

# Introduction

## ~ Orienting a Logic for Comparison ~

Like it or not, we attend to the world not in terms of objects but in terms of categories. Wherever there is a theory, wherever there is a concept, there is a comparative program.<sup>1</sup>

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The comparative project has suffered somewhat of late, most famously through the critiques of Gerard van der Leeuw's and Mircea Eliade's work and the seemingly totalizing, universalizing claims of their scholarship—minimizing difference, lifting data out of its circumscribed context, and elevating it outside of time and place to create a vision of a “transcendent” shared human dimension to history.<sup>2</sup> In his famous phrase “*homo religiosus*” Eliade encapsulates this perspective well—denoting that what makes us human is not so much a shared biological trait, a spiraling and intertwined genetic history, but some common, universal human search for the sacred that is refracted in the myths and rituals we humans narrate and perform. In a post-modern and post-colonial world, such approaches are viewed by some scholars as violent intellectual acts—assaults on the individual cultures from which the data for analysis are lifted, pulling the thread, so to speak, of the rich and carefully woven cultural tapestries the world over and thus de-forming them at a scholarly whim. Under this schema, comparison is thus relegated by its critics to a mere exercise of the creative imagination, devoid of real meaning or value because it involves sundering objects of study from their uniquely contextualized environments.

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<sup>1</sup> Paden 2000: 182.

<sup>2</sup> See Holdrege 2000 for an overview of the types of problems with the comparative studies of van der Leeuw and Eliade.

In the post-modern world where such universalizing projects hold special negative resonance, the pendulum has been quick to swing the other way. However, whereas Eliade and others may have glossed over differences in the service of exposing a shared, almost therapeutic, religious consciousness, those who fetishize difference are guilty of their own scholarly crimes, of producing a kind of scholarly nihilism. In emphasizing the uniqueness of each phenomena, the un-shareable quality of religious experience, such scholars have created, by accident or not, incommensurable worlds that are incapable of speaking to each other—incapable of knowing any story but the one in which it is embedded.<sup>3</sup>

It seems reasonable, however, that a middle course is not only possible but a fruitful way forward—that one can escape the centripetal or universalizing tendencies of modernism and the centrifugal tendencies of post-modern nihilism. For the purposes of this study I will use as a guide the logic embodied in the words of Jonathan Z. Smith when he says:

The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence . . . comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought. Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason. . . . That comparison has, at times, led us astray there can be no doubt; that comparison remains *the* method of scholarship is likewise beyond question.<sup>4</sup>

My study will take as its starting point the utility of a more balanced comparative project, one that while acknowledging similarities is careful to highlight points of difference and how those differences manifest outside the thought-worlds of individuals, in sociocultural worlds. Only by admitting similarity can one draw historical figures close

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<sup>3</sup> Patton and Ray 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Smith 1993: 240-241.

enough together to identify how they might differ and thus illuminate the truly unique contributions of individual historical actors and how those actors changed the cultural environment of which they were a part.

In the case of this study, my focus will be on the medieval religious personality of Guru Nānak (1469-1539) and his transformative social influences. By comparing Guru Nānak's life and poetic legacy with other prominent contemporary, or near contemporary, figures and the religious communities they inhabited, his extraordinary contributions to Indic religious history and culture will fall into sharper relief. In this way the principal purpose of this study is to inspire scholars to re-vision Guru Nānak's worldview and social effects through the lens of comparative analysis. For the purposes of this study, three groups or communities, with their corresponding representatives, will be highlighted for comparison *sants*, represented by Kabīr; *bhaktas*, represented by Mīrābāī and Sūrdās; and Sufīs, represented by Shaykh Farīd al-Din Ganj-i Shakar, also known as Baba Farīd. These choices are not arbitrary, for the Sikh tradition has included within its sacred literature, at one point or another along the trail of pre-canonical manuscripts leading up to the canonical Gurū Granth Sāhib, all of these figures, most of whom have attained canonical status. As such, a conversation between these figures and Guru Nānak has an inescapable element to it. By orienting Guru Nānak in relationship to these groups that helped shape his socio-religious milieu, and by using individual members of these groups as nodes of comparison, we can arrive at a deeper, more three-dimensional and nuanced understanding of the unique contributions and legacy Guru Nānak bestowed upon the Indic religious scene.

## The Bhagat Bāṇī

Each of the poets mentioned above—Kabīr, Mīrābāī, Sūrdās, and Baba Farīd—is part of a larger group in what Sikh tradition has come to call the “Bhagat Bāṇī” or inspired poetry (*bāṇī*) of non-Sikh figures (*bhagats*). The status of this poetry in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, along with the pre-caonical manuscripts leading up to it, has been a persistent topic of conversation, even controversy, within the Sikh tradition and among Western scholars. A full consideration of the rationale for the inclusion of such poetry is well beyond the scope of this study,<sup>5</sup> but a few words are nevertheless necessary before proceeding further.

