession meant that the center of the Sikh community had moved from Kartarpur to Khadur to Goindval to Amritsar, each time this shift had been accompanied by increased influence and prosperity in a settled and relatively peaceful time for the

Punjab. In contrast, the period of Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Harkrishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind was marked by disorder, conflict and persecution.

In this situation of turmoil, the step taken by Guru Arjan, of compiling an authoritative Sikh scripture, proved to be critical. Guru Arjan took the writings of the first three Gurus, added those of Guru Ram Das and his own hymns, and included the bulk of the hymns of the Bhagats that had been included in the Goindval Pothis. He organized this collection, personally oversaw the scribal duties of Bhai Gurdas, and, when the volume, then called the *Adi Granth*, and now the *Guru Granth Sahib* of the Sikhs, was completed in 1604, had it ceremonially installed in the *Darbar Sahib* (known in the West as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar. The evidence of manuscript copies of the original volume (now known as the *Kartarpur*<sup>2</sup> *Pothi*, see Mann, 2001) indicates that the *Adi Granth* began to be copied as soon as it was completed, and possibly even before, and that these copies were meant to carry the word of Guru Nanak and his successors to Sikh congregations all over Punjab, and beyond.

In 1606, at the time of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom, the *Adi Granth* was already the authoritative embodiment of the teachings of the Gurus, and it has remained so to this day. The hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur were added to the *Adi Granth* (traditionally by Guru Gobind), and some minor variations in different copies were resolved during the period of Guru Gobind (see Mann, 2001). Its status was sealed when the line of human Gurus ended with Guru Gobind, and he made the *Adi Granth* the final and eternal Guru of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, carrying the living word. In this context, core Sikh belief has been remarkably constant: the hymns of Guru Nanak and his successors in the *Guru Granth Sahib* have always conveyed the word of God, and this takes precedence over everything else.

In my view, Gurinder Singh Mann captures the essence of Sikh belief in the following statement, based on what is said in Guru Nanak’s own writings:

The heart of the matter is that Guru Nanak neither accepted, nor contested the authority of existing scriptural texts; but he perceived himself as having access to a higher and more complete truth, which was directly revealed to him and was manifested in his own hymns. And for Guru Nanak and the community of his followers, these hymns included everything that they needed to know and possess. (Mann, 2001, p. 11)

Mann is writing about Guru Nanak alone when he says this, but it is important to remember that all the Sikh Gurus use the signature of Nanak, that it is clearly stated in the *Adi Granth* (in the songs of the Sikh bards) that all of Nanak’s successors carried his spirit, and that there is a remarkable doctrinal consistency in the writings of the Sikh Gurus. In this context, we can note parenthetically that even the writings of the Bhagats (non-Sikh poet-saints) included in the *Adi Granth* were carefully selected to conform to Sikh doctrine, with commentaries added on occasion by the Gurus themselves (Mann, 2001; Pashaura Singh, 2003).

Obviously, I have not given, and cannot give in this short space, a complete history of the Sikhs in the centuries after Guru Nanak. However, I cannot neglect one of

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<sup>2</sup> This *Kartarpur*, it should be noted is a different one from the site of Guru Nanak’s founding community.

the most significant events in the evolution of Sikhism, the creation of the Khalsa, and of the Singhs (the shared name of all who took the new baptism ceremony that Guru Gobind initiated). Because of the unsettled nature of the period, our historical records are incomplete. Despite the quibbles of some historians, it seems that Guru Gobind’s actions and intentions in creating the Khalsa at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century are clear (Grewal, 1990, Chapter 4). He wanted to end the intermediation of the *masands*, local representatives of the Guru’s authority for far-flung Sikh congregations. He wanted to reaffirm the close bond between the Guru and his disciples, and to emphasize the egalitarian aspects of that bond. And he wanted to create a physical identity that also emphasized equality and self-affirmation of the faith.

Despite the dramatic nature of the Guru’s actions, and the distinctiveness of the unshorn hair enjoined for the new Singhs, I want to instead point out some of the continuities in Guru Gobind Singh’s decisions. We can find in the writings of all the Sikh Gurus a close bond with their true Sikhs. This is explicit in many hymns, and, while the writings of the Sikh bards exalt the Gurus, the Gurus’ own writings display great humility, and high praise of the true Sikhs. This is echoed in Guru Gobind’s decision to be baptized by his own Sikhs, so the Guru became the disciple (*aape gur chela*). I have noted also the emphasis on social equality and justice in the writings of Guru Nanak and in the early practices of the Sikh community. Almost two hundred years later, and after a century in which the Sikhs were driven from their main settlements and repeatedly harassed by the imperial authorities, Guru Gobind Singh’s actions are, in many respects, reaffirmation rather than innovation. They are clearly reminiscent of the transition first performed by Guru Nanak with Guru Angad. In particular, with respect to continuity of doctrine, note that the Adi Granth, now as the Guru Granth Sahib, remained the central guide of the Sikhs, even after the Khalsa was created: this has been a core tenet of Sikh belief.

