

Studying the Sikhs; Issues for North America by John Stratton Hawley & Gurinder Singh Mann (1993)[217P] ISBN:0-7914-1425-6, SUNY Press



Book Review by Kavneet Singh

This book focuses primarily on the past, current and the ongoing work being done by seven professional academics all experts in their respective fields covering the “Sikhs” in North America.

The eighth being one of the editors of this book John Stratton Hawley, who is a professor at Columbia University with expertise in medieval Hindi literature.

Mark Juergensmeyer, ex-dean of the Graduate Theological Union & UC Berkeley, CA. Currently at University of Hawaii has written couple of books on the Sikhs and Punjab in general including on the Radhaswamis.

Norman Gerald Barrier, retired professor of history at the University of Missouri. Has written 3 books on the Sikhs and currently runs an Asia Books bookstore in St.Louis, MO.

William Hew McLeod has passed on as of fall 2009. He used to be a professor of history at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Written nearly a dozen books on the Sikhs with most being a rehash and extended version of the previous ones. Ex-Christian missionary who went to the Baring Institute a ‘Mission’ in Punjab in the 60’s..

Arthur William Helweg, is a professor of Anthropology at Western Michigan University and has written 2 books on the Sikhs,

Gurinder Singh Mann is currently at UC Santa Barbara, CA and an Asst Professor of Religious Studies and has 5 books to his credit on the Sikhs. Prof. Mann is married to a white catholic.

Joseph T.O’Connell, is professor of religious studies at University of Toronto. He specializing on the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths and has one book on the Sikhs.

Jagtar Singh Grewal, ex-professor of history from GNDU at Amritsar, Punjab. Currently the Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. Simla, Himachal Pradesh. At least 6 books on the Sikhs. Dr.Grewal a government employee is working at a very sensitive position as the entire institute is funded and run by the Government of India Other than J.S.Grewal and G.S.Mann all the others are white Christian men.

One thing needs to be understood clearly and said at the outset to put the entire picture in perspective and i.e., the Sikhs have always been making history with literally no time to write their own history and secondly due to a lack of central ‘vatican’ like clerical authority have had to go through trials and tribulations, with not being able to get their house in order continuously due to persecution by different entities throughout the last

300+ years of their existence as the Khalsa. Academics even in North America, though they are pretty independent are still subject to the internal politics bearing on their positions and grants; albeit there is no getting around it. There is a certain amount of toeing the line by the pressures of the 'chairs' and the grant making institutions. In the case of the Sikh Scholars most if not all come under the elusive 'Indian-American Institute' which funds a lot of the grants in order for these scholars and their protégés to write papers, journals and books. The fact that the gravy train is really the official arm of the Government of India simply cannot be lost on them. Therefore honest and credible writings from these folks is simply not possible, because the hands that feed them do expect something in return, namely a garbled, convoluted, diluted unflattering picture of Sikh religious history all in the name of so-called sophisticated western style of questioning scholarship. Case and point is the Sikh Studies Chair at the University of BC in Vancouver which got railroaded by India and took nearly 3 years to get it back on track. It is a fact that none of the Sikh scholars who have obtained their PhD's from Australia, Canada, UK & the US have ever allowed their published thesis to be scrutinized by the public immediately, but instead put a hold on it for 2-3 years primarily to bide time and not let questioning eyes raise a ruckus on their shoddy work. It would be very interesting to see a gathering of Muslim professors being called as experts on the Jewish Faith at an Ivy League University gathering in North America and likewise again Muslim scholars being invited as experts on Hinduism. In all my adult life I have never seen that happen so how come 'these' so-called Sikh scholars have the self proclaimed god given authority to be experts on the Sikhs when they are not qualified enough to even earn their PhD's, and for a whole slew of other reasons. Furthermore only material written by 'white Christian' scholars, becomes the 'holy grail' and all else is second class.