The available evidence from the Sikh manuscript tradition reveals that the Bhagat Bāṇī first appeared under the third Guru, Amardās, in the Goindvāl Pothīs. Non-Sikh poets clearly enjoyed great popularity during the medieval period, and some scholars have conjectured that during Guru Amardās’s tenure, a time of significant expansion for the Sikh community, incorporating non-Sikh poets was a way of courting followers by showing the community’s like-mindedness with popular saints.<sup>6</sup>

The organizing principles governing the Gurū Granth Sāhib, however, are such that even in the canonical text a hierarchy of authority is made clear: the poems of the *bhagats* always appear after the Gurus and Sikh court poets in any given section of the text. This hierarchy is also made clear by the fact that the Gurus (especially Arjan, the fifth Guru) sometimes comment on poems of the *bhagats*, the purpose of which would arguably be to articulate points of contrast between a given *bhagat*’s perspective and that of the Guru (and, by association, the larger Sikh community). The Bhagat Bāṇī is thus, in

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<sup>5</sup> See Singh 2003 and Mann 2001 for more on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> Mann 2001: 102-120.

part, a means of drawing out distinctions between established thinkers/poets and newly emerging figures.<sup>7</sup> The poems of the *bhagats* are similar enough to the Sikh Gurus to invite outsiders who identify with them to enter the nascent Sikh community, while they are still different enough to provoke occasional comments by the Gurus and to be relegated to a lower status than the poetry of Sikh Gurus themselves based on their physical location within the Gurū Granth Sāhib. As such, the poetry of the *bhagats* is a valuable resource for understanding how the early Sikh community understood itself and thus invites comparison with the community's founder, Guru Nānak.

### **Guru Nānak: A Brief Life Sketch**

Guru Nānak was born in 1469 in what is today the Pakistani village of Talvandi, West Punjab. Unlike many religious personalities in medieval North India, Guru Nānak's life history, although by no means unproblematic to reconstruct, is relatively well articulated—at least with respect to its basic outlines. Sikh tradition has faithfully preserved such information in traditional narratives known as *Janam-Sākhīs* (literally, “birth-stories”), of which there are several traditions.<sup>8</sup> Although these traditions cannot be read as straight “history,” the communities that created them clearly took great care in preserving memories of their founding father.<sup>9</sup> With such a conscious attempt to preserve these memories it is not surprising that, despite the normal embellishments of

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<sup>7</sup> Singh 2003: 177-202.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the more important *Janam-Sākhīs* traditions include the *Bālā*, *Miharbān*, and *Purātan*.

<sup>9</sup> Working from Lawrence 1987: 359-373, it seems plausible that the early Sikh community might have been influenced by Islamic, specifically Sufi, religious biographies. Such biographies, working as they did from the Islamic tradition of *hadīth* (reports on the deeds and sayings of the Prophet), would have provided an example in which more factual data was woven into religious biographies than was usually found in those patterned by Hindu norms. The early Sikh community's location in Punjab, an area strongly influenced by Islamic culture and Sufism, would seem to lend support to such influence. On why the Punjab has been particularly influenced by Islam see Eaton 1987: 106-123.

traditional religious biographies, we know more about Guru Nānak's life than about the life of any other so-called *sant*.<sup>10</sup>

Guru Nānak's family was *khatri*, a Punjabi Hindu mercantile caste—a profession that his father practiced as a revenue official in his village. Nānak's early life provided wide and intimate exposure to diverse ideas, particularly in the realm of religion. His village was centered around a mosque,<sup>11</sup> and as such the unique religious ethos fostered by the village geography could not have but affected Nānak. His father's position as an administrative official meant that Nānak would have been trained in this vocation as well and would have consequently learned Persian, the administrative language of Turkish-controlled North India, at the Muslim mosque, in addition to learning Sanskrit, the sacred language of his originally Hindu traditions, at the local temple.

As a young adult Nānak moved to Sultānpur to work there as a storekeeper. Sultānpur was at this time a thriving center of both commerce and Islamic learning. Its location on the highway from Delhi to Lahore would have meant that countless merchants, some from outside of India altogether, would have passed through the city—not to mention the scores of pilgrims traveling to Mecca in the West or to Hindu pilgrimage sites in the hills to the North and East.<sup>12</sup>

It is fitting, then, that it was in Sultānpur that Nānak had the religious experience that changed the course of his life. The details of this experience are not entirely clear,

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<sup>10</sup> Other important sources include Nānak's own poetry, the poetry of court poets, the writings of Bhāi Gurdās, as well as Persian sources such as the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.

<sup>11</sup> The original headman and founder of the village of Talvandi, Rai Bhoa, was a Muslim of the Bhatti tribe. See Trumpp 2007: xlvi, n. 6. This being the case, Rai Bhoa would have followed the usual practice of such Muslim "founders" by building a mosque at the village center (Gurinder Singh Mann, personal communication).