Therefore, while it has become standard to write of the ‘transformation’ of the Sikhs under Guru Gobind (Narang, 1960; Grewal, 1990), we can also view the historical record as marking much more of an evolution of Sikh society, in response to changing circumstances and to increasingly grave external threats: this evolution proceeding from the practical emphasis on social justice of Guru Nanak; through the community building and creation of distinctiveness undertaken by Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan; to the struggle for the community’s literal survival that followed for the next century, under the last five human Gurus. In all of this, moreover, the teachings of the Gurus, first expounded by Guru Nanak, remained a constant for their disciples, the Sikhs.

Niharranjan Ray (1975), a historian, puts it thus:

What Guru Gobind Singh did was, to my mind, the logical culmination of the process that was started by Guru Nanak himself. (Ray, p. 69)

Gurinder Singh Mann (2003), in his most recent work, makes the following observation about Guru Gobind’s creation of the Singhs of his Khalsa:

Guru Nanak’s conception of a life of honor and fearlessness thus found its embodiment in the Singhs. (Mann, 2003, p. 35)

The continuity of the Sikh tradition, as expressed in these and other ways, will be important for my later arguments.

#### 4. Was Guru Nanak a ‘Sant’?

I now turn to the first of my specific questions. Was Guru Nanak reworking a ‘Sant’ pattern or synthesis of thought? The quotes from McLeod that I gave earlier made precisely this claim. I have noted that Guru Nanak explicitly did not see himself in this light, but that observation is not a complete refutation for a skeptical scholar. We must examine the issue further. I have written a long academic paper on this (Singh, 2001), which prompted a comment from Professor McLeod, and a response from me (McLeod, 2002; Singh, 2002). Here I shall merely outline the argument.

First, we must define the category ‘Sant’ itself. Relying on the work of Pitamber Barthwal (1936), Western scholars have postulated a medieval Sant tradition that includes Kabir, Dadu, Ravidas and others. They have, following Barthwal and Chaturvedi (1952), put Guru Nanak in this category based on similarities in teachings. These similarities are the formlessness of God (*nirguna*), an interior path of spirituality, the necessity of a Guru, and the fellowship of *satsang*. McLeod describes the Sant tradition as follows:

The Sant tradition was essentially a synthesis of the three principal dissenting movements, a compound of elements drawn mainly from Vaisnava bhakti and the hatha-yoga of the Nath yogis, with a marginal contribution from Sufism. (McLeod, 1968, p. 152)

McLeod is also categorical in tracing a historical evolution of the Sant tradition, identifying Kabir as a seminal figure, and, as I noted in my introduction, placing Guru Nanak firmly within this tradition. Other Western scholars of medieval India, who are not specialists on Sikhism (and often know very little about it), follow McLeod in this last placement. However, many of them are much less categorical than McLeod about the tradition itself. In my 2001 paper, I quote extensively from these other scholars to argue that the so-called Sant tradition is actually quite fuzzy and imprecise. It has none of the clarity or precision that McLeod seeks to impose on it.

A further, revealing point that emerges from a survey of academic writing on this topic is that the term itself is a 19<sup>th</sup> century construct, at the earliest. In fact, the earliest quoted published reference to the term dates back to 1911, rather than the mid-nineteenth century. According to Juergensmeyer (1987), Tulsi Sahib uses the term in his *Ghat Ramayana* (1911), and the notion that he originated the term is implied by Chaturvedi (1952, p. 783). Furthermore, Juergensmeyer explicitly credits a specific group, the Radhasoamis, with ‘crystallizing’ and broadcasting the concept in the nineteenth century.

