

“Lost in Translation”: How Colonialism Shaped Modern Sikh Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the interactions and influence of colonialism on Sikh identity. The specific focus will be between 1870-1920, when Sikh identity was reforming under the Singh Sabha movements. Arguing the “World Religion” understanding of “Sikhism” is a de-political, private, and colonial construct. Focusing on decolonisation of thought and advocating the understanding of Sikhi as a religious-political (Miri/Piri), decolonial, lived identity. This is done through tracing colonial scholarship, Sikh scholarship, and theories and understandings in Religious Studies. Tracing how colonialism affects Sikh identity through primary research focusing on the effects of texts, translations, ideas, language, and understandings from the colonial era and the issues that has for the Sikh diaspora. Arguing the translations of Sikh scriptures by Ernest Trumpp (1877) was catastrophic for understanding Sikh identity. It argues the needed reaction to the defamatory comments made by Ernest Trumpp has led to the modern formation of “Sikhism” in line with the Protestant model of religion. This idea of “Sikhism” is detrimental to Sikh identity as it separates the boundaries between religion and the secular. This article advocates use of a vernacular approach to the study of religion to advocate for decolonisation of Religious Studies through qualitative methods of research, investigating the effects of colonial language and texts of Sikh scriptures has on the Sikh diaspora.

KEYWORDS

Singh Sabha movement, Sikh identity, Ernest Trumpp, colonialism, decolonisation

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Introduction

Becoming a “diasporic people, blasted from one history into another”, is a great tragedy (Clifford, 1997: 319).

This article begins with the focus on the Sikh reform movements between 1870-1920. During this period, there were religious and educational reform movements in Amritsar and Lahore. The Lahore branch were known as the *Tat Khalsa* (*Tat* alluding to a radical, progressive, and theological branch of the Singh Sabha movement; *Tat* meaning “true/real *Khalsa*”) which is the group I specifically focus on in this introduction.

The emergence of these reform movements combated the threat of conversion to Christianity and Hindu religion, evangelicals, and the *Arya Samaj*.¹ To battle these issues, the *Tat Khalsa*, using *Gurmat*² brought focus towards life-cycle events of Sikhs as well as publishing important literature on Sikh identity. The reform movements, despite being crucial for the creation of a distinct form of Sikh identity, used and relied upon the language of Christian theology. Meaning that this concept of Sikh identity is created per Christian ideas of religion. This concept of Sikh identity is later adapted, re-appropriated, and understood under the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) through the term “Sikhism”.

Through the specific application of Protestant religion to understand Sikhi, and the translation of Sikhi into British ideas of religion, leads to a colonial construction of “Sikhism”. “Sikhism” as a colonial construct affects not only the translations of Sikh religion into Britain, which treats it as a private entity, but it also affects ideas and knowledge of Sikh religion. Thus, affecting *Miri* (temporal/political realm) and *Piri* (spiritual/religious realm).

Colonialism affects Sikh identity through the translation of important terminology into English. These issues lead to a shift of identity, through the issue of understanding Sikhi in a Christocentric lens and the translation of words rooted in Sikh philosophy and theology into English.

Throughout this article I refer to the Sikh religion as Sikhi, *Gur-Sikhi*, or *Gurmat*, this is due to “Sikhism” being a word coined by Christian outsiders (Mandair, 2013: 3) and I believe it is not a satisfactory term. The only reference I make to “Sikhism” would be in quotation marks. The only time I refer to the term is due to its problematic colonial roots, emphasising on the need to move past it.

Challenging Colonialism

The emergence of modern political sovereignty is founded not on a subjugated, working, tormented, reproductive, or disciplined body but on a *stolen body* [emphasis mine] (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2007: 135).

Understanding the construct of “Sikhism” through the WRP is riddled with colonial assumptions and interpretations of what “religion” should look like. The construction

¹ The Arya Samaj was a right-wing Hindu nationalist reform movement, who thought Sikhi to be a minority sect within Hinduism (Takhar, 2016, 19). With the contradicting colonial knowledge of Sikhs, this idea was easy to portray.

² Sikh philosophy, theology, or “religion”. Literally meaning ‘facing the Guru’

of “religion” and “religions” as global objects of study are wider historical projects of Western imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

The term *Dharam* (Sikh word for belief/tradition)/*Dharma*, or ideas of “religion” within broader Asian traditions does not fit within the mould of ‘World Religion’. This construction is not limited to Sikhi.³ Modern colonial constructions of “Sikhism” as a World Religion secures the religion as a “backwardness” (other) identity and places it within a ‘depoliticized space of private worship’ (Bhagal, 2014: 295). The WRP presents the ideas of “religion” that fits well into British culture, even at the cost of its own identity (Sian, 2013: 43). The depoliticized understanding of “Sikhism” begins in the colonial binary opposition⁴ between the religious and political realms. The WRP encapsulates the colonial mindset.

