

A new course on Sikhism: reflections after the first semester

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Thanks to the generous support of the Global Institute for Sikh Studies and the Sidhus of New Jersey, this semester I taught an introductory course on the Sikh tradition (RLST 045: Sikhism). What follows are observations from the semester; student comments from course evaluations; and ideas for future iterations of the course.

The Course and the Students

The enrollment of the course was fifteen students, of which I believe eight were members of the newly-formed Sikh Students Association of the Claremont College. The students came from all five of the Colleges and all four class years, and their majors included Biology, Religious Studies, Mathematics, Engineering, International Relations, and Gender/Sexuality Studies. The students were coming from California, Arizona, India, Fiji, and Manchester, UK, among other places. It was, in other words, a wonderfully diverse classroom.

The format of the class combined lectures and discussion, addressing issues such as the development of the Sikh *panth*; interpretations of key concepts like *seva* and *simran*; and topics such as colonialism and diaspora. Students were required to do “classrooms takeovers,” pursuing interests of their own within the weekly topics. One group led an engaging discussion on the turban as a symbol of Sikh identity in the U.S.; another group delved into Punjabi musical and dance forms, showing a clip from a recent student dance performance in which much of our class had participated; and one student, teaching his classmates about the history of “Punjabi Mexican” families in early 20th-century California, explained that his own family was part of that story.

Towards the end of the semester we visited Walnut Gurdwara for Sunday morning *kirtan* and *langar*. The students really enjoyed this experience—both those who were new to the setting, and those who were regular visitors reported that it was one of their favorite parts of the class.

Student Comments

Students gave the course high numerical rankings for educational value, academic challenge, effective organization, and relevant and interesting information. Here are a few student comments from course evaluations:

“The whole course was extremely enjoyable and valuable. I was able to learn more about the Sikh religion that I did not know from before, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, especially the Gurdwara and 9/11 topics.”

“I found all of the information to be quite valuable but specifically looking at the religion from a scholarly perspective and analyzing the poetry I thought was the most valuable. I identify as Sikh so for me this whole class was extremely valuable to me for I was able to gain new perspectives on concepts that I had learned from a religious perspective in a more academic way.”

“I found our discussions about identity and how many practiced Sikhism very interesting as I had never considered these topics before.”

"I liked how we split into groups to discuss each of the readings because we analyzed them thoroughly and I got to learn more about it that I had not thought of."

"the field trip! so fun!"

"The readings were phenomenal and materials were very well thought out and done. Prof Martinez was fantastic at facilitating."

"Although I didn't do very well on them, the short quizzes at the beginning of the semester helped consolidate my learning."

"Thank you for teaching this historic class :)"

Future Offerings of the Course

The course will be offered again in Spring 2018, and once more in either Fall 2018 or Spring 2019. Many of the students' final papers were fascinating, and I would like to incorporate more related to some of the topics that they were most interested in. In the future I also look forward to related lectures and performances that will complement the course (none of these could be scheduled for the current semester but they will certainly take place next year).

One further thought about the class in the future is that its demographics will change, and thus the course itself may unfold in new ways. This semester more than half the students were Sikh, and all the students had some personal experience with Sikhism and/or South Asia. It seems likely that future iterations will include more students who have little or no experience with the tradition and the region, and certainly fewer practicing Sikhs (I think nearly the entire Five-College SSA took the course this semester). The course may have to be adjusted to accommodate those different levels of experience in the future—potentially a challenge, and yet also an opportunity to help a new group of students to discover Sikh history, belief and practice.



The Sikhism class of Spring 2017 (minus a few students who didn't make it into the photo), before our field trip to Walnut Gurdwara.