Chapter 1:

It seems, then, that stage is set for an unhappy confrontation between two views of scholarship, a conflict that has in some parts already begun. But perhaps the prognosis is not so dismal as I may seem to have implied..... [Page 13]

Mark Juergensmeyer has clearly touched on a raw nerve by bringing out the fact that their school of thought versus the Sikhs whose scholarship is based on not only preserving the Faith but also writing the truth is heating up day by day. Scholars like Mark and his cohorts do need to do some introspection and ask themselves the same questions they are asking of their detractors. Al Gore, a wise ex-president once said, "If a man's salary is dependent on, him not understanding something, then he will not." Juergensmeyer is keenly aware of his own Faith as he taught at the Theological Seminary so he cannot miss out on a critically important fact, which is the Bible was written as a narrative nearly 400 years after the death of Jesus Christ whereas the Sikh Scripture is authenticated and the original hand written copies by the Sikh Gurus are still available which cannot be said of any other Faith. That is an astounding fact which is either commonly and subtly brushed aside by burying it underneath other fluff or questioned unendingly.

Without question, McLeod is regarded in North America & England as the premier scholar of Sikhism, and his work has given studies of the Sikhs tradition an intellectual respectability that they otherwise might have taken some years to attain....[Page 15]

Another McLeod disciple, Mark should have the decency to acknowledge a simple fact, which is, if McLeod had come to Berkeley instead of SOAS to procure his PhD would he be given one since by McLeod's own admission the whole process was sloppy and smelt of third rate scholarship and yet Mark rates him as a premier scholar of North America and the UK. There is an old saying across the globe, "the one eyed leading the blind." In a vacuum any fool can be called an expert. It doesn't say much about him either.

Chapter 2:

Western academicians often cannot accept some of the presuppositions of Sikh historians. They tend to regard Sikhism as an evolving religious and cultural tradition, one that mirrors and in turn affects the environment in which it was evolved.....[Page 27]

Norman Barrier is deluding himself when he patronizingly states that Sikh historians presuppose events. Since when is honest history writing have different yardsticks regardless of the place or people. Instead of being clearly objective these western scholars are subjective and just cannot fathom that there 'is' a documented hand written scripture and happens to be of the Sikh Faith. Unfortunately that is not true in their own Faith therefore the feigned suspicion of all others. If the criteria for awarding a PhD is to write something unique, so how come it is hard to fathom that there can be something unique out there which necessarily need not have a benchmark to compare and contrast; which is precisely what these scholars are grasping for incessantly. Minor issues like not addressing the Sikh scripture by even its correct name continuously poses problems for Sikhs to take these scholars seriously.

Sikhs have attempted to protect and consolidate their traditions by settling upon specific rules and rituals that are increasingly viewed as standard or orthodox or propagating them through tract literature, training camps, and actual practice. The earlier confusion over 'rahit' and religious doctrine has given way to a series of confident (if sometimes historically questionable) assertions about fundamental principles.....[Page 40]

First of all, Barrier defines normal Sikhs as 'orthodox' which conjures up many things and is repugnant. Secondly a grey haired expert like him should understand that the authority of the 'Sikh Rahit' is not vested in any entity except the 'panth' itself, which may choose or change whatever, and whenever the collective panth decides. Therefore historical questionability becomes moot.

Chapter 3:

An unquestioning attitude may suit those whose understanding has already been definitively formed, but it certainly will not accommodate a growing generation who insist on comparing their faith with the world they find around them..... Some will remain and lend credence to the voices of those who insist upon no change. They will, however, be a dwindling band.....[Page 52]

Sikhs are some of the most accommodating people on Earth and to belittle their intellect by being subtly sarcastic will not help either. The key is to show genuine curiosity and understanding coming from position of neutrality. McLeod's position has always been akin to a professional hangman trying to do brain surgery on an innocent being. Obviously no one is going to trust such a person and antagonism will prevail.