<sup>12</sup> Mann 2004: 20.

but after a period during which many thought that he had drowned in a local river, Nānak emerged alive and well, saying that he had been taken to the divine court of God and there had been commissioned by God to spread his message. After this, Nānak quit his job in the city and took up the religious life. He traveled extensively throughout India, visiting centers of pilgrimage for a variety of religions and discussing spiritual matters with countless learned and respected religious authorities, including Jains, brahmins, *yogins*, Sufis, and mullahs.

Nānak's travels lasted some twenty years, after which time he returned to the Punjab and founded a community of his own at Kartārpur. Regarding the historicity of Nānak's founding relationship to Kartārpur—a vitally important feature of Nānak's life and thought—the influential scholar W.H. McLeod, although usually highly skeptical of extracting “history” from traditional Sikh sources, states:

There is no doubt that Kartārpur, if not positively founded by or for Gurū Nānak, was at least transformed from insignificance to importance by his arrival there. The tradition that he actually founded the village, or that it was founded for him, appears to be much the stronger of the alternatives, for the *janam-sākhīs* are here dealing with an issue which has a local setting and which should evidently be placed in the last two decades of the Gurū's life.<sup>13</sup>

The Kartārpur community, being on a thoroughfare for pilgrims headed to sites in the Punjab hills, was not only well placed to attract the religiously curious, regardless of caste or class, but it was also far enough off the Lahore-to-Delhi highway that it was also safe from invading armies.<sup>14</sup> The location of the village was also ideal for agricultural purposes due to its location on the bank of the river Ravi.<sup>15</sup> It was here that Guru Nānak gave concrete expression to his religious message. Living in an

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<sup>13</sup> McLeod 1968a: 139.

<sup>14</sup> Mann 2004: 23.

<sup>15</sup> Mann 2004: 22.

environment that perfectly illustrated the beauty and bounty of God's creation, he inculcated in his followers the ideal of social equality, the merits of hard and honest labor, and the importance of good will towards one's fellow human beings. Guru Nānak lived the rest of his days at Kartārpur, but before his death in 1539 he made sure that his legacy would continue on and chose a successor, Lahina (Guru Angad), his most accomplished disciple, to lead the community after his passing.<sup>16</sup> Sikh tradition, through the *Janam-Sākhīs*, maintains that a major part of this succession ceremony was Guru Nānak's passage of a book containing his poetry to his successor Angad.<sup>17</sup> This initial collection of poems, later to be supplemented with the poetry of five other Gurus along with the poetry of *bhagats* and court poets, would form the core around which a Sikh canonical text would later coalesce.

## **The Punjab**

Any extended study dealing with Sikh traditions must devote space to the geographical region that would become their sacred land—the Punjab, a geographic area that extends across the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> The term itself is Persian in origin and literally means “five waters,” and it is likely best understood as referring to the five inter-fluvial zones (*doabs*) between six rivers—the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Satluj. The region was so named under the Mughal emperor Akbar as he enlarged his empire in the Northwest.<sup>19</sup> Though there has been some fluidity regarding what exactly constitutes this region's geographic uniqueness and extent, we can say that despite the literal meaning of its name, the Punjab is more fruitfully understood as a land

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<sup>16</sup> For support of the above brief biography please see Mann 2004: 18-28.

<sup>17</sup> Mann 2001: 10.

<sup>18</sup> Some 80% of the world's approximately 25 million Sikhs live in this region, now a state, in India.

<sup>19</sup> Grewal 2004: 2.



of six rivers that is bounded by the Himalayas in the North and Northwest, the Thar desert in the South, and the Yamuna river in the East. The Punjab is thus both imagined and actual—imagined because it defies its name but actual in that the general region has enjoyed a consistent “separateness” given its unique natural boundaries.<sup>20</sup>

The diversity of the region, in both socio-political and religious terms, is intimately related to its unique geography. Two of the major passes through the Himalayas (the Kyber and Gomal) allow access into the Indian subcontinent straight through the heart of the Punjab, and the third major pass, the Bolan, cuts just to the South. Thus the region has always, necessarily, been a land of cultural and ideological interactions. The Aryans, Greeks, various Central Asian tribes, Persians, Arabs, Afghans, and Turks (among others) all have passed through the region and left their unique mark. In this connection, it is important to note that the greater Punjab was exposed to Islam and Islamic civilization at a much earlier date than the Gangetic plains. As early as the Arab conquest of Sind in 711, Muhammad bin Qasim went as far North as Multan (Southern Punjab) and built a mosque there.<sup>21</sup> Under the Ghaznavids (10-12<sup>th</sup> centuries), Lahore, at the center of the Punjab, became an important city, even acting as their capital.<sup>22</sup> Cities such as these not only became large multicultural centers but also served as regional loci of military power for pushing back Mongol raids during the Sultanate period and generally functioned as Northwestern extensions of Delhi’s power (especially Lahore).<sup>23</sup> All of this helped to contribute to a particularly vibrant cultural landscape

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<sup>20</sup> Grewal 2004: 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Wink 2002a: 186.

