

## Guru Nanak and the Historians

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The year 2019 marked the 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. Since the celebration of his 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary in 1969 studies of Guru Nanak have varied in their aims, in the questions that have guided their inquiries, and in the perspectives that have been brought to bear on this important subject.<sup>1</sup> That is to be expected and is not the central concern of this essay. Instead it will focus upon the more technical aspects of the historians' work. It is at these points that what Van A. Harvey called the tension between the religious community's will-to-believe on the one hand and the modern historian's will-to-know on the other becomes most acute.<sup>2</sup> The aim here is to explore how this tension is negotiated in historical treatments of Guru Nanak.<sup>3</sup> Apart from Guru Nanak's own contributions to the *Adi Granth*, the main sources historians have to rely upon are the *janamsakhis* which were written a long time after Guru Nanak's death and are hagiographic, and hence very problematic, in nature. After extracting from them and other sources what can be considered reliable evidence, those pieces of evidence must be connected together into an account that can stand the test of critical scrutiny.

This is no easy task under normal circumstances and, as Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech have so eloquently pointed out in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, the political context of Sikh studies during the years immediately following Guru Nanak's 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary in 1969 up to the end of the twentieth century put enormous pressure on scholars in the field of Sikh studies to preserve and propagate a homogenous view of Sikhism in keeping with popular Sikh sentiment because "Sikhism was in danger".<sup>4</sup> This only exacerbated the normal tension between the will-to-believe and the will-to-know.

This essay begins with an analysis of the sections on Guru Nanak found in two well-regarded histories of Sikhism and the Sikhs written before the 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary celebrations began. One was published in India and the other in the West. Together they provide a useful base point from which to analyze two much fuller studies of Guru Nanak which appeared immediately before and during the anniversary celebrations. Since both authors, W.H. McLeod and J.S. Grewal, went on

to become prominent and prolific authors of works on Sikh history, some of their subsequent work will be taken into account as well. Finally, a sampling of historical works on Guru Nanak published by other scholars from that time up to Guru Nanak's 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary will be considered in order to bring this analysis closer to the present.

## I

In *A Short History of the Sikhs* Teja Singh, a prominent Sikh theologian, and Ganda Singh, a prominent Sikh historian, set out to make what they considered to be "the first attempt to write a history of Sikhs from a secular stand-point".<sup>5</sup> This history, they said, "reveals the gradual making and development of a nation in the hands of ten successive leaders, called Gurus".<sup>6</sup> The authors therefore set the life and work of Guru Nanak within the context of this "gradual making and development of a nation" and assigned him the role of the one who perceived "the true principles of reform" and laid "those foundations which enabled his successor Gobind to fire the minds with a new nationality, and to give practical effect to the doctrine that the lowest is equal to the highest, in race and creed, in political rights as in religious hopes".<sup>7</sup>

Teja Singh and Ganda Singh said very little about the sources of the life of Guru Nanak except when seeking to establish certain base-points with reference to his birth or to the extent of his travels. Many of the incidents they described were not footnoted at all, on the apparent assumption that these can be taken as generally accepted knowledge. However, they did indicate that many of the sources about Guru Nanak appear to be "only settings provided for the word-pictures drawn by him in his verses".<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they recorded in their history only one story with an element of the miraculous in it.<sup>9</sup> By removing the miracle stories and by seeking to justify the base-points in the life of Guru Nanak on the basis of an examination of the evidence, the authors gave their life story of Guru Nanak considerable plausibility. It may therefore be concluded that they tended to accept the tradition about Guru Nanak where it stood, except when confronted with miracles, impossible happenings, or controversies about key points in his career; their position vis-à-vis their sources was thus one of partial autonomy.

The argument about the role of Guru Nanak in the development of a new nation came into focus at the point where Guru Nanak returned

from his travels to witness Babar's sack of Saidpur. One of the "hymns of blood" was quoted and Guru Nanak's anguish over the suffering noted. The authors then asked, "What would he have done, this master of the herd, had he been in the position of Guru Gobind Singh . . . if he had a nation at his back". The answer implied is that Guru Nanak too would have fought such oppression and injustice. The authors went on to point out that "he did not sit down in impotent rage and utter idle jeremiads. He did as much as was possible under the circumstances".<sup>10</sup> Following this statement is an estimate of Guru Nanak's work. Verses from the *Adi Granth* were cited to show Guru Nanak's concern for the "social and political disabilities of his people".<sup>11</sup> The authors stated that in Guru Nanak's estimation moral degradation—ignorance and corruption—lay at the heart of the people's problem. He therefore sought through his preaching to set people free from bondage to numerous gods and goddesses as well as to place a higher value on men and women themselves; he instituted inter-dining to give practical effect to the ideal of equality; he used the Punjabi language to spread his message; and he set a personal example of his ideals in his own life.<sup>12</sup>

But do these data lead to the conclusion that Guru Nanak would have taken up the sword against tyranny and injustice if this had been a viable option at the time? This interpretation does place a very heavy load of meaning upon Guru Nanak's reaction to the sack of Saidpur. In fact this event became Teja Singh's and Ganda Singh's key to understanding Guru Nanak's life. Moreover, the warrant used to move from the data they provide to the conclusion they arrived at, namely that Guru Nanak's work was later put to the use for which he had originally intended it, is a dubious one. It could be challenged by asking whether the uses to which Guru Nanak's work were later put were not *read back into* his intentions for it. No backing for such continuity between Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh is provided, although it might be the implicit one of faith, namely a doctrine of the Guru which implies a clear continuity of intent from one Guru to the next.<sup>13</sup>

The history of the Sikhs according to Khushwant Singh is the story of "the rise, fulfillment, and collapse of Punjabi nationalism". This story began with Guru Nanak "initiating a religious movement emphasizing what was common between Hinduism and Islam and preaching the unity of these two faiths practiced in the Punjab".<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Guru Nanak founded a new religion, started a new pattern of living, and "set in motion an agrarian movement whose impact was felt all over the

country".<sup>15</sup> In addition, he was "the first popular leader of the Punjab in recorded history".<sup>16</sup> As these quotations indicate, in this study Guru Nanak was placed more within the context of the social and political history of the Punjab than within the religious history of the Sikhs.

Khushwant Singh devoted a four page appendix to an analysis of the sources of the life of Guru Nanak. He was of the view that there was an original, but no longer extant, biography of Guru Nanak that provided the basis of the *janamsakhi* accounts which, in turn, added or deleted details from it and from each other. These *janamsakhis* were "written by semi-literate scribes for the benefit of a wholly illiterate people" and thus were full of miracles, of contradictions, and of special pleading for one or another branch of Guru Nanak's family. Their value for the historian lay in the facts that they not only embody early tradition about Guru Nanak, including memories of those who knew him personally, but also that they "furnish useful material to augment the bare but proven facts of his life".<sup>17</sup> Yet Khushwant Singh felt that their contents must be tested against other evidence. He concluded on a cautious but positive note about these sources that "when we put together all the material listed above, check one with another, discard the miraculous, delete the accretions of the credulous, we are still left with enough to recreate a life story with a fair degree of authenticity".<sup>18</sup> This cautious optimism and trust in the traditions he used are reflected in the twenty pages on the life of Guru Nanak. The miraculous element is eliminated<sup>19</sup> and the *janamsakhi* accounts are accepted where plausible.<sup>20</sup>

Khushwant Singh did not state his argument on the development of Punjabi nationalism or on the role of Guru Nanak within that development directly; it must be inferred from a number of references to Punjabi nationalism. His line of reasoning seems to be that, socially, Punjabi nationalism was a sense of common Punjabi identity and, politically, it was the effort to establish an independent Punjab state.<sup>21</sup> Guru Nanak attempted, on the one hand, to destroy the old identities which were essentially religious ("there is no Hindu; there is no Mussalman") and, on the other, to capitalize on the new spirit of toleration between the two communities by working out a new religious synthesis combining elements of both creeds, and by establishing new traditions which were neither Hindu nor Muslim but appropriate to uniting them on the basis of common elements. In the process Guru Nanak created a new community which was to embody increasingly this

Punjabi nationalism and at the same time won for himself and for his ideal some admirers who remained outside his community.<sup>22</sup>

Two points are of central importance in the development of Khushwant Singh's argument. The first is that Guru Nanak effected a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam that later took on a personality of its own.<sup>23</sup> The more common view was that Sikhism had a distinct personality of its own from the very start, i.e., with Guru Nanak himself, and Khushwant Singh did not measure the teachings and institutions of Guru Nanak against each of these two alternative possibilities to see which one provided the more adequate explanation. The second and even more crucial point in Khushwant Singh's argument is that Sikhism is *the* Punjabi ethnic religion, the religious expression of 'Punjabiness', and that therefore the Sikh is the Punjabi *par excellence* and not simply a member of yet another Punjabi religious community. Perhaps the history of the Sikhs is not the history of Punjabi nationalism but of Punjabi communalism and that Guru Nanak simply made a bad situation worse by starting yet another religious community in the Punjab. The alternative is not faced and the issue not dealt with directly.