Merely gaining access to the Kartarpur manuscript will be difficult for a member of the panth in good standing and almost impossible for anyone else....[Page 58]

This statement is not entirely true, because if Max Arthur McAuliffe could get access to some very difficult and sensitive documents why couldn't McLeod? The answer lies in the approach! Max won the trust and retained the trust of the Sikhs but in McLeod's case he went to Punjab as a Christian missionary and expected the Sikhs to treat him - a white man with special deference. Without actually physically viewing the Kartarpur manuscript McLeod has written very authoritative opinions which show his own intellectual dishonesty.

Thirdly, there is sufficient material available in translation to provide a beginning student with all that is needed for complete coverage. In this respect the textbook 'Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism' provides a convenient point of departure since it contains an almost complete translation of the Sikh daily prayers and much else besides.....[Page 64]

The inherently vain McLeod cannot find any other peer whose book he can recommend but his own to meet the needs of the lay reader. Secondly, a lot of his translations are not accurate because words in the Sikh scripture are of many dialects with multiple meanings and unless one is an expert in Gurmukhi and its grammar you cannot translate or find appropriate words in the newer English language.

Chapter 4:

During the last fifteen years, migration studies have begun to assume this level of complexity in analyzing population movements, and as they have done so, many issues that once seemed separate processes now demand more intricate theoretical formulations.....[Page 86]

Arthur Helweg has kept most of his writings fairly unbiased primarily because his focus is anthropology without treading into other unknown slippery territories.

Chapter 5:

After the British Columbia experience, it emerged that a key issue for the Sikh community would be its inability to influence the process of decision making that would go into the appointment of a teacher of Sikh subjects, the establishment of a Sikh curriculum.....[Page 106]

Numerous experiences with the various universities in North America have left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Sikhs since they have spent their hard earned earnings to fund these chairs with no say whatsoever in the decision making process. To add further insult all the chairs have had a marginal to mediocre grade of Sikh scholars with some even inimical to the Sikh Theological thought. No compromise middle ground has been achieved anywhere so far! Just like Jewish or Christian theological seminaries can be accredited to function as small universities the same can be achieved for the Sikhs though it may take time. The current climate in western universities is a one way money making racket for the university and a salaried position for the hungry scholar and nothing more. *I.J. Singh of New York University found McLeod's writing to be "refreshing and lucid in its brevity and clarity, and free of the conceptual cobwebs and convoluted verbosity that often define religious writing.....[Page 108]*

Mann quotes Singh of NYU as though he is a Sikh scholar which he is not, instead is a professor of Dental Science. Mann and Singh are intelligent men but it shows them in poor light when they stand up for a charlatan masquerading as a scholar.

Chapter 6:

In the following year (1986) the presence of W.H.McLeod as visiting commonwealth fellow made it possible to offer three courses on Sikh religion taught by an expert in the field.....[Page 121]

Even Joseph T.O'Connell reveres the omnipotent McLeod as their 'gurugantal'!

There is a network of quite vocal Sikhs who are evidently troubled by the thrust of rigorous scholarship as it bears upon religious history of the Sikhs.....the conference is not organized by university staff on an academic basis, but by volunteers-notably orthopedic surgeon Jasbir Singh Mann and Harbans Singh Saraon.....The two American Sikh contributors have a professional academic qualification, but not directly related to Sikh Studies.....[Page 124]

Joseph is keenly aware that Sikhs everywhere are watching them like hawks and it unnerves them no end. He lacks the decency to acknowledge that Sikhs are not troubled about the scrutiny it's the unending immature questioning even where questions have been answered with legitimate proof. Furthermore Dr. Mann and Dr.Saraon have given very detailed proof based rebuttals and their work on the Sikhs is good enough, to earn a PhD from any Ivy League University. In fact Dr.Mann has been awarded an honorary doctorate by Punjabi University. My question would be who and what benchmarks are being used to qualify "professional academic qualification" according to O'Connell especially in a non-science subject where his peers have barely a working knowledge on the subject themselves. If it wasn't for vigilance of these various Sikh groups the McLeodians would run roughshod and wreak havoc on the religion & history of the Sikhs.

