Forgotten No More

Mark Juergensmeyer
University of California, Santa Barbara

In 1976 we hosted the first Sikh Studies conference ever held in North America at Berkeley, where I was teaching at the time. My main contribution was a paper on how the Sikh tradition was portrayed in the literature on world religion. Actually there was very little to report. Sikhism as a religious community and a body of faith was virtually invisible in the literature on comparative religions. I titled my presentation "The Forgotten Tradition."[1] Over fifty years later, however, the situation has vastly changed. Sikhism is forgotten no more.

Part of the reason for that is due to the scholarly influence of one of the participants at that 1976 conference in Berkeley, Jagtar Singh Grewal. He had already established himself as one of the leading historians of the Sikh tradition, and one of the founders of the modern field of Sikh studies. Grewal was a worthy colleague and critic of the well-known W.H. McLeod, who was also at the conference, and we knew that we could not have held the event without Grewal. So with the support of Narinder Singh Kapany and the Sikh Foundation, we flew him out from Punjab to California for the occasion.

For me it was a chance to renew my association with an old friend. I first met Grewal when I was affiliated with Punjab University in 1967. A workshop on Punjab history was held at, I believe, the YMCA building in Chandigarh, and various notables were invited, including Romila Thapar, who even then was recognized as a leading figure in the field. Grewal was just establishing his reputation—though his groundbreaking *Guru Nanak in History* would not be published until two years later, to much acclaim.[2] Clearly he was the star of the show.

When he came to Berkeley I had the fun of showing him around Northern California in my little sports car. He seemed to be gently bemused at most everything Californian, and much of the discussion at the conference centered around him and his critiques of the various presentations.

Fortunately for me, he seemed to like my contributions, including a paper on the Ghadar Party, and the aforementioned "The Forgotten

Tradition." I remember him saying that it would not be long before it would be forgotten no more, and indeed that has become the case.

Clearly his scholarship and that of other pioneers in Sikh Studies, such as W. H. McLeod, have helped to make the study of the Sikh tradition "intellectually respectable," as one of the other participants in the conference, the eminent historian Ainslie Embree, deemed it. Embree advised that this respect would be necessary in order for scholars to take Sikhism seriously. The insistence of historians such as Grewal and McLeod that Sikhism be studied for its own intrinsic merit was a significant shift in the way that the tradition had usually been discussed before. They indeed helped to make the study of the Sikh tradition "intellectually respectable."

When I was a graduate student studying South Asian culture, the subject of Sikhism was always a footnote on the dominant great traditions of India. It was incorrectly seen either as a minor offshoot of Hinduism or worse, as a syncretism between Hinduism and Islam. Grewal and his colleagues lifted Sikh studies out of the limitations of Indian religious studies and made it worthy of something appreciated on its own.

It is understandable that the Sikh tradition was initially thought to be a regional cultural phenomenon. In the 1960s, for instance, there were not many Sikhs outside the Punjab. Sikhism was distinctively Punjabi in that it arose in that territory, its central shrines are in that area, the language of its sacred texts and rituals is classical Punjabi, and the culture associated with the Sikh community—wherever it might be in the world—is Punjabi as well. When one thinks of Sikhism one thinks of the 'Golden Temple' (the Harmandir Sahib or Darbar Sahib) in the Punjabi city of Amritsar, just as readily as one thinks of the Vatican in Rome when referencing Roman Catholic Christianity. To many, Punjabis are Sikhs and Sikhs are Punjabis, and Sikhism would be unimaginable without Punjab as a cultural locus.

Increasingly, however, Sikhism is world religion that is becoming a global religion. 'Global religion' in this instance means something different from 'world religion.' A world religion is a religious tradition that is a significant presence because of the size of the community associated with it, its endurance over history, and its importance within the pattern of the world's civilizations. Sikhism has long had these characteristics. It has been worthy of being deemed a 'world religion' in the decades that followed my dire description in the 1970s that it was a 'forgotten tradition' in the minds of many observers of the world's religious scene. In recent decades the expansion of the Sikh community

around the world and the commanding public presence of Sikhs both in India and elsewhere have made it hard to forget.