Khushwant Singh's argument is soft at these two very important points and therefore highly vulnerable from the point of view of historical scholarship. But this vulnerability may not be due to the "corrupting influence of faith", namely an unquestioned theological assumption that Sikhism is the religious expression of "Punjabiness", that it is the ethnic religion of the Punjab. It is more clearly derived from the view that the periods of Ranjit Singh, when the Sikhs ruled an independent Punjabi state, and of the then current Punjabi Suba agitation carried on by the Sikhs, with which his history ends, are the two definitive periods in the history of the Sikhs and of the Punjab towards which all earlier periods were pointing. This choice of definitive periods is probably rooted more in the author's social and political commitments than in his religious beliefs.

Taken together these two accounts highlight two important technical issues historians have to face. One concerns the criteria to be used in assessing the trustworthiness of the evidence offered in the sources consulted. Both dismiss the miraculous, but while Khushwant Singh was more explicit about his criteria, both considered much of the tradition about Guru Nanak found in the *janamsakhis* to be basically trustworthy. The other issue concerns a form of argumentation used in these accounts which, while understandable in accounts that go well beyond Guru

Nanak himself, is nevertheless suspect. There is in these histories a tendency to look at him in the light of what happened after him and thus, in a sense, to read the future back into the past. On what basis can one say, when looking only at Guru Nanak, either that he intended to lay the foundations of a Sikh or more broadly Punjabi nationalism or that such a development was an inevitable consequence of his work? Perhaps the future was wide open to him and he concentrated more on matters immediately at hand. A decision in favor of or opposed to continuity of intent among the Sikh gurus requires a specific kind of evidence and the historian cannot rely on conjecture alone.

## II

1969 marked the 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. The celebrations brought forth a large number of books on various aspects of his life and teachings. However, before they appeared, a very significant work by a non-Sikh caused quite a stir within the Sikh community, a stir which is reflected in some of the anniversary volumes. This work was W. H. McLeod's *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* which was, in McLeod's own words, "a quest for creative understanding".<sup>24</sup> McLeod was painfully aware of the possibility of offending Sikh sensitivities, but sought to minimize this danger by stating explicitly just what he was trying to do.

This study is intended to discharge a three-fold task. In the first place it seeks to apply rigorous historical methodology to the traditions concerning the life of Guru Nanak; secondly, it attempts to provide a systematic statement of his teachings; and thirdly, it endeavors to fuse the glimpses provided by the traditional biographies with the personality emerging from the teachings.<sup>25</sup>

In short, McLeod's 'quest for the historical Nanak' had as its goal an understanding of the person, Nanak, in his own right. His particular quest raised the issue of faith and scholarship in a very acute form because he called into question all the traditions about Guru Nanak.

McLeod devoted two-thirds of his study to a critical examination of the sources of Guru Nanak's life. Early in his work, McLeod stated his view concerning the *janamsakhis* which was that they trace their origin to

three sources: remembered facts about Guru Nanak and embellishments upon those facts; stories centered around certain references in Guru Nanak's written works; the needs and beliefs of the later Sikh community which either created or shaped existing memories of his life. From these sources came a stock of *sakhis* or isolated incidents which were at due time arranged in chronological order, later written down, and then copied, altered or added to until they reached the form in which they now appear.<sup>26</sup> This view of multiple origins, unlike Khushwant Singh's original biography view, tends to produce a cautious pessimism rather than a cautious optimism concerning the received tradition.

McLeod devoted an entire chapter to the sources of Guru Nanak's life: his hymns in the *Adi Granth*, *Bhai Gurdas' Var I*, and the four *janamsakhis* which McLeod characterized as "hagiographic accounts of the life of Guru Nanak".<sup>27</sup> Since the first two contain little biographical information on Guru Nanak, McLeod concentrated upon the *janamsakhis*. He began by locating and dating extant manuscripts, determining original authorship and date of writing, the standpoint from which it was written, the transmission and integrity of the text, and its influence upon subsequent scholarship on Guru Nanak. Next he related and then analyzed 124 *sakhis* from the various traditions and placed the information they contain (as well as the information derived from other sources) about Guru Nanak into five categories: the established, the probable, the possible, the improbable and the impossible. What emerged at the end of this lengthy analysis was a one page statement of all that McLeod believed could safely be said about the life of Guru Nanak.

The development of McLeod's arguments concerning what could be said about the life of Guru Nanak was as thorough as was his source analysis. He tested alternate hypotheses concerning each of the 124 traditions (except the 26 miracle stories "without any features which suggest a substratum of truth")<sup>28</sup> and accepted only those which he felt he could support. One of the great merits of his work was that he was very explicit about the critical criteria he used, and the rationale behind each one, in determining the trustworthiness of the information his sources provided (established, probable, etc.). McLeod listed his seven general criteria of judgment at the outset of his attempt to reconstruct Guru Nanak's life. He dismissed miraculous or plainly fantastic incidents while recognizing that there may have been a substratum of

truth underlying them; he used the testimony of external sources to test the validity of a tradition where possible; he made similar use of Guru Nanak's works in the *Adi Granth*; he allowed his judgement to be influenced by the measure of agreement or disagreement in the *janamsakhi* accounts; he considered the earlier *janamsakhis* to be generally more reliable than the later ones; he believed that genealogical references were generally reliable; he placed greater confidence in details relating to events in Guru Nanak's life set inside rather than outside the Punjab.<sup>29</sup> These criteria were given appropriate support when he thought necessary, especially when considering the 37 *sakhis* which might qualify as probable or established.<sup>30</sup>

McLeod located Guru Nanak's beliefs and teachings within the Sant tradition. He considered Muslim, and especially Sufi, influence to have been negligible and hence rejected the Hindu-Muslim synthesis Khushwant Singh favored. Instead the synthesis Guru Nanak developed involved "a reworking of the Sant synthesis", "a new synthesis which is cast within the pattern of Sant belief but which nevertheless possesses a significant originality and, in contrast with the Sant background, a unique clarity".<sup>31</sup> He then treated Guru Nanak's teachings under the following broad headings, each with its own sub-headings ordered around key concepts in those teachings: the nature of God, the nature of unregenerate man, the divine self-expression, and the discipline.

