

Rupturing the Religious Past in the Postcolonial Present

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ABSTRACT: This review discusses Arvind-Pal S. Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (hereafter RSW), published in 2009 by Columbia University Press.

On 16 March 2010, the editor of the *Rozana Spokesman*, a daily Punjabi newspaper, produced in Mohali, Punjab, India, published an editorial, in which he was criticizing the 'Nanakshahi Calendar' that had been produced by the Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the apex institution of the Sikhs. The article was written in the author Joginder Singh Sahwney's usual provocative style, entirely consistent with his previously wellknown controversial statements. In this editorial, the particular issue he was highlighting was the role that the *Nirmalis* and *Udasis* had played with regards to conserving the original texts and artefacts of Guru Nanak. He argues that the *Nirmalis* and *Udasis* burnt the hand-written copy of Guru Nanak's writings, the '*Pothee Sahib*' and therefore made many additions, which are now present in the Guru Granth Sahib. These additions essentially take away the radically anti-brahmical message of the Guru, thus bringing Sikhs back within the fold of Brahminism. Within a week of its publication, the editorial sparked off a major controversy, with the *Jatehdar* (head) of the *Akal Takht* issuing an edict accusing Sahwney of 'blasphemy' and re-emphasizing that he had already been 'ex-communicated' for previous remarks of this nature. The editor, Brjinder Singh Hamdard, of the leading

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Daily Punjabi newspaper, *The Ajit*, moved into the fray with an editorial (25 March) condemning Sahwney for questioning the authenticity of the Guru Granth Sahib and being rude in the manner in which he wrote about Guru Nanak. This was followed by a front page editorial (27 March, 'Slander of the Guru') highlighting further remarks by Sahwney and ultimately concluding that there is no reason to pay attention to someone who has no faith in the authenticity of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Whilst this banter between the two newspapers was taking place, there was also a series of demonstrations and newspaper burning sessions taking place outside the offices of the *Rozana Spokesman*. These protests were organized and coordinated by various youth wings of the SGPC and the Akali Dal (the Sikh political party in power at the local state level). Indeed, a complaint was made to the Punjab police by the SGPC and a case against Sahwney under section 295 A of the Indian Penal code for 'alleged malicious writings about Sikh Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib, and various institutions of the Sikhs' was made. Sahwney himself left his home in Chandigarh and went into hiding in Delhi. The demonstrations and furor over the case, as is usual with such matters in the media, died down quite quickly afterwards.

My detailed description of these events is not to provide some kind of forecast for the reception of *Religion and the Specter of the West* in the social and political climate of East Punjab, but rather to highlight the way in which this case demonstrates one of the central themes of the book, that is, the 'modes of repetition' that come into play any time a controversy arises about the Sikh tradition. Indeed, the Sahwney case provides an apt example of the way in which Sikh discourse remains trapped within a colonial framework that inevitably then results, not in creative dialogue or debate, but violent protest and evocation of state power (here via the law). Let me therefore re-read these events through the critique offered by Mandair.

On a first reading there is a certain congruence between Sahwney's concerns and that of the Singh Sabha scholars who are at the forefront of re-representing the Sikh tradition as a mimesis of other colonial elites. As Mandair states, in terms of Sikh reformists:

...It is rather the influx of Vedantic ideas from the Udasi and Nirmala schools throughout the nineteenth century and its effect on the interpretation of the Sikh scriptures that appears to have been their real concern. (RSW: 218)

The issue of brahminism, that Sahwney also targets, would also have set well with Singh Sabha scholars. At the same time Sahwney clearly demonstrates the confluence between academic history and reformists that Mandair so brilliantly exposes in Chapter 4. The concern with the authenticity of the Guru Granth Sahib (which is the main response Sahwney makes to his critics) sits well with a historic understanding of religion, in which the temporal distance from the original moment may involve a corruption that puts into question access to the transcendent other. Indeed, the questioning of authenticity of

textual sources is one of the mainstays of the history of religions that Mandair is deconstructing and opening up for alternate interpretation.