<sup>22</sup> For later developments under the Ghaznavids, see also, Wink 2002a: 237.

<sup>23</sup> Guarding against both internal and external proplems. Lahore would act as a key locus of Mughal authority that confronted the Sikhs and their ambitions in the region (watch towers at the Golden Temple complex, Sikhism’s sacred center in Amritsar, were positioned to look out in the direction of Lahore).

characterized by socio-religious integration.

The lucrative overland horse trade, and many other trading ventures, also came through the Punjab.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Punjab became a center of horse trade, with breeding and grazing land dedicated to the industry in the region as early as the Ghaznavid period.<sup>25</sup> With numerous rivers and streams cutting through the region, as well as new agricultural techniques such as the Persian wheel, the Punjab was also an agricultural powerhouse that fostered further trade opportunities and stimulated the natural growth of towns and cities.<sup>26</sup> Through both its agricultural production and links to vital commercial activities, the region played a prominent role in the Indian subcontinent's political and economic life, drawing ever more people into its domain. Guru Nānak thus grew to maturity in a thriving and historically rich environment, crisscrossed by travelers, merchants, pilgrims, armies, settlers, and religious practitioners of nearly every sort.

In matters of religion, the area was home to the earliest strata of Vedic culture, Buddhist traditions as they moved into Central Asia and beyond, Jain traditions, Nath *jogīs*, goddess traditions in the hills, and Sufi shrines in the plains. The area was also home to nomadic tribes such as the Jats, many of whom decided to take advantage of the rich agricultural opportunities in the region by finding a way to integrate into settled society and cultivate the land.<sup>27</sup> Many found such a way through the thriving Sufi institutions in the area<sup>28</sup>—many also played a vital role in the formation of the early Sikh community.

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<sup>24</sup> Chandra 2007: 157.

<sup>25</sup> Wink 2002b: 240-42.

<sup>26</sup> Grewal 1998a: 3, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Wink, 2002b: 240-242.

<sup>28</sup> Eaton 2003. Grewal 1998a: 46.

## Guru Nānak and “Beginnings”

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other?<sup>29</sup>

A quest for origins always seems to haunt scholars of religious studies, and, in the case of the study of Sikh traditions, there have been varying ideas concerning when the “moment of birth” actually occurred. Major scholars of Sikh studies such as, Hew McLeod, as well as other historians of religions such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, have been reluctant to associate that moment with the life and teachings of Guru Nānak—even though the mainstream Sikh community unhesitatingly sees Guru Nānak as its founder.

According to McLeod, Guru Nānak is denied the status of “founder” in two ways. First, his ideas were not fully his own in that he was a carrier and synthesizer of other peoples’ ideas, and thus he cannot be construed as a founder as such. Second, those ideas (his or not) did not lead him to construct any institutional structures that would create the basis for a lasting community. According to this view, Guru Nānak lacked both the creative vision to fashion a unique worldview and the fortitude to construct any vision with sufficient historical force to outlast the power of his own extraordinary personality.

According to McLeod, following Guru Nānak’s death, there was a period of conservatism—embodied in the Guruship of Angad, Guru Nānak’s successor—that was then followed by a period of necessary socio-religious innovation.<sup>30</sup> According to this line of thought, with the ascension of the third Guru, Amardās, the community that had coalesced around Guru Nānak was in danger of disintegration due to the loss of his

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<sup>29</sup> Melville 2004: 60.

<sup>30</sup> McLeod 1976

unique charismatic presence. Social pressures demanded action, and Guru Amardās needed to act in order to consolidate the community identity, the very existence of which seemed to be in danger. Responding to such pressures, so McLeod argues, required Guru Amardās to accept many of the very things Guru Nānak had supposedly spoken out so forcefully against—institutional structures and religious artifacts such as rituals and texts.<sup>31</sup> A religion that, according to McLeod, originally stressed a “mystical” interiority at the expense of external, socially involved religious practices needed to turn on itself, so to speak, to stay alive. With Guru Nānak barely gone, already by the time of the third Guru the survival of the nascent community required a betrayal of Guru Nānak’s original message. The picture that McLeod paints of the early community is thus one very much at odds with itself and characterized by a contradiction<sup>32</sup> in that the community retreated under the familiar warm blanket of traditional Indic religious norms due to social need, even though this retreat constituted an ideological departure from the teachings of Guru Nānak.

Though speaking more as a generalist than a specialist in Sikh studies, William Cantwell Smith, along with McLeod, sees understanding Guru Nānak as a founder to be deeply problematic. Smith argues that Sikhism provides a prime example of a “founding” figure such as Guru Nānak whose teachings were only later “crystallized” into a religious community by subsequent figureheads. Smith gives particular emphasis to Guru Arjan and Guru Gobind Singh. In fact, in a sly rhetorical move, Smith uses the meaning of the word *sikh*, which he translates as “disciple” or “follower,” to play on the fact that it is only the *followers* of Guru Nānak that can be deemed responsible for the crystallization

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<sup>31</sup> McLeod 1976.