After examining the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, McLeod came to this conclusion about the person, Guru Nanak, in the Kartarpur period of his life:

The impression which emerges is that of a deeply devout believer absorbed in meditation and rejoicing in the manifestations of the divine presence, but refusing to renounce his family or his worldly occupation. Discipline there certainly was, but not renunciation and total withdrawal. The impression is also that of a revered teacher giving expression to his experience in simple direct hymns of superb poetic quality. Around him would be gathered a group of regular disciples, and many more would come for occasional *darshan*, or audience, with the master. And the impression is that of a man, gentle yet capable of sternness, a man of humor and mild irony who experienced the inexpressible and yet who maintained an



essentially practical participation in the everyday affairs of his community and of the world beyond it.<sup>32</sup>

In *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* McLeod treated Guru Nanak in his own right and then discussed his relationship to his successors in his next book, *The Evolution of the Khalsa*, under the heading, "Guru Nanak as the founder of the Sikh religion".<sup>33</sup> In McLeod's presentation, Guru Nanak and his teachings were a key reference point for understanding future developments, but socio-cultural influences played an important role as well. Of these McLeod singled out three as departures from the teachings and practice of Guru Nanak. The first was the decision of Guru Amar Das to create distinctive pilgrimage centers, religious festivals, rituals, and a collection of religious writings, all of which were Hindu religious practices Guru Nanak rejected.<sup>34</sup> The second was a gradual accommodation to the cultural practices of the agrarian Jats, who were becoming Sikhs in increasingly large numbers, in contrast to the urban commercial Khatri from among whom Guru Nanak (who was also a Khatri) had drawn his earliest followers. This shift accounts for both Mughal concerns about the Sikhs and the Sikh response to the Mughal government. "The growth of militancy within the Panth must be traced primarily to the impact of Jat cultural patterns and to economic problems which prompted a militant response."<sup>35</sup> This influence, like the innovations of Guru Amar Das, stood in marked contrast to the emphatic interiority of Guru Nanak's teachings and practice. The third influence, brought on by the prolonged stay in the Sivalik hills out of the reach of the Mughal armies, was an extensive exposure to the Shakti cult predominant in the hills. Its influence is reflected in Guru Gobind Singh's image of the divine as "all steel", an image which differed greatly from those used by Guru Nanak. Thus in this work there is no "reading back" into Guru Nanak anticipations of future developments in Sikh religion in order to establish a straight line of continuity of intent between him and his successors. Instead, each development is set within its own socio-cultural context and, as these three examples illustrate, both comparisons with Guru Nanak and those changing contexts were used to provide explanations for these developments in Sikh religion.

The other noteworthy anniversary study of Guru Nanak was J.S. Grewal's *Guru Nanak in History*. Its significance lies in the way in which the author delimited his purpose, organized his work, and used his sources to achieve the end he had in view. *Guru Nanak in History* was "a

study of the role which Guru Nanak assumed for himself and the legacy which he left to his successors".<sup>36</sup> In other words, it was a study of Guru Nanak as Guru. Grewal divided his work into two main parts and then added an epilogue which dealt with Guru Nanak's legacy to his successors. The first part was devoted to an examination of Guru Nanak's political, social and religious milieu, a predominantly Punjabi and somewhat more broadly North Indian milieu. This portion was based on contemporary Persian and later secondary sources. Guru Nanak's own writings on his milieu were deliberately excluded from this section. The second part of the study was an analysis of Guru Nanak's response or reaction to his milieu. For this section only Guru Nanak's compositions were used. This procedure was justified on the grounds that

A study of Guru Nanak's work in terms of his response to his *milieu* is likely to be more fruitful than a discussion of his teachings in terms of 'parallels' and 'influences'. This approach may bring out the distinctive quality of Guru Nanak's message in the context of his times as well as the originality of his response.<sup>37</sup>

Grewal's choice of sources was, in short, influenced by a desire to bring Guru Nanak's response to the conditions of his times into sharp relief.<sup>38</sup>

Grewal's procedure had some very important implications. In the first place, this was a study of "the role Guru Nanak assumed for himself" and not a life of Guru Nanak. Hence Grewal's only descriptions of the course of Guru Nanak's life are to be found in a two page summary statement in the preface and in a three page description of the Kartarpur period of his life.<sup>39</sup> A close comparison of these sections with McLeod's conclusions on the life of Guru Nanak reveals no discrepancies at all, save that Grewal was more certain than McLeod that Guru Nanak's travels took him outside India.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, Grewal discussed Guru Nanak's response to his milieu solely in terms of his teachings and not in terms of his "life". Grewal's only source was therefore Guru Nanak's writings in the *Adi Granth*. Since these were universally accepted as Guru Nanak's own, Grewal managed to avoid all of the critical problems which McLeod faced in dealing with the *janamsakhis*. Thirdly, Grewal used the *janamsakhis* as evidence only when describing the response of Guru Nanak's successors and followers to the

work which he had done. They were thus used as evidence only for the period in which they were written and not for the period of Guru Nanak's lifetime. In these ways Grewal placed himself on very safe ground from the point of view of historical scholarship, while at the same time using a method which highlighted Guru Nanak's moral fervor, the depth and scope of his experience, "the distinctive quality of (his) message in the context of his times, as well as the originality of his response".<sup>41</sup>

Grewal's attitude toward his sources and the nature of his argument can best be seen through an examination of one of his chapters on Guru Nanak's response to his milieu. The chapter on "Contemporary Politics and Guru Nanak" has the advantage of being both relevant to some of the issues raised by writers considered earlier in this essay and representative of the method used in other chapters as well. Grewal began by stating the conclusions of other scholars who had written about Guru Nanak's political concerns and views, thus demonstrating his awareness of the alternative explanations before him. In considering some of the terms in Guru Nanak's writings which clearly indicate a familiarity with contemporary politics, government and administration, Grewal distinguished between the literal and the metaphorical uses to which those words were put. The latter group, most of which center around the theme "God as King", offered an idea of Guru Nanak's general political outlook. Then, when examining Guru Nanak's response to contemporary events and particularly to the invasions of Babar (where presumably political terminology was used in a literal sense), Grewal said about his sources that, "Guru Nanak did not set out to 'describe' the age for the benefit of posterity. To confuse his response to the political condition of his time with the political condition itself is the surest way to misunderstand both."<sup>42</sup>

In his conclusions Grewal pointed out that the place of the "political concern" passages within the entire corpus of the Guru's writings was a small "but by no means negligible" one.<sup>43</sup> Grewal's own conclusions were, first, that

Guru Nanak expects certain norms of behavior, both from the ruler and the ruled. The foremost duty of the ruler was to be just, both legally and morally. The foremost duty of the ruled was to meet the valid demands of the ruler. Guru Nanak is totally unconcerned about any constitutional questions. If

anything, he wholeheartedly accepts the monarchical framework.<sup>44</sup>

And secondly, that

Guru Nanak's denunciation of contemporary politics was frank but general. . . . His observations on some of the contemporary events are more in the nature of a general judgment on the age, a sermon on morality, rather than a specific condemnation of Babar or the Lodhis. This judgment springs directly from Guru Nanak's absolute faith in God's omnipotence and justice.<sup>45</sup>

This is hardly a full summary of this important chapter of Grewal's work, but several important points emerge from it nonetheless. First, Grewal clearly adopted a critical attitude towards his sources not only by deliberately distinguishing between the literal, the metaphorical and the judgmental, but also by placing terms and passages within their context in Guru Nanak's compositions. He did not simply take them literally.<sup>46</sup> Second, he used as data all the passages from Guru Nanak's writings with political content, and events in Guru Nanak's life were omitted as data. The warrants for Grewal's arguments were usually embodied in his critical warnings: not only the distinctions between the literal and the metaphorical, the descriptive and the judgmental, the general and the specific, but also the weightage of testimony within Guru Nanak's writings as a whole. It is interesting to note that the material provided in the first part of the book was not brought into the second part either as data or as warrants for justifying the conclusions arrived at.<sup>47</sup> Third, Grewal did not refute alternative explanations directly but only by implication. Clearly, his conclusions undermine confidence in the central theses of both Teja Singh and Ganda Singh on the one hand and Khushwant Singh on the other, yet Grewal chose not to 'do battle' with them.

Grewal devoted his epilogue to discussing "what Guru Nanak meant to the first few generations of the believers in his mission".<sup>48</sup> He did this by pointing out what the images of and theological reflections on Guru Nanak were in the writings of his successors, of Bhai Gurdas, and, at the popular level, in the *janamsakhis*. He concluded that "If we were to choose one key idea which lends unity to all these developments, it is surely the concept of the *Guru*, which at once

reconciled the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's position to the authority vested in successors through the office, and which, at a different level, brought the *bani* and the *panth* into parallel prominence with the personal *guru*.<sup>49</sup>

In a later history of the Sikhs Grewal's chapter on Guru Nanak was titled "Foundation of the Sikh Panth". Guru Nanak laid this foundation by being their guru, by appointing a successor and paying obeisance to him during his own lifetime. In Grewal's words, "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".<sup>50</sup> The next two chapters on Guru Nanak's successors were the "Evolution of the Sikh Panth" and "Transformation of the Sikh Panth". Continuity and discontinuity with Guru Nanak and his mission lay in the hands of his successors and their followers.