Note that, while the term ‘sant’ occurs in the hymns of the Sikh gurus, nowhere can it be taken to imply an organized or recognized tradition. The Guru Granth Sahib uses the term ‘Bhagat’, and, as I have pointed out earlier, the inclusion of the Bhagat *bani* was done very selectively. Also, while there are specific references in Kabir to Namdev, in Dhanna to Kabir, Ravidas and Namdev, and so on, and these suggest shared beliefs, there is no implication of any contemporary consciousness of a specific tradition that can be

termed the ‘Sants’. Finally, note that Guru Nanak himself makes no references to Kabir, allegedly a seminal figure in this tradition.

To summarize the argument so far, there is no clear Sant tradition that fits the historical facts. The term itself is a 19<sup>th</sup> century construct, applied by emergent religious groups and by Hindu scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an attempt to create a lineage that increased the perceived legitimacy of their own traditions. In this light, the following statements of McLeod, made almost 30 years after his initial claims that I quoted earlier, are startling. I quote:

Must we conclude that Nanak was a Sant?

For devout Sikhs the answer must be a firm no. For them Nanak received direct enlightenment from Akal Purakh and, as the direct mediator of the divine message of liberation, there can be no possibility of antecedents....

Others, however, do not share that commitment and are required to give a different answer...If it is a strictly neutral question of antecedents and influences, the answer must be in the affirmative. Because he represents the essential concerns of the Sants, it follows that Guru Nanak must be located within the Sant tradition. (McLeod, 1997, pp. 101-102)

This is what I would call the creation of a false opposition between scholarship and belief. As I have argued above, it is a legitimate, plausible – and in my view more accurate – scholarly position that Guru Nanak cannot be located within the Sant tradition, because to do so is totally ahistorical, *and* because the tradition itself is not well defined.

My argument does not end here. Earlier, I took some time to detail the social aspects of Guru Nanak’s teachings, relying on Gurinder Singh Mann’s careful reading of the evidence given by Guru Nanak’s own hymns. Guru Nanak’s view on ethical matters is very different from the ‘Sant’ and Vaishnava positions, which are described as follows: “They share a pessimistic view of mundane life and of family ties...They cordially despise and fear women...” (Vaudeville, 1987, p. 38). This is quite different from Guru Nanak’s views on women, as McLeod also admits:

Guru Nanak’s words carry us well beyond the conventional view of his time, or, for that matter, the present time as well. Without a woman, man is nothing, so why should she be called weak and why should she ever be regarded as unclean? (McLeod, 1997, p. 242)

To summarize, Guru Nanak’s teachings imply a clear moral code, far beyond, and different in temper than, anything one can find in anything that is labeled the ‘Sant tradition’. Grewal (1969) puts it thus:

Guru Nanak’s compositions may not ‘prove’ a radical departure from the existing [social] order, but a radical departure would be justified by his compositions. (p. 196)

Lest I leave the impression that the differences in Guru Nanak’s teachings are merely on the plane of social practice, and, no matter how important that is, it is subsidiary to the individual’s liberation, let me conclude by noting that there are more basic theological differences as well. In particular, Guru Nanak’s concept of *Hukam* is an important example. McLeod says, in this regard:

...it is in Guru Nanak's use of this word [*Hukam*] that his development beyond the thought of Kabir and other *bhagats* is most obvious...(McLeod, 1968, p. 191)

McLeod is unable to situate Guru Nanak's concept of *Hukam* within Islamic thought either. Faced with total originality in the writings of Guru Nanak, McLeod is reduced to appealing to unknown, anonymous 'Sants' who must have had the same ideas before, since he is unwilling to accept that anything can be wholly original.<sup>3</sup> This kind of appeal simply flies in the face of scholarship. Note that one does not have to accept the literal claim of divine revelation to acknowledge originality, though even scientists speak of inspiration with respect to new theories in divine terms.

In any case, the claim that those who do not share the commitment of devout Sikhs must accept that Guru Nanak was a 'Sant' must itself be totally rejected, on purely scholarly grounds. I think I have clearly established this point on a scholarly basis alone – not on the basis of faith or devotion.

### **5. Did the Singh Sabha Create Sikhism as We Know It?**

In the introduction, I quoted Harjot Oberoi, whose book has been favorably reviewed by Western scholars, won an academic prize, and continues to be cited very often. Let me recapitulate his views with another quote from his book:

There appears equally to be a failure to recognize the differences between the ideology of a period and a historical explanation. It was Sikh reformers in the nineteenth century who, for the first time, labeled many current practices and certain forms of Sikh identity as unacceptable. Historians are at fault when they simply reproduce these value judgements and employ categories invented by a section of the Sikh elites to discredit specific beliefs and rituals (Oberoi, 1994, p. 32)

Here Oberoi is referring to the so-called 'Tat Khalsa' branch of the Singh Sabha movement. He labels them 'Sikh elites' and credits them with inventing a new, 'standardized Sikh identity' (p. 382). Scholars who disagree with Oberoi's perspective are explicitly discredited as reproducing value judgments rather than providing historical explanations. I will argue that the situation is just the opposite.

