Tradition, rationality and social consciousness: the Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyah moral languages from colonial Punjab
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PREFACE

Upon the whole then, we cannot avoid recognizing in the people of Hindostan, a race of men lamentably degenerate and base; retaining but a feeble sense of moral obligation; yet obstinate in their disregard of what they know to be right, governed by malevolent and licentious passions, strongly exemplifying the effects produced on society by a great and general corruption of manners, and sunk in misery by their vices, in a country peculiarly calculated by its natural advantages, to promote the prosperity of its inhabitants.

Charles Grant (1746-1823) in Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals and on the means of improving it (1797).¹

During the early centuries of overseas expansion, the most decisive distinction for most Europeans was not so much the difference in material culture but of ‘religion’. They were Christians, while with very few exceptions the others were heathens. Accordingly, much more space in their accounts was devoted to pointing out differences in beliefs and practices than in attempting to explain or compare scientific and technological prowess (as would happen later under the banners of ‘improvement’, ‘progress’, ‘development’, if not ‘evolution’). Increasingly Europeans began to identify differing degrees of heathen depravity,

¹ As cited in Stokes, The English utilitarians, 31. Between 1773-1779, Charles Grant was in service of the East India Company, where he became member of the Court of Directors. He was an evangelical and, on his return to Great Britain, one of the founders of the influential Clapham sect, striving (with success) for the abolition of slavery and the opening of India to missionary enterprise.
though ‘these were more difficult to substantiate and compare than the quality of housing, the size of ships and the volume of trade’. For idolatry was idolatry. The devil allegedly being worshipped was the same throughout Africa, Asia and South America. As such, whereas India once was seen as a land of marvels, by the nineteenth century, most British (scandalized by stories of customs such as child marriage or widow burning) viewed its people as benighted heathens fit for the ‘civilizing mission’, if not conversion.

Alternatively, the category ‘religion’ has come to be applied universally as a normalizing concept to describe the ideas and practices of people worldwide only during early modern times. In fact, as a definable entity, capable of being described both for its own essence and for the results it produces on society, the category belongs almost entirely to nineteenth century Western scholarship. More crucial to this study, however, remains that the categories associated with the Western study of ‘religion’ were imposed on non-Western cultures. Undeniably important here remains the formation of modern states worldwide which ‘officially’ meant a separation between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ (in the Western context commonly known as the separation between church and state). Yet what is ‘religious’ and what is ‘secular’? The use of the category ‘religion’ to explain human ideas and practices in many places in the world is puzzling. Is it not true that most of what happened under its banner has been very down to earth: economic, political, often totalitarian, xenophobic and generally depended on charismatic leaders? Whatever the case, while too much influenced by European ‘secular’ critique of ‘religion’ since the Enlightenment, the categories ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ definitely have to be handled with care, as their use generally does not add much to our understanding of the workings of the modern world.

2 Adas, Machines as the measure of men, 64.
Already in 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) wrote in his classic work, *The meaning and end of religion*, about using the categories 'tradition', 'community' and 'faith' instead of 'religion', a word he found so muddled in meaning and so modern in coinage as to be useless for any comparative historical study.4 Twenty years later in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Talal Asad nonetheless argued that scholarship is not finished with the employment of such terms as those mentioned by Cantwell Smith. On the contrary, that 'comprehensive concepts' like these always have to be unpacked into their heterogeneous and historically specific elements, reflecting various power relations in local situations. Yet, all the same, Asad solely refers here to the idea of history and, accordingly, while assuming that the study of history excludes 'the need for a spiritual interpretation in research',5 I am satisfied with the idea that in the end there are only two basic terms, namely 'history' and 'tradition'. Otherwise the Western idea to think of 'religion' and 'morality' as distinct remains very peculiar. South Asian languages for example do not possess a noun for 'religion', meaning 'a single uniform and centralized community of believers'.6 For centuries (and often to the present, if only from the participant's point of view) people in the subcontinent embodied their rituals, pilgrimages and acts of piety without objectifying 'religion' into an exclusive entity. As such, there are words for 'faith, rites, piety, beliefs and gods, but not for an overarching community of believers'.7 As Harjot Oberoi rightly stressed:

At most, Indian languages yield the word *panth*, a sort of moral collective of believers. But then any tradition could be made up of several conflicting *panths*, and

4 Cantwell Smith lived in Lahore between 1941-1949. At that time he was a scholar of Islam and the author of *Modern Islam in India* (1946), which earlier had been rejected as a PhD-thesis at Cambridge.
5 McLeod, Crisis of outrage, 135.
6 Oberoi, *The construction*, 12
7 Ibid., 13.
the word does not exactly fit a uniform, centralized, religious community possessing a
fixed canon and well-demarcated social and cultural boundaries.\(^8\)