### III

In September 1969 an international seminar on the Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak was held at Punjabi University in Patiala. Of the 51 papers published in the proceedings the vast majority were on his teachings; only five are worth mentioning here. Harbans Singh in a paper originally delivered as a lecture at Harvard University earlier that year, devoted seven pages to a traditional account of Guru Nanak's life based on the *janamsakhis*.<sup>51</sup> Fauja Singh's paper on "Guru Nanak and the Social Problem" compared Guru Nanak's pronouncements on social problems with those of other *bhagats* from that period of Indian history. Only Guru Nanak not only addressed the problems of caste hierarchy and exploitation of the weak by the powerful, but also presented a theologically grounded view of justice as being of great importance in human affairs.<sup>52</sup> Ganda Singh's paper on "Guru Nanak's Impact on History" dealt less with Guru Nanak himself than with the first three centuries of Sikh history, with Guru Nanak as the one who set the whole process in motion not only through his teachings but also by setting up *dharamsalas* where his teachings could be learned and put into practice.<sup>53</sup>

Two American scholars, Donald Dawe and John Carman, sought to address the issues of historical method raised by McLeod in his recently published *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. Both were modernist rather than traditionalist in their scholarship but both were keenly aware of the

limitations of modern critical scholarship when dealing with a religious subject like Guru Nanak. For Dawe the modernist approach could yield only partial truth at best, while Carman found rationalist history overconfident. Both took issue with McLeod's refusal to use *janam-sakhi* material to understand the person of Guru Nanak because they believed that the community's impressions and memories of him, as well as their myths about him, were indicative of the kind of person he was. Both used parallel case studies to show that the modernist-traditionalist clash was not unique to Sikh history and the study of Guru Nanak. Dawe saw similarities between how scholars treated the materials in the four gospels to produce a life of Jesus and how they used the *janamsakhis* to produce a life of Guru Nanak. He went on to argue, using the parallel with Jesus, that the myths about Guru Nanak bear witness not only to "the fact that the transition to new possibilities of life was intimately grounded in the concrete work of Guru Nanak" but also to "the present experience of the leader [being] seen as part of his historical life, and conversely his historical life is seen as part of the life of the community".<sup>54</sup> Carman used his own research on Sri Vaishnava community traditions concerning their founder, Ramanuja. He came up with three "pictures of Ramanuja, depending upon how one used one's sources: (1) one derived solely from Ramanuja's own writings; (2) one based on the community biographical traditions and collections of his sayings; and (3) one based solely on the community's biographical traditions. He believed that the second of these offered the most fruitful basis of dialogue between modernist and traditionalist scholars.<sup>55</sup>

In 1984 W. Owen Cole devoted just over half of his *Sikhism and its Indian Context: The Attitude of Guru Nanak and Early Sikhism to Indian Religious Beliefs and Practices*<sup>56</sup> to Guru Nanak's attitudes. Cole's intention was to fill what he perceived to be a gap in McLeod's earlier study,<sup>57</sup> but his approach more closely approximated Grewal's than McLeod's. However, whereas Grewal separated his description of Guru Nanak's religious milieu (using independent sources) from his analysis of Guru Nanak's attitude to it, Cole began with Guru Nanak's own writings in the *Adi Granth* to see what in his religious milieu attracted Guru Nanak's attention. In the second and third chapters Cole looked at what in it Guru Nanak critiqued or affirmed, how and why.

Cole surveyed Guru Nanak's references to his religious milieu and placed them in categories defined topically--Hindu, Muslim, Nath Yogi, and Jain--and then in sub-categories within each category. He then used

contextual materials to explain those religious phenomena to the reader and finally concluded that Guru Nanak focused not upon the religion of the philosophers, theologians, sacred texts, or even of the urban elites, but upon the religious beliefs, practices, personalities, and institutions of rural India. In other words, it was the religious world with which his audience was most familiar. In the next two chapters he employed the same categories and sub-categories, but used relevant texts and contextual materials more interchangeably than in the first chapter. There are three features of this movement back and forth between text and context that stand out. First, with regard to context, Cole saw Guru Nanak's cultural context as predominantly Hindu and that Guru Nanak took much of that cultural context for granted. (Islam had not had the cultural impact it was to have later.) Second, with regard to the text, through his hymns Guru Nanak sought to communicate his message to his rural audience in terms that they could understand; thus the words chosen to convey his message were influenced, at least in part, by the religious understandings of his audience. Third, the texts taken as a whole reveal the standpoint from which Guru Nanak made his critique of his religious milieu, affirming parts of it and rejecting others. As Cole comments after quoting two passages from Guru Nanak's hymns,

To realize mentally and experientially that God is within oneself is for Guru Nanak the truth which alone gives permanent satisfaction. . . . The Lord's mansion, entered by devotion to *nam*, which has been inspired by God's grace, is the only resting place of the soul.<sup>58</sup>

From this contextual analysis of Guru Nanak's hymns Cole was able to draw some important inferences not only about Guru Nanak's attitudes towards key features of his religious milieu but also about Guru Nanak's intentions.

While insisting that Guru Nanak affirmed elements of Hindu and Muslim religion, he joined with McLeod and Grewal in arguing that Guru Nanak rejected too much in both to seek for a theological synthesis of the two.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Cole went on to point out that in his hymns Guru Nanak paid more attention to the Nath Yogis than to traditional Hinduism or Islam.<sup>60</sup> While differing with them at key points also, Guru Nanak did use much of their terminology to convey his message to his predominantly rural audience. In fact Cole infers from all the evidence

gathered in chapters two and three that Guru Nanak's intended audience consisted primarily of the lower castes of village society for whom Brahmanical religion had nothing to offer.<sup>61</sup> In addition, his severe critique of Jainism in particular indicates that Guru Nanak's was a social religion, emphasizing not only the interior life but also compassion, service and brotherhood among his followers as well as social order within society at large.<sup>62</sup>

In 1992 Harbans Kaur Sagoo published her *Guru Nanak and the Indian Society* which covered much the same ground as Grewal's *Guru Nanak in History*, but in a different way. She began with the premise that the saints "provide a very useful source of information about the spiritual and ethical standards of the times, and also of the socio-economic conditions".<sup>63</sup> Her primary concern throughout most of the book was with the socio-economic conditions of Guru Nanak's time rather than with Guru Nanak himself. Whereas Grewal separated what he had learned from other sources about those conditions from what Guru Nanak wrote about them in order to heighten the distinctiveness of Guru Nanak's approach to society, Sagoo combined information from all these sources together, often using Guru Nanak's writing to supplement what she had learned about socio-economic conditions from other primary and secondary sources. However, she devoted her concluding chapter to Guru Nanak's vision of the ideal society by drawing inferences from her previously cited references in his contributions to the *Adi Granth*.

These studies of Guru Nanak, when taken together, are quite suggestive. They indicate that the tension between the religious will-to-believe and the historian's will-to-know was recognized and negotiated in ways that could offer fresh insights into Guru Nanak without violating the historian's standards of truth-seeking. They did this first by accepting the abbreviated version of what is known about Guru Nanak's life that resulted from McLeod's source analysis. In addition, they also relied heavily on Guru Nanak's writings in the *Adi Granth* for their fresh insights and largely ignored the *janamsakhis*. However, with the arrival of post-modernist historical scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, some important re-evaluations occurred.

#### IV

From the 1980s onward the post-modern approach to historical scholarship has been making an impact not only upon the ways in which



Guru Nanak's life is presented but also upon the tension between critical scholarship and Sikh religious sentiment. The post-modern approach is characterized by almost total skepticism regarding the possibility of getting at the "truth" of past "reality" because it treats all accounts of the past as culturally and especially linguistically conditioned by the author's own socio-cultural location. This skepticism has led to both an attack upon the entire enterprise of modernist scholarship, so well represented by McLeod, and an extreme relativism that has reduced historical scholarship to providing nothing more than perspectives or hypotheses on the past. Two practical implications of this approach have had a direct impact upon historical studies of Guru Nanak. One is that texts from the past are to be critically examined not to determine their accuracy in reporting about the past but instead in relationship to other texts in order to trace continuities and changes in perspective. The other has been an honoring of differences in perspective, which has led to a heightened appreciation of and reliance upon local traditions about the past, even hagiographic traditions employing miracle, legend and myth.

