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

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Because of analogies in socio-political context, I sometimes compared nineteenth century social reform in the Punjab (if not South Asia at large) with what happened in Europe during the so-called Protestant Reformation. Both periods were marked by great political, social and economic changes, to which the introduction of print culture and the process of state formation were decisive. Also there were similarities in criticizing tradition and society by lay leaders longing for a return to a pristine Golden Age and succumbing to one or the other scripture as authoritative compendium of eternal wisdom. Otherwise, reformers began to attack popular culture with its saints, healers, magicians, witches and so on. Instead they started to preach (in the vernaculars!) more uniform and homogeneous ideas about how to improve one’s life. But how much further can one extend this comparison? Does not the time gap of nearly three hundred years matter? And, it can not be stressed enough, what about the continuity of Indian tradition during colonial rule? Obviously the comparison solely has heuristic value. What happened in nineteenth century South Asia and Britain in the end should be explored simultaneously in terms of interaction in
Indeed, perhaps as part of a process of 'secularization', i.e. in terms of authority passing from a traditional to a secular source, that nonetheless took place somewhat differently in the South Asian context and therefore should be defined.

In the nineteenth century, Christian Europe had been wrestling with the Enlightenment for about a century. Consequently, northern European Protestant countries in particular gradually got 'secular' features, turning the 'Enlightenment' of few into the 'secularization' of many. Interestingly, the fact that the Protestant Church found ways to incorporate 'secular' forces partly should be attributed to its growing involvement in missionary activities overseas. From the late eighteenth century onwards and especially with the advent of the voluntary missionary society (many of which still flourish today), Protestants obtained an outlet for their burning evangelical desire to preach the Gospel. The Christianity that reached nineteenth century South Asia therefore was of a specific kind and its 'moralism' decisively influenced Indian traditions. Not only because of the interaction with Christian missionaries, but especially because the overall language of the British 'civilizing mission' was permeated with Christian 'moralism' and, alternatively, Indians furthered its influence by following Anglo-vernacular education and ever-growing participation in the liberal democratic public sphere.

Thus, as a result of the colonial interaction, South Asia got 'secular' features. Because of the fast changing conditions, it seems elitist Indians were increasingly prone to 'take things as they are'. As such there emerged a 'social consciousness' that aimed to cope with Western reason and Christianity and indigenous 'tradition' at the same time. Seminal here remains the process of state formation, while it asked for 'rationality' in many ways (Census/scientific definitions) and

1 Cf. van der Veer, Imperial encounters and, especially, because of its direct reference to the Punjab, Cook, Imperial affinities.
2 Chadwick, The secularization of the European mind, 7, 9.
for different reasons (land revenue, political representation and establishment of a system of law). Undeniably the process heavily influenced Indian traditions. Following voluntary movements working through modern disciplinary institutions and practices, the reconstruction and cultivation of norms to chasten the individual and collective life of the community laid the ‘rational’ basis for modern identity politics. Hence how absurd it is that, because of different, colourful and often fluid ‘traditions’, generally still today South Asia is depicted as a society dominated by ‘religion’, taken indeed as the same unchanging phenomenon over the centuries. How is this possible after indigenous voluntary movements have been spreading the word of the ‘civilizing mission’ through their ‘moral languages’ in the public sphere for over a century? Undeniably this has much to do with the dominance and common acceptance of the secular-religious binary opposition between West and non-West as mentioned in the Preface. My discussion of the Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyah ‘moral languages’ aimed to make clear that what happened in reality was much more complicated, albeit modern and open to comparison.