The response by the *Jathedar* of the *Akal Takht*, also then fits well into the 'vicious cycle' in which modern reformist Sikhism is trapped. Using the language of globalatinization,² the protagonist is to be 'ex-communicated' and charged with 'blasphemy' or defaming of the Guru (which is the headline of the *Ajit* editorial). What is also of interest here is the way in which, to exert authority, the Sikh institution utilizes the power of the law of the Indian state. Though the move from this kind of discursive regime to the power of the state is highlighted by Mandair in terms of a Sikh victimology (RSW: 299), it also operates to support religious institutions in their boundary maintenance. Indeed, the actions of the SGPC in this case highlight one of the themes which Mandair outlines, as dominating Sikh discourse since the Singh Sabha refiguration: those of '*individual and collective identity*', '*Sikh ethics*', '*Topologies of death and necrophilia*', '*Systematic eradication of myth and mythic art*' and '*Partition/parturition*' (RSW: 236–37). In further exploration of the 'Sikh ethics' theme, Mandair's observation that discourse on ethics is made to conform to 'the attributes of a static immutable God, which in turn define a moral standard to which all Sikhs must somehow conform' (RSW: 236–37), succinctly outlines the response of Sikh institutions to the Sahwney case. In sum, the themes outlined precisely circumscribe the scholarship and much of the activism around which Sikhs have mobilized or been motivated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

To break out of this discourse is one of the essential aims of RSW. For Mandair, the problem is the 'neocolonial Sikh imaginary, which continues to exert a stranglehold on contemporary Sikh thinking' (RSW: 207). The solution is not to 'dismiss' Sikh theology or mysticism, but rather to rupture these discourses to open up the space for a 'radically different reading' which would accord with 'postcolonial diasporic struggle for *dis-identification*' (RSW: 207; author's emphasis). The outcome of this process is the constitution of 'a post-colonial and postnationalistic global diasporic Sikh imaginary' (RSW: 207). Though Mandair does locate his effort in the 'Western Sikh diaspora' he does not want to be contained by this location as this both undermines the effort to universalize and indeed re-asserts binaries of 'West versus Rest, theory versus empiricism and ethnic versus native' (RSW: 441), which are part of the colonial mindset that the book is determined to undermine. There are two targets for this practice of intellectual struggle that characterizes this book's endeavour: first the 'nationalised/identitarian modes of repetition that have encompassed Sikh "tradition" in its entirety' (RSW: 27) and secondly the 'privileged space of secular academic discourse' (RSW: 28). Though, as Mandair

2. Mandair (RSW: 104) applies Derrida's idea of globalatinization to describe the way in which concepts developed in Roman Christianity come to dominate the way that all religions behave; thus Sikhs will deploy the concept of excommunication.

demonstrates throughout the book, but especially in Chapter 4, the body of traditional scholarship and secular academic discourse are deeply imbricated.

Before going on to outline the method and practice which would allow Sikhs to decolonize their intellectual discourse, another question arises from the desire for change inherent in this book: why would those Sikhs who are invested in the colonial architecture and institutions of modern reformist Sikhism choose to decolonize? One could argue that it would enable a break from stories of the kind that opens this review. It may also resolve some of the ongoing tensions between different Sikh groups, in terms of practices. But to give up the enunciation 'I am a Sikh', which is one of the central affirmations of a colonized response, would involve an abandonment of institutional power at an unprecedented scale. It is after all this enunciation which forms the basis for the elections to the SGPC, which in turn provide the management of the historic Gurdwaras in Punjab and the bedrock of electoral support for the Akali Dal at the Punjab state and India parliamentary level. While it could be convincingly argued that Mandair's perspective may be better for the spiritual wellbeing (and this would automatically impact on the material in Mandair's schema) of those who hold power in these institutions, it would equally undermine the ground from which they gain power. In this sense, there is a strong feeling of the utopian and optimistic in Mandair's work, not unlike that to be found in the text *Empire* by Hardt and Negri, which forms an occasional foil for the theoretical arguments pursued in the text.