In 1992 Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh published an article entitled "The Myth of the Founder: The Janamsakhis and the Sikh Tradition". She began by noting that the *janamsakhis* had received little scholarly attention "for further insights into our collective human imagination and consciousness".<sup>64</sup> The one exception was McLeod's *Early Sikh Tradition*, which became her foil for the remainder of the essay. She agreed with McLeod that "myth is a fundamental aspect of the *janamsakhis*",<sup>65</sup> but, like Dawe and Carman, criticized McLeod for limiting his use of them to only that which "is capable of empirical certification."<sup>66</sup> Since "the evocative and metahistorical impact of the *Janamsakhi* form"<sup>67</sup> was ignored in his analysis, she sought to adopt "a metahistorical approach to the *Janamsakhis* that would explore their mythic dimension for its own sake". This, she argued, "is vitally important in order to understand Sikh identity".<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, she did not explain what exactly she meant by a "metahistorical approach," but her essay seems to imply that it examines myth, allegory and poetry to discover what realities they point to or suggest that give meaning and direction to human life but are nonetheless beyond "empirical verification".

She devoted the remainder of her essay to *sakhi* number ten in the Puratan tradition, which "vividly presents Guru Nanak's vision of Ultimate Reality as a totally formless and transcendent being".<sup>69</sup> After offering some background, she described the vision in some detail,

drawing upon two lengthy quotations from *sakhi* number ten. She then highlighted four coalescing elements of this vision as presented in this *sakhi*, all of which she found supported by passages from Guru Nanak's own contributions to the *Adi Granth*. These she summed up in the following words.

- (1) Guru Nanak had an intense revelatory experience; (2) his response to the experience was in the form of ardently joyous poetry; (3) in his poetry he formulates the conception and perception of Ultimate Reality as total unity; and (4) soon after he set out, he was recognized as the "founder" of a new religious community.<sup>70</sup>

She concluded from this analysis that it is methodologically wrong to understand Guru Nanak only in terms of contemporary religious influences, as McLeod did. Instead, one should recognize the distinctiveness and uniqueness, even the transcendent, historically "unconditionedness" of that vision, for the "truth" of the myth about it "is to be found in the history and the life of the religious community".<sup>71</sup> This "metahistorical approach", while safeguarding the distinctiveness of Guru Nanak's vision, also blurs the clear distinction Grewal made between Guru Nanak himself and his legacy enshrined in the *janamsakhis*.

She carried this approach over into her larger work, published for Guru Nanak's 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak*,<sup>72</sup> which is more present-oriented than strictly historical in nature. Her stated aim is to discover and understand this First Sikh, "his personality, his vision, his emotions, his concerns, his self-awareness, his undertakings".<sup>73</sup> For her, "aesthetic appreciation of his poetics is the way to absorb his innermost private world and be in touch with him intimately".<sup>74</sup> In the first chapter she seeks to establish Guru Nanak as the First Sikh. As in her earlier essay, she argues, relying this time primarily on his own writings in the *Adi Granth*, that his mode of thought and praxis was a product neither of the Sant nor of any other religious tradition but of his own distinctive encounter with the divine. She then proceeds to explain what it is to be a Sikh, namely one who not only hears, embraces and loves the teaching rooted in Guru Nanak's experience but also shares in it. She lays special emphasis upon hearing because it is through the poetics and musical settings of Guru Nanak's

hymns that his experience is transmitted to others to be embraced and loved. Moreover, Guru Nanak's nine successors continued to use his poetics and musical lines with the same end in view.<sup>75</sup> This "new way of experiencing the divine One" became Guru Nanak's legacy and provided the basic continuity between the ten Sikh gurus as well as "the paradigmatic mode of existence for his followers".<sup>76</sup>

Her next chapter deals with the *janamsakhis*, which depict Guru Nanak's life "in the language of myth and allegory".<sup>77</sup> In going through the main events of his life she also pays attention to the visual in the *janamsakhi* manuscripts for the insights they offer, and concludes:

These are the memories we have of our First Sikh. The narratives may not be historically factual but they are far greater than facts. They highlight the very groundwork of the Sikh religion, and invite the young and the old from whatever genders, Sikh or non-Sikh, from east or west, to renew their imagination, thought and experience.<sup>78</sup>

Her subsequent chapters, based primarily on Guru Nanak's own writings in the *Adi Granth*, deal with the First Sikh as mystic philosopher, revolutionary thinker, and environmentalist. She concludes with a "cursory look" at how the First Sikh "continues to be at the epicenter of Sikh personal and public life, and is extending in many exciting scenarios on the global stage".<sup>79</sup>

There is surprisingly little on Guru Nanak in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. The emphasis in the editors' introduction was upon diversity within Sikhism and, since that diversity appeared after his death, the brief treatment of Guru Nanak is quite understandable. Moreover, what Pashaura Singh had to say in the introduction to his opening essay, "An Overview of Sikh History", is as important as what he has to say about Guru Nanak himself. He opened his overview by pointing out that the debate in Sikh historiography was generated by positivist historians who, mostly, "presented historical facts as the telling of a single narrative by addressing the question, 'what really happened?'" an approach, he said, "privileges the scholar's 'historically accurate' account over the memories of the followers of a religion and plays down the 'tradition' handed down from the past."<sup>80</sup> History in his view "<sup>81</sup>is not simply the past; history is process." Specifically,

A historical account of anything that separates out its elements and traces each back to its source is not so accurate a description of 'what *really* happened' as is one that looks at the same facts but the other way around, and makes intelligible the historical process by which these disparate items from here and there were at a given moment creatively put together to constitute something new.<sup>82</sup>

Pashaura Singh justified this rejection of McLeod's approach to the historian's task in favor of privileging tradition by arguing that tradition embodies the community's selective and changing group memory, and his interest was in seeing how that group memory evolved over time.

His own account of Guru Nanak's life was not much longer than McLeod's and was set within the parameters of what McLeod considered either probable or established. His treatment of the *janamsakhi* account of Guru Nanak's decisive experience of 'mystical enlightenment' does differ from those of both McLeod and Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh in that he treats the details of the *janamsakhi* description of what happened as symbolic of "dissolution, transformation, and spiritual perfection".<sup>83</sup> Like Grewal and Kaur Singh, he saw Guru Nanak's teachings as new, unique, and "derived not from his relationship with the received forms of tradition but rather from his direct access to Divine Reality through personal experience".<sup>84</sup>

The final historian whose work on Guru Nanak to be considered here is Gurinder Singh Mann who in 2004 wrote a short introductory textbook entitled *Sikhism* which, along with some articles that followed it, seek to understand Guru Nanak as the founder of the Sikh *panth* and thus lay special emphasis upon the Kartarpur period of his life. In *Sikhism* Mann described the religious life of Kartarpur and pointed out that "after establishing the community [of which he was the overall leader], Guru Nanak consciously worked toward providing it with distinct structures and an understanding of itself as a group".<sup>85</sup> His summary is worth quoting.

[Guru Nanak's] beliefs surface in the writings of his contemporaries but he stands apart in his emphasis on the unity of the divinity, a life of personal, familial, and social commitment, and the need for collective liberation. Furthermore, he stands alone as one who translated the beliefs that he sang in

his compositions into the actual founding of a community. Guru Nanak created institutions of central authority, a sacred text, the gurdwara, liturgy, and rudimentary rituals. Within his own lifetime, he raised his most worthy disciple to the status of the Guru and helped the community make the transition to new leadership.<sup>86</sup>

Mann's 2012 article, "Guru Nanak's Life and Legacy: An Appraisal", combined a critique of McLeod's methodology with a proposed alternative. It focused on three issues: constructing the life of Guru Nanak, interpreting his beliefs and teachings, and his founding of Kartarpur. Mann questioned McLeod's construction of Guru Nanak's life for two reasons: his unduly skeptical bias towards the *janamsakhi* sources and his assessment of the incidents in Guru Nanak's life in isolation from each other as well as from their literary and historical settings, a procedure Mann considered to be formalistic.<sup>87</sup> Mann did not share McLeod's skepticism about the Puratan *janamsakhi* in particular, not only because he dated it much earlier than McLeod had, (pre-1588 vs. about 1635), but also because it was a product of the "mainstream" Sikh community rather than of a sectarian group. Mann also insisted that these *sakhis* be treated, not in isolation from but within their literary settings both for the sake of added data as well as insight (which he illustrates with one telling example), and in order to see how traditions about Guru Nanak's life developed over time.