What exactly did the Tat Khalsa replace? Oberoi describes it as "the polytheism, idol worship, caste distinctions and diversity espoused by Sanatan Sikhism." The term 'Sanatan Sikhism' will be unfamiliar to most, if not all, contemporary Sikhs. Oberoi places the term as itself originating in the late nineteenth century, though I could not find a precise, clear reference in his book, beyond the assertion that the term was current in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Punjab, and became common from the 1880s. In fact, the term, much like what happened with the term 'Sant' that I discussed earlier, appears to have been appropriated by Oberoi and applied in a novel way. Oberoi traces the 'Sanatan tradition' to a compromise made between Khalsa and Sahajdhari Sikhs during the emergence of the Khalsa *misl*s in latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>3</sup> "This is not to imply that his work is wholly original, *for this can never be the case...*" (McLeod, 1968, p. 189, italics are mine).

Some key characteristics of Sanatan Sikhism according to Oberoi are as follows:

Sanatan Sikhs following older Khalsa conventions held the Adi Granth and the Dasam Granth, the two devotional texts, at par. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 93)

The Dasam Granth became paradigmatic for the entire religious culture of the Sanatan Sikhs. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 98)

Sanatan Sikhs ... also began to accord an almost analogous status to the Puranas. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 99)

Avtar Singh Vahiria, the most articulate exponent of Sanatan thinking later in the century, counted Guru Nanak among a long line of avatars, including Ram and Krishna. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 103)

Many among the Sanatan Sikhs took to the worship of images, for it was a time-honoured Indian custom to so honour avatars. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 103)

Along with the worship of images it was considered legitimate to worship living gurus. For an average Sanatan Sikh there was hardly any difference between Sikh gurus and some of their charismatic descendants. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 104)

For Sanatan Sikhs the caste system and its taboos had undoubtedly become an integral part of the Sikh faith, and they did all they could to enforce it. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 107)

...though Sikh ascetic orders like the Udasis were clearly at odds with the world-affirming Khalsa episteme, Sanatan acceptance of the varnasramadharm theory gave them a logical place within the ambit of Sikh tradition. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 107)

If the above, astonishingly, sounds nothing like modern Sikhism, Oberoi's answer is that our surprise reflects the complete victory of the Tat Khalsa. Interestingly, while Oberoi claims to provide a historical explanation, his rhetoric is itself full of value judgments. The Tat Khalsa reformers “aggressively usurped the fight to represent others,” and created a “monolithic, codified and closed culture,” as opposed to the “older pluralist paradigm of Sikh faith.” (Oberoi, 1994, p. 25) There are numerous examples of such rhetoric in his book, which suggest that Oberoi is mourning the extinction of what he calls Sanatan Sikhism, rather than taking an objective scholarly position.

Let me now examine Oberoi's thesis critically, from an academic perspective. I have several points to make, and I shall just summarize them here. First, besides the problem of bias in language (Grewal, 1997, p. 68), Oberoi is also biased in his use of facts. He uses sources and incidents selectively without giving the larger context, or the background or biases of the sources.<sup>4</sup> His neglect of historical context goes deeper. He almost completely neglects the events of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which had led to the displacement of the Sikh Gurus from their traditional centers; the persecution which had made it impossible for Sikhs to control their own sacred sites; and the general chaos that must surely have prevented the core of the Sikh community, the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh, from wielding any influence on social institutions as they struggled to avoid extermination. One cannot understand the patterns of the Sikh community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century without seeing it as an outcome of the preceding period, and Oberoi fails to do so beyond a simplified account of what he terms a Khalsa-Sahajdhari rapprochement in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its immediate aftermath.

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this is reminiscent of the use of sources such as Barthwal (1936) and Chaturvedi (1952) to provide 'neutral' evidence for a 'Sant' tradition.

I have alluded to various groups within Sikhism, in the context of quoting from Oberoi. What was this diversity? Throughout Sikh history, there have been conflicts over succession. I will not go over the details here, but what is clear is that dissident groups have either faded away, or come back into mainstream Sikhism, adopting the Singh identity in particular. Clearly, the institution of appointing a successor, and, after Guru Arjan, the existence of an authoritative Sikh scripture, played a role in defining the center versus offshoots.