After the change in the US immigration laws in 1964, a flood of new Indian migrants began to pour into the region. They were often in highly skilled positions in health service and the computer-related information technology sector. Many were urban Sikhs, joining the established largely agricultural Sikh community in the farming areas of California's central valley. So the sheer number of Sikhs and the rapid increase of highly visible attractive new Gurdwaras made it difficult for Sikhism in North America to be ignored.

At the same time, Sikhism increasingly has become part of the transnational fabric of religious communities that are spread throughout the earth. What makes this phenomenon global, and different from being a world religion, is when the ideas and practices of a faith tradition are interwoven with other cultures, and their own practices adapt and change in response to the multicultural environments in which they are found. When Sikhs in British Columbia proudly march through the streets on their sacred days to demonstrate their allegiance to the faith, they are proclaiming, rightly, that Sikhism is a world religion of some stature. When Sikhs in California adapt their social practices to American customs, proudly display the American flag in Gurdwaras, and take part in interfaith councils, they are stating, also correctly, that Sikhism is a global religion as well.

The statistics help to make the case. Though the precise numbers are contested, the Sikh community is said to claim over 25 million adherents worldwide. This makes Sikhism a larger global religious community than Judaism, and like Jews, Sikhs are found everywhere. The Punjab state of India is the only place on earth where Sikhs are in the majority, but over thirty percent of the world's Sikhs live outside the Punjab.[3] They live elsewhere in India and are dispersed throughout the major continents. Significant clusters of Sikhs predominate in some regions. There is a large Sikh population in the UK, Canada, and the US, especially in California where, as I have mentioned, there is a century-long tradition of a vibrant Sikh presence in or near Yuba City, Marysville, Stockton and other rural areas of the state's Central Valley. Sikhs in UK and Canada have increasingly been a part of the multicultural societies of urban regions. In Vancouver and the state of British Columbia in Canada, there is a higher percentage of Sikhs in the population (2.3%) than in India as a whole (2%). In almost all of these cases these migratory Sikhs are people who are

ethnically and culturally rooted in the Punjab but who have settled elsewhere. In some cases these expatriate communities are generations old.

The move outward from the Punjab began almost from the beginning of the faith in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sikh communities that are found even today in Afghanistan and Iran are likely descendants of Sikh traders who settled in the regions as early as the 16th century. The famous account of Guru Nanak's travels recall that he visited Baghdad; and indeed a Gurdwara in that city is said to have been constructed in honor of his visit. It is likely that trade was also a factor in the movement of the Sikhs westward along the overland trade routes from the Punjabi city of Lahore to Kabul and thence to Isfahan and Baghdad. Similar trade opportunities took the Sikhs northward along the great Silk routes that connected India to Balkh, now in Afghanistan, and then to the key pan-Asian trade hubs, Bukhara and Samarkand, now in Uzbekistan. From there they traveled throughout Central Asia and beyond.

Later, beginning in the nineteenth century, the Sikhs found other opportunities to settle abroad. Many Sikhs had enlisted as soldiers in the Indian army, and the British government provided an avenue for Sikhs to serve in the military elsewhere in the world under British control, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. In the early twentieth century, opportunities for farming attracted rural Sikhs to Canada and California. In the mid-twentieth century and continuing to the present, Sikhs trained in technical and engineering skills have been lured abroad.

As Sikhs began to live elsewhere in the world, they brought both their faith and their Punjabi culture with them. In time, Sikh communities began to incorporate local customs into their tradition. In the early part of the twentieth century, for instance, many expatriate Sikhs shaved their beards and cut their hair, deviating from the more traditional standard. In California in the early twentieth century, some Sikh bachelors married Mexican women. There is a thriving Punjabi-Mexican interracial community in the California border city of El Centro.[4]

Hence, like other religious traditions, the history of Sikhism has been one of dispersion, interaction and transformation, and profound cultural change. Though most Sikhs will assert that the inner core of the tradition's teachings have endured and the heart of their faith has remained intact, immutable through the years, no one can deny that the cultural vessels in which those ideas have been carried have been varied and the outside influences have been considerable.