One of the main propositions of this study has been to replace the use of the category ‘religion’ with traditions embedded in history, which during modern times particularly has much to do with ‘rational’ definition, partly as part of the process of state formation. The result are ‘moral languages’ (i.e. traditions morally struggling with Western Christianity and science) with the process of ‘secularization’ as cliffhanger, putting forward the modern features and moral ambiguities of traditions at the same time. Hence ‘moral languages’ remain crucial as part of a variable, indefinite and fragmented ‘social consciousness’ in a liberal democratic public sphere at least for two reasons. First, because on the basis of ‘rationality’, ‘voluntarism’, ‘science’ and modern disciplinary institutions and practices, ‘moral languages’ make possible world historical
comparison in terms of ‘secularization’. Second, because they show the profound influence of Christian ‘moralism’ as well as Western Orientalism on modern South Asian identities, despite all continuity in idiom and practice. But there is more. For undeniably, ‘moral languages’ were central to the emerging public sphere in South Asia and as such influenced the nationalisms that emerged afterwards. Indeed, therefore perhaps they belong to that ‘inner domain’ of the greater Indian cultural tradition, as defined by Partha Chatterjee and recently again stressed by Dirk Kolff, where the nation already was sovereign, even though the state ‘officially’ was in foreign hands. If so, it was here that Indian nationalisms gained their basic ‘moral’ strength to enter the public sphere and counter and eventually take over the colonial state, making the domain of ‘culture’ the source of Indian legitimacy and its nationalism ‘different’.

Yet, can one delineate also a role for ‘moral languages’ over seas and time? Is the influence of ‘tradition’ abroad (as Sudhir Kakar asked himself in relation to the idea of ‘culture’) indeed ‘so pervasive that even when an individual seems to break away from it, as in states of insanity, the “madness” is still influenced by its norms and rituals’? After the abolition of slavery within the British Empire, one and a half million Indians went over seas during the indentured labour system (1834-1917), mostly to East Africa, the Caribbean and the Fiji islands, and many stayed on after completing the job. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyah missionaries followed in the footsteps of those who emigrated earlier. The first Arya Samaj missionaries arrived in Fiji in 1902 but they were more successful afterwards in the Caribbean and at present particularly in South Africa. The Ahmadiyahs opened the first

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3 Chatterjee, The nation and it fragments and Kolff, Indië en de wereldgeschiedenis, 9
5 As to be expected, migration from the Punjab was not so much the result of the indentured labour system but of military service instead.
mosque ever in Great Britain and afterwards created a community scattered practically all over
the globe and overall displaying a remarkable spirit of initiative and enterprise.\(^6\) Today, the
community may watch the *Khalifah* either on the Muslim Television Ahmadiyyah channel as
broadcasted from London through satellite or on internet.\(^7\) Best known however probably
remains the Sikh diaspora. Sikhs can be found throughout the world, particularly in the English
speaking countries of the former British Empire but also in the Gulf states.

Obviously Indians abroad had to decide what to keep and what to discard of their home
cooked traditions. At first there would not be much change inside the house but over time some
emigrants and especially their children started to question the value of keeping the parental
tongue in a strange land or a traditional custom or meal, while preferring to be like their new peer
group. In fact, also today the identity markers discussed in this study remain crucial, as despite
fast changing circumstances, over seas communities do much to stay morally together in terms of
tradition, indeed often on the basis of caste. The focus on language and script, for example,
becomes increasingly impractical with children growing up speaking and reading English or any
other language. Similarly, translations of the ‘scriptures’ not only bring forward problems of
definition but of the whole ‘sacred’ relationship between scripture, language and script.
Otherwise the wearing of traditional clothes and attributes proved problematic (as in the case of
Sikh turbans and daggers) and ‘emancipation’ often questions traditional (patriarchal) authority,
as in the case of (academically qualified) Indian women opting for a mixed marriage.