Oberoi’s own list of traditions within the Sikh Panth is a hotchpotch of other categories, but excluding dissident groups (such as Minas and Ramraiyas):

The religious diversity within the Sikh Panth [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century] made it possible for its adherents to belong to any one of the following traditions: Udasi, Nirmala, Nanak-panthi, Khalsa, Sahajdhari, Kuka, Nirankari and Sarvaria. (Oberoi, 1994, p. 24)

If one examines each of these groups, almost all of them depart from the core teachings of the Sikh Gurus in one or more fundamental ways. The terms ‘Sahajdhari’, and ‘Nanak-Panthi,’ on the other hand, are generic, though typically in different contexts. However, Oberoi’s examples of Sahajdhari Sikhs are quite idiosyncratic, and Grewal (1997), analyzing Oberoi’s terminology and examples, states, “Oberoi’s Sahajdharis are virtually ‘Udasis’.” However, the Udasis were an early offshoot from the Sikh faith, and departed radically from the teachings of Guru Nanak, as well as his successors, suggesting a deep problem with Oberoi’s labeling and classification.

Ultimately, Oberoi’s account of diversity in the Sikh tradition has no logic at all. Grewal (1997) concludes, “His [Oberoi’s] hypothesis of Sanatan Sikhism in the early nineteenth century appears to be vague and vacuous.” (p. 29) Furthermore, he says, “To talk of multiple identities among the early nineteenth century Sikhs is to resurrect non-entities.” (p. 32) I would put it even more strongly. Oberoi’s characterization of Sanatan Sikhism is defined by groups and beliefs that violate the core teachings of Guru Nanak. This is why the modern Sikh is surprised by Oberoi’s arguments, because the Sikh Gurus would be, not because of the Singh Sabha. Oberoi’s thesis is therefore deeply disingenuous. This is my second important point on this issue.

Finally I would argue that it is clear from the historical record that the Sikhs, from the time of Guru Nanak, recognized themselves as a distinct group. The hymns of several of the Gurus, as well as other early core Sikh sources (the bards and Bhai Gurdas) make it clear that there was this self-consciousness, as well as conceptual clarity in the distinctiveness. I have already argued that there is little basis for placing the early Sikh community within some larger so-called ‘Sant’ tradition. Doctrinally, as well as in core social practices, it was marked as distinct. The Adi Granth played a central, defining role in the Sikh community from 1604 onwards, as emerges very clearly from detailed historical analysis (e.g., Mann (2001)).

Oberoi completely fails to understand this history (or to acknowledge it), or the contents of the Guru Granth Sahib itself, and its internal evidence, as has been pointed

out by Grewal (1997, p. 13) and Pashaura Singh (2003, p. 32).<sup>5</sup> Oberoi also fails to weigh the evidence in the writings of Bhai Gurdas, preferring the less reliable Janamsakhi folk traditions. Grewal (1997), in analyzing the positions of McLeod (1989) and Oberoi, characterizes McLeod’s position as one that “the consciousness of distinct identity [during the period of the first Gurus] was quite clear among the intellectual elite, or at the center, but it was not equally clear among the mass of the Sikhs, or at the periphery. This was a difference of degree.” But this could be said of any religious tradition, even one as centralized and hierarchical as Catholicism.

Another aspect of identity that is stressed by Oberoi is life-cycle rituals, such as those for birth, marriage and death. He gives these practices great importance in the construction of religious identity. According to him, “Prior to the Khalsa transformation, Sikhs do not seem to have possessed a distinct set of life-cycle rituals.” (p. 63) So implicitly, Oberoi has to fall back on his claim that the Khalsa was only one of many equally valid Sikh identities, to maintain his thesis that Sikh identity is a modern creation. But there is detailed evidence that contradicts his statement on social rituals (Grewal, 1990, p. 53; Mann, 2003, pp. 54-55), including the hymns of the Sikh Gurus themselves. In any case, since Khalsa ceremonies and markers predated the Singh Sabha movement, and, as documented by Grewal (1997) and McLeod (1989), and as discussed above, the Khalsa identity was the dominant Sikh identity from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the 19<sup>th</sup>, rather than being one of many equal contenders, it follows that Oberoi’s claims are deficient in multiple respects.