Mann began his critique of McLeod's analysis of Guru Nanak's teachings by calling into question McLeod's "Sant synthesis" on two grounds: it underestimates the influence of Islam upon Guru Nanak and, by reducing the great variety and complexity of Sant religious teachings to a synthesis, it blurs over the originality and distinctiveness of each of the Sant teachers, as well as of Guru Nanak.<sup>88</sup> He also notes that McLeod used a thematic approach to Guru Nanak's teaching that not only ignored his ethical teachings, which were of crucial importance, but also separated his teachings from the historical and biographical context in which they arose and were put to use.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, Mann took McLeod to task for devoting so little space to the founding of Kartarpur. He considered McLeod's work to be so locked into a religious, and particularly Hindu religious, view of Guru Nanak's life and legacy that he was "reluctant to explain why the Guru got into the enterprise of gathering a community with numerous institutional

structures.”<sup>90</sup> Mann also said that McLeod paid little attention to the socio-cultural background of Guru Nanak’s early followers, simply by assuming that, like Guru Nanak himself, they were all or mostly Khatri. Mann’s data, while admittedly limited, is still sufficient to cast doubt on that assumption.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the social composition of the community Guru Nanak gathered, in which all were treated as equals, as well as the choice of Kartarpur as the site for gathering that community, were important to Mann as indicators that Guru Nanak’s was not just another religious gathering within the Hindu social order but something new and different that he sought to perpetuate.<sup>92</sup>

In two articles in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Sikhism* Mann set forth his own view of the sources of Guru Nanak’s life and then his own, updated construction of Guru Nanak’s life, teachings and legacy. “*Sakhis* about the Founder” deals primarily with the early dating, and hence enhanced reliability of what came to be called the Puratan *janamsakhi*. The date of writing according to the earliest manuscript is 1588 and Mann defended this early date on the grounds that “References to the existence of a manuscript from 1588, the simplicity of this text’s structure, the brevity of its contents, the early versions of Baba Nanak’s compositions as preserved in the text, the relatively open attitude toward Islam, the frequent use of Persian terms all point to its being a text whose origin lies somewhere in the closing decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>93</sup> He then went on to show why it was earlier than the other *janamsakhis* and then concluded that “it is an excellent source to gain an understanding of the life and activities of the Sikh founder”.<sup>94</sup>

Mann began his essay on “Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh *Panth*” by surveying the literature of the subject and noted that it “presents Baba Nanak as a mystic who considered liberation (*mukti*) from the cycle of birth (*sansar*) to be the ultimate goal of human life. This analysis, along with the claim that ‘Islamic elements were unimportant’ in his thinking,”<sup>95</sup> is then used to situate him within the galaxy of Hindu voices of his time. However, given the new information at his disposal, Mann considered it to be “more useful to construct a fresh narrative of Baba Nanak’s life, understand the core of his beliefs (*jot*), and examine the methods (*jugati*) which he employed to complete his mission (*kar*) and ensure its survival in the years that followed his death.”<sup>96</sup>

Mann began his reconstruction of Guru Nanak’s life with two “epiphanies” Guru Nanak described in the *Adi Granth*. The first was a command to spread the divine word which seems to have led Nanak to

travel extensively. The second was Babur's "takeover of Hindustan as part of the divine design for the region"<sup>97</sup> which seems to have led Nanak to revise his mission, establish a center at Kartarpur, and found the Sikh *panth* there. By that time, judging from some of his own writings in the *Adi Granth*, Guru Nanak had become "profoundly uncomfortable with the socioreligious environment of his times" and felt impelled to "found a new community—a new order that would work toward creating a world that would be different from the one responsible for the senseless carnage he had observed".<sup>98</sup> His choice of Kartarpur, Mann argued, was neither accidental nor just a matter of convenience, but was strategic in nature. One consideration was that the social composition of the neighboring villages, inhabited by Jats, was conducive to furthering his mission. By arguing not only that there were Jats among the original followers of Guru Nanak but also that Guru Nanak deliberately chose Kartarpur because that area was predominantly Jat, Mann undercut McLeod's argument that the later arrival of the Jats into the Sikh *panth* led to a departure from the teachings and practice of Guru Nanak.

In the final two sections of this essay, "Assembling a *Panth*" and "Stabilizing the Legacy", Mann dealt with the founding of the Sikh *panth* which he considered to be "the central jewel of his [Guru Nanak's] legacy".<sup>99</sup> Like the rest of the essay, this too is based primarily on the *Puratan janamsakhi* and Guru Nanak's writings in the *Adi Granth*. It deals with the social composition of the earliest community at Kartarpur, with how that community grew both within and beyond Kartarpur, with the pattern of life at Kartarpur, and how it helped those there to become "bearers of truth". The *Puratan janamsakhi*, said Mann, depicts the *panth* as having an autonomous set of beliefs, ceremonies, and institutions that distinguished it from all others around them.<sup>100</sup> Guru Nanak not only appointed a successor who took over during his lifetime but also passed on his poems and songs in written form to assure their continuation. Mann concluded, "Starting from the selection of the area to assembling a group of families there, providing them with adequate modes of sustenance, structuring their daily routine, extending the model to other places, and envisioning a clear sense of their future direction—all these elements point to a conscious effort on his part to create a new religious community that would be firmly centered on the divine wisdom enshrined in the *pothi* containing his compositions."<sup>101</sup>

Another of Mann's conclusions is perhaps even more significant for the purposes of this essay.

[O]ne needs to underline that scholars in the field are fortunate to have access to the writings of Baba Nanak and of those who had met him, as well as a few other texts whose authors would have met people who had known and had the opportunity to hear him firsthand. On the basis of the information in these texts, along with what emanates from the sites and artifacts of the time, we can construct a relatively convincing narrative of his life and activities.<sup>102</sup>

It is important to note that throughout this essay, as in this conclusion, Mann used the language of plausibility and likelihood, rather than of fact and certainty. His is, as he says, a construction based at times on “relatively convincing” intuitive conjectures not only about the reliability of his sources but also about the inferences that may be drawn from their contents. He is very honest with the reader about this, as the frequency of such phrases as “it seems”, “we can surmise”, “it is likely”, and “it seems fair to assume” would indicate. In short, he does not overstate his case and leaves it open to correction.

## V

This essay set out to explore the tension between the religious community’s will-to-believe and the modern historian’s will-to-know by examining, as a case study, a sample of important historical studies of Guru Nanak. Since Guru Nanak was the founder of the Sikh community, what has been at stake throughout this analysis have been the essentials of Sikh identity on one side of the tension and the integrity of historical scholarship on the other, neither of which has remained static over the past half century. This concluding section offers some reflections on the key pressure points in this tension that have emerged from this study which may be relevant for other forms and subjects of inquiry in the study of Sikhism.

The first and most obvious pressure point in the tension between what might be called popular Sikh sentiment and the dictates of historical scholarship was the question of how best to treat the information in the *janamsakhi* sources of Guru Nanak’s life. McLeod was the first to address this tension in considerable depth, subjecting each *sakhi* to critical examination according to some explicit criteria and concluding with a greatly shortened view of Guru Nanak’s life. This



greatly increased the tension. Much later, in a lecture at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, McLeod described this tension as "a difference between two kinds of historians."

On the one side we find arrayed the historians who put their trust in tradition. These are the ones who defend the traditions of the Panth and who, as a result, have a large and well-integrated version of the Panth's history set out before them. As opposed to the traditionalists are the sceptics, historians who maintain that every fact requires believable evidence to support it and who in consequence find the established history of the Panth much more restricted.<sup>103</sup>

There were those who subsequently sought to decrease the pressure at this point of tension by pushing back against McLeod's skepticism about the reliability of tradition on scholarly grounds. Both Dawe and Carman, who were scholars of religion but not of Sikhism in particular, considered the memories of the religious community embodied in its traditions about the founder to be deserving of more credence than McLeod was prepared to grant them. Mann dated the Puratan *janamsakhi* a half century earlier than McLeod did, thus placing it during the likely lifetimes of followers who might have known Guru Nanak personally, and giving its account of Guru Nanak's life greater credibility. What has been at stake in this tension has been popular Sikh images of Guru Nanak and the beginnings of Sikh history. However, scholars, with a few occasional exceptions, have accepted McLeod's description of what can be safely said about Guru Nanak's life.