Not particularly surprising in pre-modern South Asia therefore ‘religion’ was basically ‘a
highly localized affair, often even a matter of individual conduct and individual salvation’.\(^9\)
Also such labels as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Sikhism’ only emerged during the nineteenth century by
adding the Greek suffix ‘-ism’ to a word used to designate followers of a certain ‘tradition’.
Obviously the word ‘Hinduism’ should be scrupulously avoided because there are only
multiple Hindu practices. Yet according to the historian of the Sikh tradition, Hew McLeod,
because of the Singh Sabha reformation there is reason for continuing with ‘Sikhism’, though
the term does not apply to earlier patterns of Sikh belief.\(^10\)

All in all, as far as the idea of ‘religion’ is concerned, it is time to leave behind the
secular-religious binary opposition as dominantly existing since the Enlightenment and in its
place define ‘religion’ as ‘tradition’ sanctioning morality by some final reference to
transcendent authority. This as alternative to ‘secularism’ (which includes the idea of history)
with its own orthodoxy but its ultimate point of moral reference in the world of reason and
not beyond.\(^11\) Then again, however, and this is crucial, I take ‘secularization’ as a neutral
process, whereby authority passes from a traditional to a secular source, but which is not anti-
religious in intent and, importantly, due to historical context has its own unique
characteristics around the world.\(^12\) For indeed, particularly if one looks at it in terms of social

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 14. The Sikh community is also known as Panth spelt with a capital ‘P’.
\(^{9}\) Ibid.
\(^{10}\) Personal communication, 16 January 2003.
\(^{11}\) Importantly, since colonial times ‘secularism’ has a different meaning in India, which indeed sounds much
like contemporary state legislation in terms of multiculturalism (and what I label politics of ‘difference’). There
it refers not to the absence of ‘religion’ but to a political and social order, wherein ‘officially’ no one ‘religion’
is preferred to the others but all are given equal respect by the state.
\(^{12}\) These definitions of ‘secularism’ and ‘secularization’ differ from the idea of ‘secularism’, as recently put
forward for example by Peter van der Veer, ‘as a set of arguments in favor of separation of church and state’
with ‘a genealogy in the Enlightenment’ but working out differently in historical formations worldwide. For
obviously when trying to understand how traditions changed during modern times this idea remains too much
practice, since the nineteenth century, 'tradition' seems to me not so much different from other forms of 'moral' knowledge more or less 'rationally' authorized by science and spread through modern disciplinary institutions and practices. Liberalism, for example, cannot be understood unless one recognizes that it always was and remains a Christian 'moral' doctrine (i.e. that of the religious dissenter). Also it remains worth pointing out that Christianity perpetuates the category 'religion' because of its 'images of how the world ought to be' and as such since the nineteenth century heavily influenced 'traditions' worldwide in terms of 'rationality' and 'morality'. Even so, one sometimes has to continue to use the category 'religion' instead of 'tradition' as a whole intellectual heritage can not be easily discarded. The idea however is to analyze what happened by writing a comparative historical narrative that does not follow the secular-religious binary opposition. Instead the long-term world historical perspective will be taken in which during the period of European expansion, a crucial interaction took place between the Christian West and the rest of the world. Ever since, the West dominated the course of world history and, as a result, the relationship of modern non-Western 'traditions' towards transcendence and morality more or less developed along similar universal 'rational' lines. These developments however cannot be justified simply by the slogans of 'secularization', 'Westernization' or 'modernization', if only because that would neglect the historical continuity in terms of the 'modern' (instead of 'invented') features of 'tradition' in their specific contexts.

bounded to the secular-religious binary opposition dominantly in existence since the Enlightenment. See further Imperial encounters, 16-18.
13 Chadwick, The secularization of the European mind, Chapter Two (On liberalism).
14 Earlier the process has been called 'Protestantization'. See for example Jones, Socio-religious reform, 213-215 and Brush, Protestant in the Punjab, Chapter Six.
15 For undoubtedly much of modern humanistic studies and almost all social science use categories formed in the nineteenth century and imposed upon other societies. Hence sometimes also in this study I had no other option than to use such terms as 'religion', 'religious' and 'religious nationalism', if not the secular-religious binary opposition.
Obviously this study to a great deal concerns an exercise in historiography because of its preoccupation with such labels as ‘secularism’, ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, ‘Hinduism’, ‘state’, ‘public’, ‘colonialism’, ‘secularization’, ‘modernity’, ‘religious nationalism’ and anything followed by ‘project’ in the study of South Asian history. When thinking about the use of these terms in the specific context of late nineteenth century Punjab, their logic often vanishes in the confrontation with the historical sources. Where to begin when it feels like starting anew? How to construct a narrative without compromising too much with historical detail? How to use larger labels in a logical, comparative but nonetheless satisfactory manner? When reading the narrative one might be surprised by what has been included and excluded, as obviously it reflects my, perhaps now and then not so fashionable, personal interest over the years. Nonetheless, I hope the work has not become too antiquarian, written by a grubber for small bits of string too short to use but too long to throw away, but instead provides (without drawing too easy conclusions) a somewhat different perspective on the contemporary discussion of ‘religion’ in South Asia.17