Thus, it is clear that Sikh identity, as defined by belief and by practice, was already distinct early in the period of the Gurus. It certainly evolved through the three centuries after Guru Nanak, but retained its essential character. If there is a scholarly debate, then it has to be conducted at the peripheries of identity. Because Sikhism is not an exclusive or exclusionary religion, because it does not reject other truths, it is easy to confuse this with the lack of a boundary. Diversity in practice, and tolerance of some diversity, do not imply the lack of a moral gradient. The writings of the Sikh Gurus, starting with Guru Nanak, are quite clear and consistent on such points – on what is good, and what is not. Yet they recognize humanity for what it is, with its diversity and its failings: no one is rejected outright. Oberoi neglects the core and focuses at the margins, and he treats these margins without using the moral lens of the Sikh Gurus.

The answer then, is clear: the Singh Sabha movement did not create Sikhism, as we know it today. There was a sharpening of identities and boundaries in that period, but

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<sup>5</sup> One can also note the comments of Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh: “Utterly neglected is the very core of the Sikh religion. How can boundaries be constructed without a center? Guru Granth (the scriptural foundation of Sikh identity), Guru Nanak (the founder of the Sikh tradition), the nine successor Gurus (who build up the Sikh religion) have no place in Oberoi’s study...Oberoi’s statements, “The category ‘Sikh’ was still flexible, problematic, and substantially empty” (p. 53) and “there is no fixed Sikh identity in the early Guru period” (p. 56) are very misleading. Clearly as early as the Guru Granth (e.g., pp. 305, 314, 465, 593, 601, 960, 967, 978) and Bhai Gurdas (Var 33:4, 9: 2, 9: 11), there is ample evidence for a full and established Sikh identity. Actually Oberoi seems to be more at home with the writings of Western sociologists than with that of the Sikhs. The Guru Granth, the Dasam Granth, Rahitnamas, and the literary output of the Singh Sabha poets and writers are seldom mentioned, and when so, grossly misinterpreted. The Guru Granth is mentioned dismissively.” (Singh, 1996, p. 761)

there remains a clear continuity of the tradition from the time of Guru Nanak, through his nine successors, and thereafter. If anything, post-Singh Sabha Sikhism is closer to the Sikhism of Guru Nanak than anything that comes under Oberoi’s umbrella of Sanatan tradition.

## **6. Lessons and Implications**

Why are the above two specific examples so important? The case of the Sants is particularly challenging, because the term has almost become a standard one to use in Western scholarship. Almost no one using the term seems to be aware of, or sensitive to its origins in the community and heritage formation projects of specific, typically Hindu, groups. This creates an unpleasant asymmetry, mistakenly posed as an issue of scholarship vs. belief. Instead, I would characterize it as a co-optation of Western academia by a stream of thought that has taken the world view of 19<sup>th</sup> century European Indologists and turned it to its own purposes. This version of *The Wonder That Was India* (the title of A.L. Basham’s well-known book) has little room for independent minority traditions.

The Sant appellation is probably too deeply entrenched in Western academia to be dislodged, though its ahistoricity, logical flaws and biases need to be reiterated. However, the claim that Guru Nanak was a member of this somewhat mythical tradition needs to be constantly and explicitly challenged. It is possible to dismiss these issues as “merely academic,” ones that have no impact on the lives of ordinary Sikhs. However, both the positions that I have critiqued have found their way into popular books (for example, McLeod’s 1997 paperback book, titled *Sikhism*). The solution to this is to continue to produce high-quality academic work that improves our understanding of the Sikh tradition. I think there is clear evidence to refute the claim that Guru Nanak was a so-called “Sant,” but the issue needs wider visibility within Western academia, by scholars with reputations that carry weight in those circles. This is not to advocate a specific conclusion, or to diminish academic freedom, merely to note the need to level the playing field, and to influence the agenda of which issues are debated.

The role of the Singh Sabha movement also needs to be reassessed in Western academia. From being a reform movement, it has been repositioned by writers such as Oberoi as creating a new, restrictive and limiting form of Sikhi. For any religious tradition, it is easy to identify and document tremendous diversity of practice, and there will always be debates around what constitutes a minimal core of religious observance. The Jewish tradition, with its appellations of orthodox, conservative and reform, among others, illustrates one kind of compromise. In the case of Sikhs, there has always been an acceptance of diversity, even pluralism, but there has also been a strong tendency to define an inviolate normative core. This core has also been subject to debate, but Oberoi’s version of history contains basic errors and strong biases, and it does not truly reveal what the debate has been. In particular, Oberoi’s complete neglect of the period of the Gurus, his misrepresentation of the historical position of the Guru Granth Sahib and Adi Granth, and his misinterpretation of the history of the Khalsa, together undermine his thesis for those who have some understanding of Sikh history and beliefs. In particular, a deep examination of the period of Guru Gobind Singh, and its immediate aftermath,

suggest that the Singh Sabha movement was not out of tune with a Sikh tradition that had evolved over two hundred years, but with a strong degree of consistency of doctrine and ethical norms at its core (Mann, 2008).<sup>6</sup>