<sup>32</sup> McLeod uses this very word “contradiction” himself. See McLeod 1976: 8.

of the community—not the Guru himself.<sup>33</sup> Guru Nānak, so Smith maintains, is a prime example of a religious figure whose thought and teachings constitute

the attainment of one man in one age who reaches past the symbol-systems to that personal and cosmic reality that they are calculated to represent, and teaches that the reality, rather than the symbol, is alone of significance, [but] is made available to other men and later ages by being made available in the form of a symbol system.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Guru Nānak’s vision, and the teachings that grew out of it, transcended the concretized structures that define religious communities; it constituted a mystic’s experience, beyond time and language and thus incommunicable. It was therefore up to others (later Gurus) to bring matters back down to earth, so to speak, and create the very thing that Guru Nānak tried so hard to reach beyond or leave behind. To draw this point out, Smith states:

This is part of what is meant by saying that it is wrong to speak of Nanak as the “founder of Sikhism.” . . . Nanak could well have lived the life he did and preached the message that he preached, with yet nothing for us to call Sikhism emerging in Indian history, if later generations had not produced an Arjun to crystallize his teaching and his followers into a formal structure[. . .].<sup>35</sup>

What one is dealing with here is what social theorists, most famously Weber, have called

the routinization of charisma, the gradual transformation that occurs when, after a prophet’s passing, the fiery intensity of his message begins to cool and fix itself into institutions if it is to survive.<sup>36</sup>

What is clear, however, from my own research, is that Guru Nānak was not a mere mystic; rather, he strove actively to build a community himself. He was not a man whose head was perpetually in the clouds, as so many seem happy to claim, but instead he took concrete action to create something new, organized, and sustainable. Though

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<sup>33</sup> Smith 1981: 177-196.

<sup>34</sup> Smith 1981: 180.

<sup>35</sup> Smith 1981: 181.

<sup>36</sup> Pals 2006: 157.

Smith latches onto figures such as Guru Arjan and Guru Gobind Singh as those who would most successfully create the necessary “symbol systems” to consolidate and sustain a religious community out of the supposed otherworldly mysticism of Guru Nānak’s worldview, Guru Nānak, as this study hopes to show, ought to be the focus of such efforts to catch Sikhism “at the moment of its birth.”

The question thus remains, how ought we get at this moment? What angle of vision will allow us to better comprehend the mission that Guru Nānak set out to establish and continue into the future. As stated earlier, the approach of this study will be one of comparison, as it is my contention that comparing Guru Nānak’s life, thought, and social action with that of his contemporaries (or near contemporaries) will help to illuminate the multidimensional complexity of Guru Nānak and his unique place in Indic religious history.

## **A Brief Genealogy: Scholarly Constructions of the “*Sant* Synthesis” and the “*Nirguṇa* School”**

. . . all faulty connections of ideas . . . all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too heavily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to truth.<sup>37</sup>

In his autobiography *Discovering the Sikhs*,<sup>38</sup> McLeod candidly acknowledges how he came to first study the thought of Guru Nānak—and in so doing he exposes the genesis of a history of scholarly misunderstanding of this key figure in Indic religious history. As he himself describes it, McLeod’s initial interest seems not to have been Guru Nānak but Kabīr and other so-called *sants* who are classified as *bhagats* in the Sikh scriptural

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Weil in Miles 1986: 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> McLeod 2004.

context.<sup>39</sup> McLeod, however, was initially dismayed after reading through the works of such key figures as Kabīr, Ravīdās, and Nāmdev, as he was unable to derive any “coherent system” from their collective, and presumably, individual works. When McLeod later turned to Guru Nānak, the eventual focus of his early scholarly work, he found the systematizer for whom he had longed, a figure that made sense, so to speak, of the poets to whom he had originally been attracted. Guru Nānak’s voice was clear, articulate, full of purpose, and distinctive, but he shared substantially in the use of a certain vocabulary and religious outlook that McLeod, and others before him, referred to as the “*sant* synthesis.”<sup>40</sup>

According to McLeod, Guru Nānak was therefore, despite his unique clarity, merely a carrier of other peoples’ ideas—ideas that came before him and that he did not author himself. It is key here to understand that McLeod’s exposure to the *sants*’ ideas, given his location in the Punjab during his long stay in India as a teacher, was through the Gurū Granth Sāhib. The homogeneous character of *sant* ideas should therefore have been of little surprise given the fact that the text of the Gurū Granth Sāhib includes an edited version of the poetic corpus of the various *sant* poets—one aimed to broadly fit the unique ideological and social visions of the early Sikh community.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the bell had already been struck, so to speak, and McLeod was unhesitant in propagating the notion, especially in his seminal *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, that Nānak was, in

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<sup>39</sup> More on the *sants* will follow throughout this study. For now it will be helpful to state that they are typically thought to be bound by a worldview that categorically rejected caste distinctions; that they advocated a staunch monotheism which gave no quarter to divine incarnation or anthropomorphism; that they eschewed external rituals in favor of an inner religious sensibility; strongly critiqued organized religion and its elites, and shared a vocabulary that emphasized the importance of the divine name (*nām*), the divine word (*śabad*) and the role of the human guru in guiding the adept along the spiritual path.