Chapter 7:

Although the very phrase "doctrinal evolution" is repugnant to many Sikh scholars, who see Sikh truths as eternal and unchanging.....we found ourselves questioning scholars who insist that the advent of Sikhism constituted a complete break from earlier thinking.....[Page 143]

It is funny that a Sikh scholar like G.S.Mann does not realize that the Sikh Faith is a revealed religion. In that case all the ten 'Gurus' in their magnificence had chartered a course for their followers best known to them. Unfortunately it is hard to go back in time to analyze their brains but smart scholars should know better than trying to figure out the 239 years of continuous theological grooming of the collective is in itself unique in the annals of religious history. There is nothing similar or such a long time frame of any other monotheistic faith anywhere to compare with; so in trying to bracket a preconceived notion of "doctrinal evolution" into a mould is nothing short of being ludicrous.

Although Muslims were the enemy, insofar as they held the central power, the Sikh concepts of martyrdom (shahadat) and holy war (dharamyudh) are hardly understandable without taking into account parallel concepts in Islam.....[Page 145]

Again Mann finds it hard and the urge to explain Sikh martyrdom without explaining the parallel concept in Islam when there are distinct differences between the two. Further for nearly 7 centuries no other Prophet or Prophets made martyrdom as an accepted part of the Faith till the advent of the Sikh Faith. Why is it strange that any other Prophet other than Prophet Muhammad could not come up with a certain line of thinking independently?

Khalistan, the unsaid word, was the goal, and violent force was the right means to achieve it.....[Page 156]

Mann is insuating that Sant Jarnail Singh demanded Khalistan when the hard fact is that it is untrue. When asked if a country was offered, would he take it; he did say he would take it, but at all times he wanted respect and autonomy and not be treated as second class citizens in all walks of life and never asked for an independent country. Secondly never was violent force advocated by him except where all other legal means fail which includes police and the judiciary, and only as an absolute last resort to pick up arms. The Sant was never charged with any provable crime ever! Pope John Paul II stated over 20 years ago, "When all other means fail man has the right to take up arms", so does that make the Pope a terrorist?

Chapter 8:

What impels authors such as these to write on Sikh history of Sikh Faith is not altogether clear. It seems unlikely to merely a desire to see their names in print, especially since one can scarcely hope to make a fortune from such publications. Is it then an act of piety? Certainly each of these writers desires to project a particular image of the Sikh past and of Sikh tradition, so perhaps one concludes that they are writing for "self understanding".....[Page 170]

Jagtar Grewal's above statement is in reference to Daljeet Singh, Jagjit Singh and Gurdev Singh. These are noble Sikhs who had clearly seen a vacuum in Sikh Studies and admirably filled it with a true labor of love; yet wrote logically and critically with absolutely no expectations but the inherent passion to make sure that the generations to come get unbiased and untainted information. Why and how could a gentleman such as Grewal write without bias while being the Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies which is a Central government body; which has never ever taken kindly to writings sympathetic to Sikh political and religious thought?

The peer pressure within the western academia which overtly spills over to peers elsewhere makes sure that all intra-scholarly criticism remains within certain bounds because every University employed scholar cannot afford to seriously offend either their counterparts or concerned governments. Crossing the invisible line can mean loss of employment, demotion and loss of grants which in the case of Sikh Studies are primarily funded by India and its other indirect arms. These and other western scholars rarely mention anywhere who the grant giving bodies are so that the readers can decipher the biases of the scholars on their own. The politics within academia is not black and white when it comes to writing about vocal minority faith groups, especially ones who are hounded by racist governments. Scholars have little choice but to perform a jugglery act and definitely in part to please their masters.

Anyone reading a wide variety of books on Sikh Studies needs to read this book to get some flavor of the mindset of these authors who are some of the key players of the McLeodian school.