There are no doubt Sikhs in Punjab (though not the editors of the *Rozana Spokesman* and *The Ajit*) who would be sympathetic and open to Mandair's message of decolonization. But one of the key tasks of this book is to clear the philosophical ground for this decolonization to take place. This requires an intense engagement with Hegel and his influence on the ways in which Sikhism came to be understood by Singh Sabha reformers. Whilst this philosophical journey is not necessary for the re-formulation of religion that Mandair proposes, it certainly enables an engagement which provides conviction in the re-interpretation. Indeed, it is Sikhs with a 'global, diasporic imaginary' that will be more able to attend to this text, and these are more likely to be found in the West than in the Punjab. It might be further argued that the question 'What is your religion?', or the demand for a religious identity, is always most cogently called for by those for whom a need for a transcendent God is most urgent, that is, those in power. British imperialism demanded religion from Indians, and US imperialism demands religion from its new immigrants. Mandair's book is a response to the same call from the state, but transposed onto the imperial motherland, rather than at one of its 'other' centres.

Mandair's response, though, is not to accede to the question 'What is your religion?' with the simple reply 'I am a Sikh'; rather, he answers this question (which has to be responded to) via another question which haunts the book: 'What if *religio* remained untranslatable?' (RSW: 42). This does not entail a

refusal of religion, something that in any case is impossible in the philosophical argument Mandair puts forward. A retort of some sort is necessary as the question has to be answered for a Sikh subject to be modern. The possibility offered by Mandair is a re-interpretation of the *Adi Granth* which highlights the paradoxical nature of the process of interpretation and therefore a religion without theology, but also a religion which is grounded in instability and therefore in the paradox itself:

This paradoxical property of the concept *sabda guru*—radically conservative yet radically subversive, the very element of ‘religion’ but at the same time the very element of disenchantment, the most religious yet at the same time the most secularizing of principles—can be seen as one of several theoretical and political hinges on which it is possible to stake the task of Sikh postcoloniality. (RSW: 36–37).

To further develop the concept of *śabda guru*, Mandair has to delve into the Sikh tradition as it is performed nowadays to further reveal the way in which colonial architecture, academic anthropology and brahminical ideologies stand in the way of the liberating potentials of the *Adi Granth*. In Chapter 5, ‘Ideologies of Sacred Sound’, Mandair offers a brilliant exposé of the synergy between brahminical hierarchy, the ‘vedic economy’ and the Orientalist view of religion. In this chapter, Mandair expounds the way in which caste is intimately linked to orality and therefore to an anthropological stance, which whilst attempting to provide the natives with agency, actually seals them back within another hierarchy or social ordering: ‘the Brahminic ideology of sacred sound, which was socially institutionalised through the framework of caste’ (RSW: 331). Whilst acknowledging that this model lives on ‘even within orthodox Sikh practices’, and that a ‘much stronger and pervasive strand’ exists that resists these practices (RSW: 331), he does not fully explain where this strand might be found in existing Sikh practices or discourse. In a note to Chapter 5, we are told that non-modern forms of signification do survive in the oral exegesis of figures such as ‘Sant Singh Maskin, Darshan Singh Ragi (ex-jathedar of Akal Takht, etc.)’ (RSW: 477 n. 96). It may well be that the follow-up to this book on ‘Sikh Sovereignty’ which is mentioned in the last chapter will provide more detail of those aspects of the tradition that indicate greater potential for a Sikh postcoloniality.