<sup>40</sup> For a summary of Northern Sant beliefs please see McLeod 1968a: 151-163; Schomer and McLeod 1987: 1-17; Vaudeville 1959: 7-9; Vaudeville 1987: 21-40.

<sup>41</sup> Schomer 1979: 75-86. Linda Hess’s extensive work on Kabīr is also particularly good at illustrating this fact.

the last analysis, best understood through the *sant* lens. This episode in the history of Sikh scholarship may in fact be one of the most important moments in determining our understanding of Sikh traditions and their historical trajectory. The early trajectory McLeod established for the nascent study of Sikh traditions still hangs heavily over the field and has had dramatic effects in determining the dominant scholarly perspective not only on Guru Nānak but also on the later development of Sikh traditions more generally.

Though it is not exactly clear how the work of another, much earlier scholar, P.D. Barthwal, might have affected McLeod, his work bears some attention for setting the stage, yet again, for privileging similarity over difference, for he played a significant part in the larger story of the “*sant* synthesis” and its genesis in scholarship. Writing his *Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*<sup>42</sup> in 1936, Barthwal created what he saw as a coherent ideological or philosophical system of *nirguṇa* ideas as embodied in the poetry of figures such as Kabīr, Nānak, Dādū, and Ravīdās (to name only a few prominent examples). On this point Barthwal makes an important assertion:

To my mind, mine is the first attempt of its kind. The poets of the Nirguna school have been dealt with by different authors, but none has attempted to systematically view the whole as one school.<sup>43</sup>

Barthwal thus sees his contribution as a key one, one in which the disparate voices of various poets, and the scholars who previously studied them, are given a collective voice, and a classification or category—the “Nirguṇa school”—is thereby created. Barthwal admits that these poets did not set out to “consciously undertake” the formulation of a system of philosophy, but he nevertheless makes the following bold statement:

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<sup>42</sup> Reprinted as Barthwal 1978 (*Traditions of Indian Mysticism based upon Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*).

<sup>43</sup> Barthwal 1978: xi



The Nirguna school represents a consistent philosophy and a *perfect* system can be worked out from their teachings . . . it is not, however, contended that these saints consciously undertook to formulate a system or systems of philosophy, for they were not philosophers, but mystics. (emphasis mine)<sup>44</sup>

One can therefore see that Barthwal appears to be comfortable with the fact that his study has an inherently artificial quality to it. This “perfect system” is something that Barthwal is extrapolating from a diverse and extensive poetic record and is thus bound to elide the nuances of individual poetic voices in the name of “systematization.”

However, if Barthwal is to act as such a “systematizer,” it is worth investigating how he even arrives at, or understands, the “Nirguṇa school.” It seems clear that, for Barthwal, this school took shape as part of a socio-religious response to the needs of medieval North India<sup>45</sup>—a time that was defined by a “vast gulf of hatred separating the two races [Hindu and Muslim], that still needed being bridged.”<sup>46</sup> He argues:

Medieval North India urgently needed a reform movement which would aim at sweeping away all ignorance and superstition, that gave rise to Mohammadan bigotry and fanaticism on the one hand and inequitous [sic] social fetters on the other and that stood in the way of communal rapprochement [sic] and social equity.<sup>47</sup>

This “reform movement,” he goes on to describe, “came in the shape of the Nirguṇa School.”<sup>48</sup> According to Barthwal, this created

the basis for the common ground on which both the Hindu and the Moslems could amicably meet, [and] was supplied by the *Vedānta* of the Hindus and the Sufism of the Moslems, the latter being but the former with a passionate colouring.<sup>49</sup>

The remedy for this lay with certain poets of the North. As Barthwal explains, the

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<sup>44</sup> Barthwal 1978: xi

<sup>45</sup> During the time this book was written one can also surmise that it had decidedly modern associations as well.

<sup>46</sup> Barthwal 1978: 8.

<sup>47</sup> Barthwal 1978: 14.

<sup>48</sup> Barthwal 1978: 14.

<sup>49</sup> Barthwal 1978: 15.