As with the case of the Guru Nanak vis-à-vis the Sants, Oberoi’s arguments have received a great deal of traction in Western academia. To some extent, this reflects a tendency for those in such positions to want to defend academic freedom, and one can accept that concern, though it has diverted attention from a rigorous evaluation of Oberoi’s work. Even where reviews have been critical, they have been largely ignored. One problem is that Oberoi has positioned his work in relation to modern continental European philosophers, so that they are implicitly and explicitly used as authorities for his methodological position. He presents himself as a champion of diversity and tolerance, while his critics (along with the Singh Sabha movement) are reduced to being narrow-minded and out-of-date. This is ultimately a new form of Orientalism, or what I have termed a “subalternization” of the Sikh tradition (Singh, 2011).

Note that both the claim that Guru Nanak was a Sant, and the claim that the Singh Sabha movement made a minority version of Sikhi into the dominant one, serve, unwittingly or not, to reduce the status of Sikhi as a distinct tradition with a clear historical tradition. The Khalsa symbols are devalued, the originality of Guru Nanak’s message is devalued, and the value of the currently understood normative core of belief and practice is devalued. Why do I make these statements? One aspect of the issue is that of distinctiveness, originality and subjectivity, but there is also a matter of relativity. Both claims push Sikhi into the position of being a poor cousin of Hinduism, either in beliefs, or in practices, or both. Note that this effect is separate from the validity of the two claims, a validity which I have also challenged.

Perhaps the devaluation would be less apparent in the absence of a Hindutva movement, but the existence of such a movement, and its attempted interface with Western academia, is well known (Kurien, 2004). In this respect, some of the work of Arvind-Pal Mandair and Balbinder Bhogal also presents issues. Mandair (2009), for example, seeks to place Sikhi within a broader Indic tradition. Indeed, he argues that Sikhi is not a religion in the Western sense, and therefore the Singh Sabha reformers have circumscribed Sikhi in a way that departs from the original path.<sup>7</sup> I think there are several problems with this argument. It assumes there is a Western concept of religion, and does not really come to grips with traditions such as Judaism and Islam, which are neither Indic nor European. Further, it seems to neglect the ethical dimensions of the Singh Sabha’s efforts, or indeed the ethical dimensions of any religious tradition – Mandair’s focus on continental European philosophers seems to itself circumscribe his views on

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, Dhavan (2011) has provided a history of the Khalsa that emphasizes diversity of characteristics, motivations and practices of members of the Khalsa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her emphasis is on interpreting events from a perspective of materialism and material incentives. This is a useful contribution, but its weaknesses are in lacking a full understanding of the trajectory of the Sikh community up to the founding of the Khalsa, and of the spiritual roots of the community before and after the Khalsa’s creation.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Mandair (2009, p. 32) states, “neither Sikh experience nor the broader Indic culture from which it is derived can claim to possess a word for “religion” as signifying either a mystical or theological core or a *unified faith community*.” [italics are mine]

how members of different religious traditions might view themselves. Ultimately, Mandair positions the Singh Sabha reformers as victims of the colonial encounter,<sup>8</sup> thereby diminishing their agency and their articulation of a vibrant, continuous tradition.<sup>9</sup> Mandair and Bhogal also emphasize what they see as sensual and corporeal aspects of the Guru Granth Sahib, going much further than McLeod in seeking to connect Sikhi to a larger, hegemonic Indic tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, academics are just as entitled to interpret the message of Guru Nanak and his successors as anyone else, and Mandair and Bhogal provide interesting engagements with the contents of the Guru Granth Sahib, in contrast to Oberoi, who does not. However, the implication of their work that the Singh Sabha reformers were essentially victims of colonialism, and that their impact has been to move mainstream Sikhi away from some more authentic past version, is equally troubling.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, this is a discussion that needs to continue.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper I first reviewed some essentials of the Sikh religion as founded by Guru Nanak, and its subsequent evolution. Next, I tackled two seemingly academic questions, one pertaining to origins, and the other to later development. I argued that there is a clear scholarly case for rejecting views that have become popular in Western academia. I then noted some of the reasons why such problematic interpretations survive, circulate, and even proliferate in academia. There are issues of politics, of institutional cultures, and of a lack of clear, non-polemical refutations of problematic