The scripture of the Sikh tradition is regarded as a unique revelation. Yet the Guru Granth Sahib and the stories of Guru Nanak recorded in early Janamsakhi literature, indicate an awareness of the Hindu and Muslim communities living in the subcontinent during the Gurus' lifetimes. Echoes of Hindu and Muslim saints appear in Sikh literature. Sikhs have always lived comfortably with persons of other religious affiliations without losing what is distinctive about their own.

In a global era, when people move easily from place to place and take their old religion with them, their beliefs and customs are affected. When people settle in a locale as an expatriate community, some curious things begin to happen to old religious ideas and practices—in some cases these cultural elements become rigid and insular, in other cases they adapt and change. Sometimes this interaction and the resistance to change produces hostility, as Sikh communities have discovered when they have persisted in wearing the turban and other forms of traditional clothing that many of their American and European neighbors have regarded as arcane and sectarian. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11, some Islamophobic Americans mistakenly identified Sikhs as Muslim, and many were brutally attacked. But regardless of the social tensions that cultural interaction creates, in time a certain amount of acceptance and assimilation has occurred.

Some of this social tension is experienced within the diasporic communities themselves. Often it is an older generation of immigrants that is deeply suspicious of attempts to modify familiar customs and cultural practices to suit the patterns of the host society. Disputes have arisen over such matters as the proper clothing to be worn in public, whether dating and marriage outside the community is permissible, whether Sikh men should shave their beards, and whether Sikh women should wear Punjabi clothing and headscarves. The more conservative members think—correctly—that in adapting to the practices and customs of the host society their own culture is changing. The question for the community is whether such changes are superficial as long as the more important aspects of belief and religious adherence are maintained.

The global diasporas of peoples and cultures can transform traditions. Though it is likely that Sikhs will retain certain fundamental elements of their tradition—just as Christians, Buddhists, and Jews have done in expatriate communities that they have established abroad—it is also likely that there will be changes. They will face some of the issues of acculturation and transformation that every tradition has encountered,

and raise questions that go to the core of their religion—such as whether outsiders who marry into their communities and convert to Sikhism can be accepted as equals. Increasingly, the developments in the diaspora affect the global community of Sikhs, as the center of gravity within the community has moved outside the Punjab.

Chronicling these global changes has become the work of a number of scholars who have built on the foundational historical research of Jagtar Singh Grewal and his colleagues. Some of the research has been on Sikh communities in diaspora in different locations around the world. Grewal's colleague, W. H. McLeod wrote on the Punjabis in his native New Zealand.[5] Gurinder Singh Mann co-authored a book on *Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in America*.[6] Several books cover the Sikhs in Britain.[7]

Other works have tried to span the world, tracing the development of the Sikh tradition as a worldwide and increasingly global phenomenon. Darshan Singh Tatla has written on *The Sikhs in Diaspora*,[8] and two book recently cover the global dimensions of the Sikh community and the Sikh tradition – *Global Sikhs,* edited by Opinderjit Kaur Takhar and Doris Jacobsh, and *Sikhs in Global Context*, edited by Pashaura Singh.[9]

The fact that major book publishers in UK and the United States as well as in India have devoted resources to books that focus on the worldwide spread of the Sikh community is ample testimony to its increasingly global recognition as a significant world religion. The Routledge publishing house in the UK has even devoted a book series to the study of Sikhism.

The increase of available works on Sikhism around the world is a testimony not only to the global spread of the Sikh diaspora, but also to the increase of scholarly awareness of the tradition and a diversity of studies relating to it. When we held the first conference on Sikh studies in North America in 1976 there was not a single course devoted to the Sikh tradition anywhere in the US, Canada or UK (to my knowledge), much less any faculty positions devoted to it. W. H McLeod taught the first course in Sikhism at Berkeley when he was a visiting professor there in the 1970s. Some fifty years later the situation is dramatically different.

There are now scores of courses in Sikhism taught in the UK, US, Canada, and elsewhere outside India, and a significant number of faculty positions in which teaching Sikhism and Punjabi language are sole or major requirements. Several endowed chairs have been established, including the Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair in Global and Sikh Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, sponsored by Narinder Singh

Kapany in honor of his mother; its chairholders have included Gurinder Singh Mann, Anshu Malhotra, and myself. Almost every campus of the University of California now hosts courses on Sikhism, including endowed chairs at UC-Riverside and UC-Irvine as well as the one at UC-Santa Barbara. Many also have Panjabi language courses in tandem with courses on Sikh history and culture.