\(^6\) In the 1980s the Ahmadiyahs supported around twenty-five hospitals and thirty-five secondary schools in West
Africa alone, ten missionary colleges worldwide and a publishing plant in Surrey near London with facilities for
computer typesetting in thirty languages. As stated in Francis Robinson, *Prophets without honour? Ahmad and the
Ahmadiyyah* in *History Today*, June 1990, 44. Interestingly, the first Ahmadiyah mosque abroad in Woking (Surrey)
was built under the supervision of the earlier mentioned Dr. Leitner with money mainly donated by the Begum of
Bhopal. When the mosque remained closed and deserted after the death of Leitner, Ahmadiyahs got it restored and,
with permission of the Trustees of the mosque, transferred their mission from London to Woking in 1913. As stated
Moreover the use of history still is much in the frontline. To give the example of two well-known cases wherein the Singh Sabha legacy came to the front. First the controversy between Hew McLeod and the Sikh community about the interpretation of Sikh History and second the one concerning the establishment of a Chair for the study of Sikhism in 1987 at the University of British Columbia in Canada, against which many Canadian Sikhs protested. Over the years, McLeod has written excellent historical accounts on the Sikh tradition, though many Sikhs question the quality of his work. According to them, history is not enough for the study of Sikhism. As Indir Jit Singh put it:

Because religion is a reality to which the historical intellectual analysis alone is ill-suited. Only in part can history and intellect measure the intuitive reality that transcends both.8

Similarly, Harjot Oberoi was attacked by Sikhs ‘who felt that he was not using his position to promote the cause of Sikhism’ after his appointment as the first Chairholder of Sikh studies by the Canadian government (following a policy of multiculturalism) at the University of Columbia.9 As a result, the author of the best work of history about the making of the modern Sikh tradition recently withdrew himself completely from Sikh studies.10 According to McLeod, the contemporary discussion about the Sikh tradition therefore in the end more or less is between

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7 Singh Sabhaite, Arya Samajist, Ahmadiyahs and their respective opponents are very active creating websites.
8 McLeod, Crisis of outrage, 132.
9 Ibid., 122.
10 In What has a whale got to do with it?, Oberoi elaborates how, first, with the 1984 Delhi riots that followed after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard he was terrorized for belonging to the Sikh community and, second, in 1987 for not being a proper Sikh.
'sceptical' historians, like himself and Harjot Oberoi, and 'traditional' historians, who also could be termed Singh Sabha historians.\textsuperscript{11}

On the whole, Indians in diaspora (by now more than 20 million) were confronted with the distinction between 'religion' and 'culture' unfamiliar and incomprehensible to most non-Westerners. Obviously there now are second and third generation settlers who have compartmentalized 'culture' and 'secular' life at least to the extent of separating, for example, their understanding of the Sikh tradition from a Punjabi lifestyle in respect of diet, dress, arranged marriages and language. Continuity of 'tradition' nonetheless partly was secured after the Second World War, when Indian reform movements got hold on the new wave of emigrants from the subcontinent and the second generation over seas Indians to Europe and North America. Many of the Surinamese in the Netherlands, for example, are Arya Samajist or Lahori Ahmadiyah. Undoubtedly 'moral languages' had prepared Indians much earlier for what was to come and hence the Arya Samaj, Ahmadiyah and Singh Sabha movements adapted smoothly to changing territorial, political and technological circumstances. Indeed, while migrants (including Westerners) generally tend to form closed communities to defend themselves against the wider hostile society and assimilation, 'moral languages' often gained in authority. Overall they were welcomed as 'alternative' to full participation in societies following, sometimes straightforwardly racist, politics of 'difference'. For, in relation to the latter, 'colonial' attitudes definitely still can be found all over the West (and non-West). In fact, they increasingly came to the fore with the ever-growing flow of migrants. In terms of politics of 'difference' therefore