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<sup>8</sup> The following quote from Mandair (2009, p. 37) is illustrative, “One such moment might be regarded as “subjective.” It consists in revisiting the site of *the trauma caused by the entry of Sikhs and Sikhism into the dominant symbolic order of modernity*, to reopen the site of original lack and the concomitant act of traumatic repression. This revisitation and reopening is not only a psychoanalytic operation, but also, because the site of the first repression (by Singh Sabhā scholars) revolved around the translation of Sikh scripture into the domain of European conceptuality, an interpretive operation—or, rather, *a reinterpretation of Sikh scripture in a way that attempts to release the affects of shame associated with the “scene of colonial surrender”* to Western military and conceptual power.” [Italics are mine]

<sup>9</sup> Mandair (2011), in defending the arguments in his book, states that “terms such as these [shabad-guru, nirgun-sargun, anhad nad] came to be reconstituted through a process of colonial translation as key concepts of an ontotheologically grounded belief system that became foundational to the modern (and ‘orthodox’) Sikh imaginary and which never existed prior to the encounter between Sikhs and the West.”

<sup>10</sup> For example, Bhogal (2007, pp. 16-17) states, “Yet this ‘success’ came with a price: the loss of Indic hybrid namings and heteronymous understandings. Their ‘progress’ is haunted by mixed blessings. Were the Singh Sabha reformists really the carriers of ‘Sikh tradition’? Did they conserve the past of the Gurus or were they in some sense traitors to that past in their inventing of a ‘tradition’ which relied solely on horizontal translations?” And in Bhogal (2012, p. 856), we have the following, “the [Sikh] reformation split the *animal* body from the *rational* mind in the creation of Sikh-ism as an Indic mimete of a Christian-type *monotheism*. . . . the Sikh’s embracing of the world could be more aptly described as an animal sublime.”

<sup>11</sup> Note that the implicit claim being made by these writers is that their interpretations, informed by the work of various continental European philosophers, are superior in some sense to those of the Singh Sabha writers. This is a claim that each individual who reads the Guru Granth Sahib will have to judge for herself. The problem, of course, is that these writers use their position in Western academia and their use of the English language to foreclose the voice of those who wrote in Punjabi a century ago, without the façade of Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, or other European thinkers.

research. These issues need to be addressed patiently, respectfully and with scholarly care.

It is important to note that there is nothing in my analysis that is personalized – there are specific arguments that are analyzed and critiqued. The motives and personalities of the makers of these arguments are not impugned. I have critiqued McLeod’s claim that Guru Nanak was a ‘Sant.’ But McLeod (1968) admits to Guru Nanak being ‘profoundly original’, his having created an ‘integrated and coherent system’, and to the ‘clarity’ and ‘beauty’ of his teachings. However, I would argue (as others have done) that McLeod’s understanding of what Guru Nanak accomplished, both theologically and in social practice, is incomplete and partial.

The religious tradition founded by Guru Nanak has withstood various challenges, including threats of dilution, assimilation and even extermination. In overcoming external challenges, the religion and its social framework have evolved. I have argued that there is an essential continuity of Sikh belief and practice from the time of Guru Nanak. The existence of a clear, consistent scriptural text has played an important role in this continuity, establishing an unchanging center for the tradition. In emphasizing both distinctiveness and continuity, I do not downplay the diversity of practice that is bound to exist in a religious tradition with 20 million followers worldwide. However, diversity does not mean that anything goes: this is a key blind spot in Oberoi’s thinking, for example. And, yet, Sikhism is pluralistic and non-exclusionary in ways that can lead to confusion such as Oberoi’s, as well as to subtle negotiations with other religious traditions.

Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sikhism began to migrate from its South Asian birthplace, and one can now find Sikhs spread all over the world. This obviously creates new challenges, as the Sikhs have not been very well understood by Western scholars and observers, or by Western societies engaged in other global battles. How Sikhi responds to its new situation will depend on the awareness and understanding of its followers. Ultimately, both the Sikhs, and the existing societies of their new homes in places such as Britain, Canada and the United States, have much that is positive to share with each other. This sharing, too, will require mutual understanding, and the academic arena will be an important one for sharing to take place, and for understanding to develop.

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