A second pressure point concerns how language used in the early sources is to be understood. Apart from the problems of translation into foreign languages and explications in a modern Punjabi idiom with their inherent risks of distortion, there are two points at which the tension between religious belief and scholarly integrity become obvious. One is whether and how the language of myth, symbol, and analogy in the *janamsakhis* can be used legitimately in order to understand Guru Nanak himself. The other, more significant one concerns how Guru Nanak's language in the *Adi Granth* is to be read. McLeod treated the *janamsakhi* material with great skepticism, but used his contributions of the *Adi Granth* in order to understand Guru Nanak's own thought and teachings. Because of the similarities McLeod noted between Guru

Nanak's thought and that of poets the Sant tradition, McLeod located Guru Nanak within the Sant tradition. Grewal used the *janamsakhis* to understand not Guru Nanak's life but his legacy, and Guru Nanak's language in the Adi Granth to show how he responded to his milieu. That language—both literal and metaphorical, general and particular, descriptive and judgmental—gave expression to an ethical critique of what he saw going on around him, a critique that included the Sants. Cole concentrated on Guru Nanak's language in the Adi Granth in order to describe how Guru Nanak communicated his message to his predominantly rural and low caste audience. This represents a significant shift in emphasis in the discussion about Guru Nanak because it implies that Guru Nanak's choice of words was shaped not just by his own beliefs but also by his audience's beliefs and pre-understandings which were, in turn, shaped by the Sant tradition. Kaur Singh focused on the poetry Guru Nanak used to describe his life-changing encounter with what she described as the Transcendent, Ultimate Reality, the Ineffable, an experience he sought to pass on through his verses.

These differences, while subtle, are important. In his hymns Guru Nanak used images, metaphors, and analogies not only to express what his relationship to the divine meant to him but also to invite others into that relationship which the Guru's word describes as the aim of life and a bliss which nothing else can provide. At the same time, he also testified to the inadequacy of words to express the inexpressible, especially about the Absolute with whom the Guru's word makes relationship possible.<sup>104</sup>As has become apparent, what is at stake in these differing understandings of how Guru Nanak used language in the Adi Granth is whether Sikhism should be viewed as an offshoot of the Sant tradition or as a distinct religion grounded in the vision of Guru Nanak himself.

A third pressure point in the tension between the religious community's will-to-believe and the historian's will-to-know is to be found in the kind of explicit arguments or implicit assumptions used not just in determining what the facts are but also in making assertions that connect those facts together in either a narrative or an explanation. The logic of argumentation plays a large role in determining the fundamental continuity and discontinuity between Guru Nanak and his successors, continuity being more in line than discontinuity with the religious sentiments of the community. Guru Nanak at Kartarpur provides the base point for comparison when determining what the elements of

continuity and discontinuity were. At the conclusion of *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* McLeod described Kartarpur as a community of disciples with a three-fold pattern of life (regular devotion, teaching, and daily labor) which gave practical expression to Guru Nanak's ideals<sup>105</sup> and later pointed to three departures from that norm he set there. Grewal's description near the close of *Guru Nanak in History* was basically the same as McLeod's.<sup>106</sup> In *The Sikhs of the Punjab* he described first evolutionary development under the protection of the Emperor Akbar and then, after his death and the imperial opposition that followed it, a transformation leading to the depersonalization of the Guru when guruship was transferred to the Granth and the *panth*, as well as "the division of the Sikhs into two distinct components", the Singhs being the "transformed" but not yet dominant component.<sup>107</sup> Pashaura Singh's description of Kartarpur emphasized the distinctiveness of Guru Nanak's *panth*. It was new, different, and based not on existing belief patterns but on a vision gained through direct access to the divine. Moreover, it was embodied in distinct institutions (not just a pattern of communal life) which gave expression to Guru Nanak's ideals: the *sangat*, the *dharamsala*, the equalitarian *langar* ("the first practical expression of Guru Nanak's spiritual mission to reform society"), and the Guru.<sup>108</sup> From there it evolved under changing circumstances, culminating in the inauguration of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>109</sup>

Mann argued that Guru Nanak established a new order that was not only religiously but also socially independent of the Hindu (and Muslim) order. Central to his argument about a new social order was an interpretation of Guru Nanak's verses in the Adi Granth on the sack of Saidpur as not just another commentary on the more lamentable aspects of the human condition, but as including a sense of divine call to action as well. In addition, Guru Nanak's strategic choice to locate at Kartarpur, an area dominated by rural Jats who had not yet been incorporated into the Hindu caste hierarchy, and the mixed caste composition of the early Kartarpur community, were further indicators of Guru Nanak's intention to found a new order. In *Sikhism* he portrayed the period from Guru Angad to Guru Tegh Bahadur as a time of consolidation combined with elaboration upon the legacy of Guru Nanak. This was followed by consolidation combined with a reshaping of that legacy when Guru Gobind Sind Singh created the Khalsa.<sup>110</sup>

Two conclusions about continuity and discontinuity seem to emerge from this brief summary. The first is that the choice between continuity and discontinuity is not an either-or choice. There appears to be a consensus that we find both when comparing what Guru Nanak said and did with what his successors said and did. Differences lie in how the two are combined with each other and in the degree of emphasis one receives in comparison with the other. The second is that how one views continuity and discontinuity seems to have been shaped at the outset by how one views the teachings and work of Guru Nanak himself. The differences between McLeod, Grewal, Pashaura Singh, and Mann on what Guru Nanak did at Kartarpur vary from the stark to the nuanced, and they do influence how they saw and evaluated subsequent developments under his successors. The nature of the base point almost determines the weightage given to key future events in the labeling language used to describe the period from Guru Angad to the death of Guru Gobind Singh.

Today the tension between the religious community's will-to-believe and the historian's will-to-know does not appear to be as severe as it was a half century ago when Van Harvey wrote his book on the subject and McLeod wrote *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. What changes in the will-to-believe there have been within the Sikh religious community may well depend upon what section of that community one is looking at. However, there is little doubt that the demands of historical scholarship have changed greatly under the impact of post-modernism. On the one hand, it has totally demolished the myth of objective scientific history. Histories are now viewed as constructions of the past shaped by the historian's subjectivity, culture and language. The skepticism that McLeod considered necessary to establish the truth of an account is now at best a safeguard against excessive bias--whether personal or cultural--and total relativism. On the other hand, post-modernists have sought to deconstruct the master narratives as well as universalizing and homogenizing tendencies in "scientific" history and to elevate diversity, the local, and even the traditional in its place. With regard to Guru Nanak and Sikh studies in general, this shift towards more post-modern scholarship is reflected most clearly in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* with its condemnation of "positivist history" and celebration of diversity within Sikhism.<sup>111</sup>

In the last analysis, while the tension at the heart of this essay may be diffused unevenly throughout the religious and scholarly

communities, it is most keenly felt within the historian's own self when framing, conducting, and writing up research on Guru Nanak or any other aspect of Sikh history. More specifically, whether the historian is aware of it or not, this tension appears when she or he is doing the technical work of source analysis, analyzing the language of those sources, and developing arguments that will stand up to critical examination. There is little doubt that the shift in historical studies created by the post-modern critique has eased the tension between religious belief and scholarly research, giving religious belief a lot more breathing room and limiting historical scholarship to holding excessive expressions of religious fervor in check and assessing degrees of plausibility in accounts of the past. Nonetheless, tension at these, and perhaps other, points in the technical side of the historian's work is not going to disappear; it is built into the very fabric of being faithful both to the subject matter of one's study and to the dictates of one's academic discipline. This survey has indicated where some of the more obvious pressure points in that tension have appeared in the study of Guru Nanak as well as how diverse authors have dealt with them. Perhaps two important questions remain which this study cannot answer. How much more understanding of Guru Nanak, and of what kind, does the religious community require in order to do what Guru Nanak expected of it and not become trapped in traditions about him which are either distractions or illusions? How can the historian now add to our knowledge of Guru Nanak without, in the process, imposing upon Guru Nanak his or her own pre-understandings about what the Sikh panth has been and/or ought to be about?