In 2020 I was contacted by Narinder Singh Kapany, who had helped to fund the 1976 Sikh studies conference, with an interesting suggestion. The time had come, Kapany said, to survey the field of Sikh studies again. But since the world was virtually shut down during the covid pandemic, Kapany suggested that instead of convening an in-person conference, we try something different. He proposed that we hold a series of zoom-based interviews with various figures in Sikh-related teaching and research in the UK, Canada, and the US. Kapany asked if I would be the moderator for the series, to be sponsored by his Sikh Foundation.

I readily agreed. Though Narinder was unable to see the results of his proposal since he died shortly after our conversation at the age of 94, nonetheless we soldiered on with a remarkable series of one-hour interviews with a diverse group of scholars.[10] They came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and a diversity of academic settings, from small religious-related colleges to large state-sponsored universities. What they all had in common was an affection for studying the Sikh tradition in all of its complexity.

Fifty years earlier at our Berkeley conference on Sikh studies, our conception of the field of Sikh studies was that it was based on early Sikh history and scriptural studies of the Guru Granth Sahib and related texts. What my conversations with leading figures in the field has revealed, however, is that the field has not only expanded in numbers of scholars, but in the diversity of Sikh-related subjects studied. The early history and scriptures of the tradition continue to be foundational, of course. But now there are academic positions and courses on Sikh art and music, worship patterns, community relations, intercultural understanding, and much more.

Our 1976 conference is no longer the sole event that has focused on Sikh studies in North America and the UK. At least one event a year is held somewhere outside India, and often more. There is a Punjab studies circle based in the UK, and a Sikh studies unit of the American Academy of Religion. No one would think of creating a course on world religion today without the inclusion of the Sikh tradition – not erroneously

described as an offshoot of Hinduism or as a Hindu-Muslim syncretism, but as a proud independent tradition worthy of studying on its own merits. It has achieved that "intellectual respectability" that Ainslie Embree required in his 1976 comments many years ago.

Jagtar Singh Grewal lived long enough to witness his great legacy and see the flowering of the field of Sikh studies. A few months before his death in August, 2022, at the age of 95, I was in Chandigarh and able to talk briefly with him. Though his voice was weak, his spirit was strong. At an earlier meeting with him I knew that even in his mid-90s he was continuing to work on his research. I asked him what project he was working on, and he told me he was thinking again about his groundbreaking work, *Guru Nanak in History*.[11] He said that he had found some new material indicating that Guru Nanak might have been even more aware of the diverse religious landscape of the Punjab than he had previously realized. Thus even from the beginning, it seems, Sikhism was truly a global religion. It was not forgotten then, and today it is certainly forgotten no more.

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[1] Mark Juergensmeyer and Gerald Barrier, eds., *Sikh Studies: Essays on a Changing Tradition,* Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979.

[2] Jagtar Singh Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History,* Chandigarh: Panjab Univ., 1969.

[3] Source for numbers: Census of India, Pew Research and WorldData Info https://www.worlddata.info/religions/sikhism.php.

[4] Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans,* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

[5] W.H.McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand,* Columbia MO: South Asia Books, n.d.

[6] Gurinder Singh Mann, David Numrich and Raymond B. Williams, *Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in America,* New York: Oxford, 2002.

[7]Darshan Singh Tatla and Eleanor Nesbitt, *Sikhs in Britain: An Annotated Bibliography,* Warwick UK: Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, 1987.

[8] Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora,* London: Routledge, 2005.

[9] Opinderjit Kaur Takhar and Doris Jacobsh, eds, *Global Sikhs,* London: Routledge 2023, and Pashaura Singh, ed., *Sikhism in Global Context,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[10] Recordings of the conversations may be viewed on the website of the Sikh Foundation, http://www.sikhfoundation.org/conversations-in-sikh-studies-with-dr-mark-juergensmeyer/.

[11] Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.