\textsuperscript{11} McLeod, Crisis of outrage, 131. At present the controversy, with fierce reactions from the Punjab and throughout the Sikh diaspora, concerns the fact that McLeod in his latest book claims (as mentioned in Chapter Three) that the Five K's were not part of the Sikh \textit{Rahit} until the Singh Sabha reformation. See: \textit{Sikhs of the Khalsa}, 204-213.
'moral languages' remain crucial, while they were defined, respectable and so suitable for pedagogy and identity politics. Hence, in a sense, members of the Arya Samaj, Ahmadiyah and Singh Sabha movements also can be seen as followers of a 'canon' of reinterpreted nineteenth century traditions as I experienced for example in April 2000 in Southall, a Punjabi dominated suburb of London. There I talked to Christian, Ahmadiyah and Arya Samaj preachers spreading their word on a busy Saturday afternoon in one of the main streets and during the same week to Sikhs celebrating Baisakhi at the local Singh Sabha gurdwara. Many of the arguments brought forward I knew from nineteenth century sources on religious controversy in the Punjab.

So Indians in diaspora increasingly became entangled within local states' politics of 'difference' (though now generally put under the heading of 'multiculturalism') and hence continued to define themselves as 'different' to each other and local authorities. As in the nineteenth century, Sikh emigrants mostly remained preoccupied with defining their tradition in terms of a 'world religion' (we are not Hindus!). Both Arya Samajists and Ahmadiyahs continued their polemics against each other and especially Christians overseas, but on the whole became much more entangled in internal discussions: Arya Samajists with the followers of the Sanatan dharm (orthodox religion) about the definition of Hinduism and Ahmadiyahs with their position vis-à-vis Sunni Islam. More significant, however, remains the fact that overseas Sikhs, Arya Samajists and Ahmadiyahs continued to have ties with the subcontinent (if not physically then at least spiritually and/or, more importantly, financially and politically) and form transnational communities. Particularly since Indira Gandhi's violent suppression of militant Sikhs in the

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12 Besides being the second month of the Hindu calendar, Baisakhi is the time of the spring-harvest festival in the Punjab (where it also means the start of the New Year).
13 I had similar experiences over the years when talking to Ahmadiyahs, Arya Samajists and Sikhs in India, Pakistan and the Netherlands.
Golden Temple in 1984 (Operation Blue Star), overseas Sikhs for example to a great deal of support (morally and financially) the agitation for a separate Sikh nation, Khalistan, to be carved out of the Sikh 'majority' territory in Indian Punjab.\textsuperscript{14} Alternately, since the so-called Liberalization of India under Prime Minister Rajiv 'Mr. Clean' Gandhi (1984-1989), ties with NRI's (Non-Resident Indians) and, more recently, PIO's (Persons of Indian Origin) have been cherished by the Indian government. Hence, in terms of sponsoring, especially since the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) came into power, Hindu nationalism also has growing transnational ties. Crucial here remains the establishment of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) in 1984, which attempts to unite Hindus worldwide to recapture the Indian state from the 'secularists' and to prevent Hindu conversions to Islam. As such, as is well known, the VHP was vital to the financing of the 1992 Ramjanmabhoomi/Babri Majid campaign, which culminated in the destruction of the latter mosque in the north Indian city of Ayodhya.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, like mission became an outlet for Protestants in nineteenth century, today overseas connections in a sense function in a similar manner for South Asian 'traditions', with the blasphemous Ahmadiyahuhs perhaps as the extreme example.

The case of the Sikhs also makes clear one specific form of identity politics to be found in countries with large 'minorities' (other examples are Israel-Palestine, Nigeria, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, all on the territory of the former British Empire). Modern South Asia saw the

\textsuperscript{14} While earlier Sikh migrants only had a vague sense of being Indian, since 1984 the idea of the Punjab 'homeland' increasingly came to the fore. Moreover, a ferocious debate on the collective fate of the Sikh community in diaspora emerged. Sikh activists began lobbying for their 'rights' and 'representation' with local state officials and particularly the United Nations, leading to the World Sikh Organization and the Khalistan Council to proclaim the Sikhs' right for self-determination through many resolutions.