*nirguṇa* saints stood outside, above, or between the religious traditions of the day. Thus these saints are painted as saviors for a troubled time of religious strife in medieval North India. For, according to Barthwal,

that the Hindus and Moslems should remain like good and peaceful neighbors, was clearly the need of the moment and these men of broad vision realised it as clearly.<sup>50</sup>

According to Barthwal's narrative, it would appear that the devotional spirit of South India was smothered by sectarian interests—the shackles of which were thrown off by the various figures in the North. Even the traditional transmitter of Southern devotionalism to the North, Rāmānanda, could not abandon his sense of superiority over the *śūdra* or Muslim.<sup>51</sup> As Barthwal claims:

It was left to Kabīr, a Moslem disciple of Rāmānanda, in whom the new thought found its full expression. . . . In him both *Vedānta* and Sufism joined hands to proclaim that God is one and imageless, that he is not to be found in rituals and forms which are but veils of falsehood hiding Him from us, but is to be realized as one with us being enshrined in our own hearts, and forming the substance in all that exists.<sup>52</sup>

Here Barthwal identifies two ideological features of the “Nirguṇa school” that persist in understanding the group today—namely, that it rebukes religious ritual and is largely a religion of the “interior.”<sup>53</sup> It would appear, then, that the “Nirguṇa school,” according to Barthwal, came into being due to the unique qualities of a single figure, Kabīr.

Barthwal thus links the “Nirguṇa school” directly with Kabīr, whom he considers the perfect “spokesman” because he was a Muslim taught by a Hindu guru, Rāmānanda. Indeed, Barthwal consistently comes back to Kabīr in describing the ideas of others, painting him as the fount from which the ideas of the “Nirguṇa school” ultimately sprung

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<sup>50</sup> Barthwal 1978: 8.

<sup>51</sup> Barthwal 1978: 14

<sup>52</sup> Barthwal 1978: 14-15

<sup>53</sup> Vaudeville 1964.

and whose message future *nirguṇa* figures were destined to carry forward. For our purposes, this becomes a significant problem in Barthwal's description of Guru Nānak, a figure who receives only glancing attention in the book. About Nānak, Barthwal says:

After two decades of Kabir's death, there was born in Talvandi, a small village in the neighbourhood of Lahore, in 1469 A.D., a child who was destined to carry on his mission of truth.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that Barthwal frames his discussion of Guru Nānak in this way (actually providing a brief "biography" toward the end of the book) is extremely important for our understanding of how the contributions of Guru Nānak, from a very early period in Western scholarship, tend to get lost in the enormous ideological shadow of Kabīr. Moreover, Barthwal's characterization of the "Nirguṇa school" provides the basis for later scholars' formulations of the "*sant* synthesis."

Such a vision of Kabīr's central importance is picked up in the scholarship of the great French scholar of *sant* religion in general and of Kabīr in particular, Charlotte Vaudeville. Vaudeville's tendency to portray Kabīr as the paradigmatic *sant* is especially clear in some of her later work—particularly her influential brief survey of *sant* thought.<sup>55</sup> However, some of her early work precedes that of McLeod, which he subsequently picked up and wove into his first book length study of Guru Nānak, mentioned earlier, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*.<sup>56</sup> Vaudeville's later survey of *sant* thought is especially interesting in helping to establish a framework for understanding the *sant* tradition, its ideological base, and key figure(s). In attempting to identify the salient features of the *sant* tradition, Vaudeville addresses both what "binds" it together as a unique tradition, despite its non-sectarian affiliation and conspicuous lack of doctrinal

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<sup>54</sup> Barthwal 1978: 254.

<sup>55</sup> Vaudeville 1987: 21-40.

<sup>56</sup> McLeod 1968a.

uniformity, and how it differs from some of the prevailing religious norms of the time. What is interesting, however, is that in marshaling textual evidence to support her claims concerning what constitute the central features of *sant mat* (*sant* thought), Vaudeville chooses, from among the rich manuscript traditions and choice of authors, twenty-two (out of a total of twenty-five) textual quotations from Kabīr. One therefore wonders whether her survey really does what it intended to accomplish, or whether it instead simply provides a “systematization” of Kabīr’s religious thought. Such a situation helps illustrate the slippery nature of the category *sant* as an analytical category in current scholarship, and it raises significant questions concerning the usefulness of the category in identifying the thought and lived experiences of the various poet-saints supposedly falling under its umbrella. It should be noted that the volume in which Vaudeville’s essay appears, *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and McLeod, explicitly pays a debt to Barthwal, acknowledging that his scholarship has influenced the present volume<sup>57</sup>—a volume that has had a formative influence on the study of *sant* ideas and of individual *sants*.

Having briefly surveyed the genealogy of scholarly constructions of the “*sant* synthesis” and the “*nirguṇa* school,” we can see how such constructions have wielded an inordinate influence in our scholarly taxonomies and have at times ossified into constraining categories that have been misapplied to certain poet-saints and to Guru Nānak in particular, as my study will demonstrate.