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<sup>1</sup> A valuable historical assessment of some of the major controversies in Sikh studies up to the time of publication, including controversies surrounding Guru Nanak, is provided by J.S. Grewal in his *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi: Manohar, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> This tension is explored with reference to Christianity by Van A. Harvey in *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1969. His analysis of the tension can be applied to religious traditions other than just the Christian.

<sup>3</sup> This article builds on one I wrote back in 1973 entitled "Modern Historical Scholarship and Sikh Religious Tradition" (in J.S. Grewal, ed., *Studies in Local and Regional History*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak University, 1974, pp. 109-137). I restated the issue more briefly at a Sikh Studies conference in California in 1976 where it gained little traction ("Sikh Studies in the Punjab" in Mark Juergensmeyer and

N. Gerald Barrier, eds., *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979, pp. 25-32). However, when Sikh Studies was being established as a field of study at some major universities in North America, this tension between the traditions of the (Sikh) religious community and the critical traditions of the western university became very apparent and had to be reckoned with. This is reflected in several of the essays in a book growing out of a conference held in New York City in 1989 (John Stratton Hawley and Gurinder Singh Mann, eds., *Studying the Sikhs: Issues for North America*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> These events included the Khalistan movement, the Indian army's destructive entry into the Golden Temple, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the persecution of Sikhs in Delhi that followed it, as well as lengthy President's rule and emergency measures in the Punjab. Scholars who deviated from the homogenous view were subject to a variety of social punishments. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, "Introduction," in Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 8-11.

<sup>5</sup> Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *A Short History of the Sikhs*, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1950, p. iii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* The words are actually those of J.D. Cunningham in his *A History of the Sikhs from the Origins of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*.

<sup>8</sup> Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *A Short History of the Sikhs*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> The blood and milk from the food of Malik Bhago and Lalo. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> "The whole movement was gradual and at no stage was there a sudden or uncalled for departure from the original aim." *Ibid.*, p. iii. This doctrine may also account for the failure to consider other explanations of the central aim of Guru Nanak's life.

<sup>14</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, I, p. vii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299. It is for the first of these reasons that Khushwant Singh considered Bhai Gurdas' references to Guru Nanak in his Vars to be authentic. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>19</sup> Except in the story of Guru Nanak's death, but there it is qualified. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

- <sup>20</sup> Khushwant Singh questioned whether Guru Nanak actually visited Ceylon. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii-ix.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 17, 39, 46, 48.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>24</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968, p. viii.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>30</sup> McLeod later wrote a much fuller study of the *janamsakhis*. *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-Sakhis*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980.
- <sup>31</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 161.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- <sup>33</sup> This analysis is found in chapter one of *The Evolution of the Khalsa: Five Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>36</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1969, p. 1.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix, 283-86.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix; W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 146.
- <sup>41</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, p. xi.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166 & 167.
- <sup>46</sup> Grewal specifically warned against this again in his chapter on 'Contemporary Society and Guru Nanak'. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>47</sup> Grewal's description of Guru Nanak's political milieu would not justify the view that Guru Nanak was living in a particularly degenerate or unjust age.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.
- <sup>50</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The New Cambridge History of India, II.#: The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 41.
- <sup>51</sup> Harbans Singh, "Guru Nanak as Historical Reality and Continuing Memory", in Harbans Singh, ed., *Perspectives on Guru Nanak*, second edition; Patiala: Punjabi University, 1990, pp 18-25.. The first edition was published in 1973.

- <sup>52</sup> Fauja Singh, "Guru Nanak and the Social Problem", in Harbans Singh, ed., op. cit., pp 141-160.
- <sup>53</sup> Ganda Singh, "Guru Nanak's Impact on History", in Harbans Singh, ed., op. cit., pp. 418-427.
- <sup>54</sup> Donald G. Dawe, "The Historian, the Guru, and the Christ", in Harbans Singh, ed., op. cit., p. 368.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 360-372; J.B. Carman, "History and Historiography in the Study of Indian Religious Movements: One Significance of the Guru Nanak Anniversary Celebration", in Harbans Singh, ed., op. cit., pp. 373-380.
- <sup>56</sup> London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 148.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 103,158.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 108-109.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 106, 160.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 139. Cole's reading of the Babur *bani* about the Sack of Saidpur, which Teja Singh and Ganda Singh had used to connect Guru Nanak's intentions directly with Guru Gobind Singh's actions, is theological: God was in charge of events and was using Babur's armies as an instrument of God's justice. Guru Nanak used Semitic theological language here simply in order that Muslims might understand and appreciate his message Ibid., pp. 99-102.
- <sup>63</sup> Harbans Kaur Sagoo, *Guru Nanak and the Indian Society: Political Institutions, Economic Conditions, Caste System, Socio-Religious Ceremonies and Customs, Position of Women*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1992, p. vii.
- <sup>64</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, "The Myth of the Founder: The Janamsakhis and the Sikh Tradition," *History of Religions*, Volume 31 (1992), p. 330.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid. She quotes from p. 9 of *Early Sikh Tradition*.
- <sup>66</sup> Nikky-Gurinder Kaur Singh, "The Myth of the Founder", p. 330.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 331.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 330.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 332.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 341.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 343.
- <sup>72</sup> Gurgaon: Penguin Random .House India, 2019
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 4.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 37.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 46.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 69.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 98.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 209.



<sup>80</sup> Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh History," in Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>85</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, *Sikhism*, Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak: An Appraisal", in A. Malhotra and F. Mir, eds., *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture and Practice*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 119.

<sup>88</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak: An Appraisal", pp. 124-126. In a later article Mann addressed the issue of including Guru Nanak within a broadly shared Bhakti movement in a somewhat different way. Guru Nanak never described himself as a bhagat nor is there any clear evidence that he was familiar with the songs and poetry of the major bhagats of the time. His values, view of God as active in history, and his concern for rightful living in this world differed from the bhagats. Thus the overlap between Guru Nanak and the bhagats was limited and so it would be misleading to view him as part of the Bhakti movement and consequently the Sikhs "as an offshoot of the larger Hindu community". Gurinder Singh Mann, "Guru Nanak and the Bhagati Movement," *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies*, 25:2 (2018), pp. 165-79.

<sup>89</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak: An Appraisal", pp. 128-29.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 130. The reference is to W.H. Mcleod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 153.

<sup>91</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak: An Appraisal", pp. 132 & 135.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

<sup>93</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "Sakhis about the Founder," in Knut A. Jacobsen, Gurinder Singh Mann, Kristina Myrvold, and Eleanor Nesbitt eds., *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism. Volume I: History, Literature, Society, Beyond Punjab*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2017, p. 177.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>95</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth", *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 9 & 10.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> W.H. McLeod, "Cries of Outrage: History vs. Tradition in the Study of the Sikh Community", p. 2. The date of this lecture is not given but I presume it was delivered in the autumn of 1994. There are references in it to events as late as July of that year and I sent Dr. McLeod a letter thanking him for a copy of it in January 1995.

<sup>104</sup> I found in Khushwant Singh's translation of Guru Nanak's hymns for UNESCO quite a few expressions of his inability to put these into words. One example of this is the following in Raga Bilaval:

What shall I say? I try to speak

I learned I could not speak of One

Who is beyond description.

I can only say as much as Thou willst me to say

And that is but a tiny fragment of Thy real greatness.

Khushwant Singh, *Hymns of Guru Nanak*, New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1969, p.

171. See also pp. 53, 60-61, 75 & 154.

<sup>105</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, pp. 230-232.

<sup>106</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, pp. 284-286.

<sup>107</sup> J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, p. 81.

<sup>108</sup> Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh History", p. 22

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 24 & 25.

<sup>110</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, *Sikhism*, pp. 29-47.

<sup>111</sup> See pages 1-8, 19-20.