\textsuperscript{15} Like the extreme Hindu nationalists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, the VHP has a broad definition of Hinduism that includes all but the foreign and hostile Muslims and Christians. According to the VHP, a just Hindu society of the ancient Golden Age was conquered and suppressed first by Muslims and then by the British. Hence, following some Western scholars, Hindu religious inclusiveness is called tolerance, while Muslims are seen as fanatical and bigoted and secularists as anti-national agents of the West.
combination of identity politics of 'belonging' with constructed versions of Hinduism and, partly in reaction to that, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism. Commonly put under the label of 'religious nationalism', these identifications to a degree developed as 'alternatives' to the 'secularism' of the Indian National Congress and the later Congress Party. Since Hindu nationalists however gained more and more power through the Hindu (Maha)Sabha(s), VHP and especially the BJP, militant Sikhs and similar movements among other 'minorities' in the subcontinent are also directed against rule by the Hindu 'majority'. All the same, for Ahmadiyaha's 'loyalty' in the end has nothing to do with any state, be it Pakistan or Great Britain, but with the 'true' interpretation of Islam. While the Hindu case might seem different, particularly since the BJP became the ruling party of India, at the same time, the tension for most Hindus remains to feel 'morally' comfortable in the modern world. Likewise, if ever there will be a Khalistan, it will have the same problems as independent India, and especially Pakistan, in accommodating 'tradition' with the idea of progress.

All over the world, identity politics assertively came to fore out of the need to reassert oneself against the real and perceived continued domination by the West. Whether in the South Asian context this feeling was implanted or nourished by the Anglo-Indian colonial state or not, it was based on real inequality which persists even today and the connection between 'morality' and 'power' may have been thought of as a partial remedy for that. Yet, though contemporary identity politics in the subcontinent confirm that the re-orientation of community concepts to the needs of (national) economic progress in a way was a passing one, the re-emergence of 'moral' rigour in South Asia today is not new or surprising. While often attributed to disappointment with capitalism and liberalism, it can be equally explained through its formative roots in the
nineteenth century. Whatever the final word, ‘moral languages’ today are often found useful worldwide as part of criticisms against Western hegemony with its ‘objective morality’ and ‘spiritless’ progress. Despite two World Wars and the rise and fall of communism, the West (now led by the United States) no doubt continues to dominate world politics. Nowadays, the ‘civilizing mission’ for example can be best detected in the attempts to foist on the world the green agenda under the slogan of ‘sustainable development’. Backed up by multinational commerce, the funding conditions of the World Bank and the disciplinary force of the United Nations (where the Commonwealth, as a pressure group, resembles a club within a club) as a form of extra-territoriality, the West promotes its ‘objective morality’ around the world in terms of human rights, democracy, egalitarianism, labour and environmental standards, perhaps more than ever before. What cannot be stressed enough, however, is that these so-called universal values largely remain part of a proselytizing ‘civilizing mission’ of what remains Western Christendom at heart.

16 Reetz, Dietrich, In search of the collective self: how ethnic group concepts were cast through conflict in colonial India in Modern Asian Studies, 31, 1997, 314-315.
17 Protestant evangelicals in the United States definitely also can be called ‘religious nationalists’, if one would use the term. Demonstrizing the ‘secular’ government, these evangelicals have followed a policy of gradual change during the last decades. Stressing ‘electoral’ victories in local races and chipping away at laws and regulations governing school prayer, creationism and abortion, while the effort to control the Republican party further shows their continued aim of seeking national power.
18 In this view, Non-Government Organizations (NGO’s) are the logic follow-up of nineteenth century Christian missions. In fact, the two still today often have strong relationships.
19 The most recent extreme case of course is the ‘War against Terror’, which following the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York (September 11, 2001) really came out into the open.
20 This is not to say, however, that non-Western societies should not progress. On the contrary, among other things they should abandon slavery, practice tolerance, educate women, permit mixed marriages, tolerate homosexuality and conscientiously object to violence in all its varieties. The point is that the rhetoric used by the West in trying to get everybody in line would be improved if it were more frankly ethnocentric and less professedly universal in its claims.