It is also in this chapter, though, that the ground is finally cleared for Mandair to provide his own interpretation, or at least the initial ground for a future interpretation, of the *Adi Granth*. In the wake of Bhai Vir Singh’s intense elaboration of the *mul mantar*, Mandair returns to this key opening of the *Adi Granth* and provides an example of a reading which is only possible once the space of the colonized mind has been opened up by deconstructing theology and bringing God from up high down to the ground. In re-interpreting some of the key terms from the Sikh tradition—*Shabd-Guru*, *Nam*, *kirpa*, *satguru*, *gurmukh* and *man*—Mandair aims to derive a ‘posttheistic’ way for liberation. In place of a transcendent God we are given

'*nam*' which as an aporia embeds both detachment and worldly experience in one word. Here the possibility for truthful living in the here and now is central to the reading of the *mul mantar* that Mandair offers. While the liberation on offer by Nanak is 'primarily a reorientation of the consciousness' (RSW: 375), this necessarily involves a change in the material, and thus *nam* is not solely about the mystical terrain but also ultimately about the condition of the political. This interpretation ends Chapter 5, with a turn from the 'reorientation of consciousness' (RSW: 375) to the practice of *nam simran*, which is 'a concrete sacrificial practice for transforming memory' (RSW: 377). As if to emphasize the sense in which Mandair is working within tradition, the life of the Gurus is evoked as a final ontological proof of the exegesis offered.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the exegesis offered in *Religion and the Specter of the West* offers a radical reading of the Sikh tradition, although this is not as an abstract exercise. As a small example, the prevalence and continuance of *Sants* and living Gurus has continued alongside the prominence of the *Adi Granth*. This has often been justified through the requirement of a Guru to enable the transformation to *gurmukh*. *Nam* cannot be obtained through one's own efforts as this would allow the ego to think that it is by itself that enlightenment is being achieved. 'Grace' or 'favourable glance', would at first reading seem to require a teacher or spiritual Guru. In this space, many have established themselves as *Sants* within the Sikh tradition and Gurus of overlapping and parallel traditions (Nirankari, Namdhari etc.). Mandair immediately questions this interpretation by asking who was Nanak's Guru? In response: 'Nanak's own preceptor, however, was not a human guru but an impersonal principle: The Word (*śabda*), which Nānak also calls *satguru*' (RSW: 374). This is a brilliant move, not only in terms of disrupting the presence of human intercession within the Sikh tradition, but also because for the first Guru to be the first he cannot have a previous human Guru, thus breaking the cycle of repetition that produces a theological understanding of religion.

By way of a conclusion I want to return to the two aims of the book that I identified earlier: first, the desire to break with the colonial modes of repetition that have encompassed the Sikh tradition, and secondly the intervention in academic discourse. Whilst I have dealt in some detail with the first aim of the book and would want to advocate that the book certainly fulfils that intention, I want to end by briefly attending to the extent to which an intervention is made in secular academic discourse. What is key to the philosophical interventions that Mandair makes is an assertion of 'religion' as a main conceptual tool, as a question rather than a given category. One dimension of this insertion involves a particularization of recent philosophical accounts that ignore the Christian basis and the Hegelian influence of their own practices. Indeed, the most cogent critique and expose is that of the contemporary and wellknown philosopher, Žižek. It is not the universalizing tendencies of Žižek's and others' speculations that trouble Mandair, but rather the closure

that this involves. Intervention in these secular spaces implies opening up the site of the Universal for competing claims on the same ground. This is not a new problem, for essentially this discovery that other intellectual frameworks could provide the same basis for speculation and reason as Europe's was something that Hegel discovered but then had to cover up, as this would undermine European supremacy and universality. It is the lack of acknowledgment that this tendency is being followed by a whole range of theorists, often with an anti-imperialist political perspective, that troubles Mandair. By forwarding the possibility of alternate universals and by decolonizing the interpretive framework of the *Adi Granth*, Mandair evokes the potential of developing a Sikh philosophy which can 'change the nature of universals' (RSW: 430) and enable Sikhs 'to feel confident again about asserting ancient and very practical notions of freedom and action based on the nondual One' (RSW: 430). Indeed, in this sense, this book can be read in totality as the lever prising open the space for the emergence of a universal Sikh philosophy. Whether this is a sufficiently powerful tool to disrupt the secular space of academic discourse remains to be seen, but as an attempt it is worth supporting.