## **Overview of Chapters**

In addition to this introduction, my study comprises four chapters and a conclusion. The

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<sup>57</sup> Schomer and McLeod 1987: 3.

three main chapters, chapters 1 to 3, are configured in a parallel manner, with each chapter considering the relationship of Guru Nānak to a particular group as embodied in exemplary representative(s) of that group whose poetry appears in the Gurū Granth Sāhib or in the pre-canonical manuscript traditions leading up to it: *sants*, represented by Kabīr (chapter 1); *bhaktas*, represented by Mīrābāī and Sūrdās (chapter 2); and Sufis, represented by Shaykh Farīd al-Din Ganj-i Shakar, or Baba Farīd (chapter 3). Each of these chapters examines the treatment of particular categories in the poetry of Guru Nānak—*sant* (chapter 1), *bhagat* and *bhakti* (chapter 2); and *shaykh* and *pīr* (chapter 3)—and then provides a comparative analysis of the poetry of the representative figure(s) with the poetry of Guru Nānak in order to map the similarities among their perspectives and, more importantly, to recover the significant differences that set apart Guru Nānak’s distinctive perspectives on the divine and the world, critiques of religious institutions and practices, and social and ethical ideologies.

One of the central arguments of this study is that the term *sant*, and its correlative *nirguṇa bhakti*, in being applied to Guru Nānak, has done serious harm to our understanding of him as a figure in Indic religious history; indeed, perhaps no other interpretive lens has done more damage or set back our understanding of him so dramatically. Chapter 1 takes up the task of investigating Guru Nānak’s relationship to the *sants*, examining his own use of the term and his thoughts regarding the *sants* as glimpsed through his poetry. The chapter provides an extended comparative analysis of the poetry of Kabīr, as the paradigmatic representative of the category *sant*, and the poetry of Guru Nānak in order to illuminate the similarities between these two figures’ perspectives as well as the important differences that distinguish Nānak’s worldview and

social vision from that of Kabīr and other poet-saints who have been classified under the category *sant*.

Having examined Guru Nānak's relationship to the *sants*, or those poet-saints who have been classified as exponents of the *nirguṇa* school, at one end of the devotional spectrum, in chapter 2 we turn to an investigation of Guru Nānak's relationship to the *bhaktas*, and more specifically to those poet-saints who have been classified as *sagūṇa bhaktas*, at the opposite end of the spectrum. One of the interesting features of Guru Nānak's poetry is that his usage of the term *bhagat*, which is the Punjabi term for *bhakta*, does not fit the usage assigned to it in modern scholarship. The *bhaktas* chosen for comparison are Mīrābāī and Sūrdās, both of whom are acclaimed representatives of medieval Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions in North India. Both poets are included in the pre-canonical manuscript traditions leading up to the Gurū Granth Sāhib, although in the end only a single fragment of Sūrdās's poetry is included in the canonical Gurū Granth Sāhib, while none of Mīrābāī's poems makes it into the final form of the canonical scripture. Nevertheless, the importance of these two Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* poet-saints warrants an analysis of their poetry in comparison to the poetry of Guru Nānak as well as that of Kabīr. Such a comparison sheds valuable light on our understanding of Guru Nānak's distinctive worldview and social message and helps us to determine what he shares with these poets.

In chapter 3 we shift to an examination of the relationship of Guru Nānak to Islamic traditions and more specifically to Sufi traditions. The chapter includes an analysis of the terms *shaykh* and *pīr* in Guru Nānak's poetry. The Sufi *shaykh* chosen for comparison with Guru Nānak is Shaykh Farīd al-Din Ganj-i-Shakar, or Baba Farīd, a

towering figure in the religious history of the Punjab, the region from which the Sikh tradition sprang. Baba Farīd is second only to Kabīr in terms of the number of his poems, as a non-Sikh poet, that are included in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, and thus there is ample material with which to compare the person and poetry of Guru Nānak and the person and poetry of Baba Farīd. This chapter also examines the role of Islamic traditions in shaping the religious landscape in which Guru Nānak found himself and through which he shaped his own distinctive worldview. The contributions of Islamic traditions and Islamicate political structures have historically been marginalized in accounts of Guru Nānak, and this chapter seeks to redress this problem by highlighting important aspects of Guru Nānak's relationship to Islamic traditions and to Sufi traditions in particular.

Chapter 4 departs from the organizational design of the previous three chapters by concentrating exclusively on the usage of terms. This chapter focuses on the terms *gurmukh* and *sikh* in order to illuminate their significance not only for Guru Nānak but also for the early Sikh community more broadly. Although the chapter is primarily concerned with the term *gurmukh*, through investigating the ways in which both *gurmukh* and *sikh* are used in key passages in Guru Nānak's poetry, hagiographic narratives, and the writings of later Sikh figures, it seeks to illuminate the overarching importance of both terms. Indeed, such an investigation can contribute to a more nuanced, multivalent understanding of the seminal categories that undergird Guru Nānak's poetry and his continuing legacy.