Between 1989 and 1998, I visited the Punjab four times. The first time, I stayed only shortly in Amritsar while coming down from Kashmir and passed through Lahore up on my way to China across Pakistan’s majestic Khunjerab pass. I did not know anything about the region and, like so many before me, became fascinated both with the British influence as well as the abundance and colourfulness of Punjabi traditions. Subsequently I toured Indian Punjab more extensively during my one-year stay at New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1992-1993.18 By that time I was already much interested in nineteenth century South Asian history but looking back it still remains a mystery to me how I ever ended up in the field of Punjab studies, moreover with the Singh Sabhas, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs. I

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18 Where at the Centre for Historical Studies I learned much, particularly from Neeladri Bhattacharya, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar and Majid H. Siddiqi.
returned to Indian and Pakistani Punjab for three months in 1996 and once again in 1998. During these latter visits I mostly was hunting for historical sources in a variety of depositories, public and private. The final research was done during several visits in 2000 to the British Library (Oriental and India Office Collections), London. The sources used however were found not so much as the result of a systematic search, but through serendipity instead.

I am thankful to all those who have encouraged, advised or assisted me over the years but want to acknowledge some specific debts. Dirk Kolff’s Socratic teachings at Leiden University undoubtedly lured me into it all. As a result, I reached India similar perhaps to Punjab Officer Malcolm Darling (1880-1964) under the sway of Cambridge teacher Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862-1932). Though Eric Hobsbawm called the latter ‘superficial and therefore typical’ of the era of triumphant bourgeois liberalism, like other Socratic teachers in a time dominated by muscular Christianity, Dickinson admirably ‘thought that the only ideas worth being were the ideas a man worked out for himself’. Particularly also I enjoyed the times Dirk went through my writings somewhat in a Dickinson manner, ‘sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, his pencil jerking below some solecism or jabbing an uncertain argument, muttering “It hasn’t come yet” —until finally it came’. Some years later, Dick Plukker at the India Institute in Amsterdam unexpectedly disclosed to me the almost lost world of Indology. To spend time on the translation of texts written in languages one will never command may seem futile, yet I think it gets much to the heart of (academic) study, i.e. the devotion to apparently pointless matter which in the end

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19 I am especially grateful to those who helped me at the following institutions for their hospitality and/or assistance: the Ahmadiyah centers in Qadian, Rabwah and Lahore; the Vishveshvarand Institute, Hoshiarpur; Amritsar, Chandigarh, Lahore and Patiala Universities; New Delhi’s Teen Murti and National Archives of India libraries; the Sikh history research department of Khalsa College, Amritsar; the Vedic Pustakalaya, Ajmer and Mohinder Singh at the National Institute of Punjab studies/Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi.


23 Ibid., 136.
however proves to be the kernel. Much I learned from Dick’s profound knowledge of Hindi and Urdu and meticulous approach to grammar in general. Also I am grateful for his comments on an earlier draft. Hence, again some years later, Peter van der Veer irrefutably boosted the project by single-handedly and against the tide arranging a bursary at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam (1997-2001). Otherwise, over the years, I enjoyed reading his writings and, after initial jolts, remarks on two earlier drafts. During the final stage, then, Hew McLeod (University of Otago, New Zealand) mildly but scrupulously put his finger on mistakes in my interpretation of the Sikh tradition and generally inspired me to reach out for stricter academic standard and aesthetics. Also Ian Talbot (Coventry University, UK) made some useful suggestions. Further, for different supportive reasons, I am thankful to Jerry Barrier (University of Missouri, Columbia, US), who thirty-five years ago made a start with the comparative study of modern Punjabi identities, and Willem van Schendel at the University of Amsterdam.

Wherever possible, South Asian terms are explained in the text, while the meaning of remaining words can be found in the glossary. With the exception of Panjab University (Lahore) and where it was originally used in book titles or citations, I decided to use Punjab(i) instead of Panjab(i), as it is firmly attached in most people’s minds and usage. Similarly I retained such words as gurdwara and purdah, while these have become English terms.

24 Besides to the Amsterdam School, I am thankful for financial assistance to the former Faculty of Political, Social and Cultural Sciences (now Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences) at the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) in The Hague.