The problematic colonial roots and modern construction of Sikh identity are ridden with the “martial” stereotype. The problematic WRP allows a concept of religion that ‘requires the concept of secularity (and secularism) to emphasize (sic) the irrationality and backwardness of the other (the colonized)’ this is through the process of ‘racialization and gendering’ (Nye, 2019: 17). This is especially seen in the conception of the “martial” Sikhs (Singh, 2009: 103 and Shani, 2012: 166).

The WRP typically includes “the Big Five” of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, they are ‘always presented in that Abramocentric order’ (Cotter & Robertson, 2016: 2). Sometimes this paradigm includes ‘Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Baha’i’ with “other” religions including “New Religious Movements” and “indigenous” traditions (Owen, 2011: 254). With questions being raised over who decides these classifications, which religions are selected/excluded, and what is the criteria being a main area of debate (Owen, 2011).

The classifications of World religions are conflicting, and “Sikhism” is in some sort of paradox, where it is either a part of “the big six” or excluded altogether. When it is included, it is seen as inferior to Christianity. The place of “Sikhism” within the WRP leads to impositions into how Sikhi is taught and studied. This paradox must be directly tackled.

Taking a vernacular religion approach deconstructs the WRP and informs the lived religion approach in the analysis of fieldwork in this article. The lived religion approach used in this study is influenced by Graham Harvey’s (2011) approach to field research. Harvey’s approach to studying religion through fieldwork is to study religion in its vernacular (lived reality) form (Harvey, 2011: 217).

Researching religion as it is lived (Primiano, 1995) allows me to witness elements of the Sikh religion that may contradict established narratives, which rely on theories about texts, creed, and rituals that inform on how Sikhs “should” practice their religion. This is an important methodology to apply to the study of Sikhi and religion, due to the long-standing implications of colonial projects, interpreting religion through anthropological and historical means, with their impositions.

³ As seen in the World-Religions Paradigm through terms and religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and ‘New Religious Movements’.

⁴ A binary opposition arises from the theories of structural anthropology. Claude Levi-Strauss states ‘the human mind, which operates with a universal logic of dualities, [is] called [a] binary opposition’ (Erickson & Murphy, 2008: 113).

Non-European cultures are frequently presented as uncivilised. There is a running theme of portraying Sikhi as a reform religion (Mandair, 2014: 74). Understanding it in light with Protestant Christianity, which is treated, presented, and conceived to be the highest stage of religious development (Bowman and Valk, 2014). Anthropological ethnography has been the main perpetrator of this idea. Ethnography is the study of a community or culture, that is normally outside of the West, being presented as either 'primitive' or 'exotic' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This understanding of religious tradition has an explicit focus on texts, founders, and core beliefs. Using a lived religion approach deviates from this and challenges the WRP (Owen, 2011), where the Paradigm relies on the focus of 'traditional' forms of religion.

Research and findings

This section adapts fieldwork done in my masters' dissertation to showcase debates within the study to religion and the issues of the WRP. I carried out ten interviews, below are a few samples of these. Debates include ethnography, the term "religion", and the institution of a Gurdwara. Primary research was done with participants I met online and with participants I met in person. These accounts are interwoven with theory and understandings from Sikh literature.

My focus on lived religion focuses on how religion works in everyday public life. Combating some of the hindrances of the education of Religious Studies, through critiquing the WRP privatising religion/(s). This severely affects the *Miri-Piri* dynamic within Sikh thought (Bhogal, 2014: 283).

The focus on lived religion helps to highlight the nature of individual and fluid understandings of Sikhi. One participant (Participant E) used the term "God" in casual speaking but mentioned that they use Gurmukhi or Panjabi terms in private settings such as prayer. In this instance it is interesting to explore where those concepts come from; in the sense, my participants may believe "religion" to solely be individual and private, a knock-on effect of colonialism. This is a conception my research actively tries to explore and rectify.

It is worth mentioning, many Sikhs may not be fully aware of the issues of colonialism, hence, my project actively tries to challenge academic understandings of the religion to highlight the failings of the WRP. Through the focus on the academic failings of understanding the Sikh religion, it highlights where many participants get their notions of religion from.

The first interview I conducted was with a married couple from Canada, using the online platform *Zoom*. Participant A is a female Panjabi Sikh and Participant B is a male white-convert Sikh. The issues they discussed are the role of the institution: leading to the use of social media, issues in Christian translations, and a general observation of the conversational use of Sikhi rather than "Sikhism".

Participant A and B started their interview telling me that religious life continues outside and can be separate from the institution of a Gurdwara. Yet, the Gurdwara plays an important role in my participants' beliefs. The participants that I spoke to lived two hours away from a Gurdwara and so they cannot regularly visit the Gurdwara. The substitutes the couple spoke about was doing *path* and mentioned during the pandemic, they volunteered at a local food kitchen.

Participant A spoke about how they missed the communal and religious institution of the Gurdwara. This participant likened the ethos of *Seva* (selfless service) in a Gurdwara being in common with the voluntary work they undertook, this is an example of *vicarious religion* (Davie, 2007: 22):

At this food kitchen it... Made me feel homesick with the concept of *Seva*, my mum has been making *roti*'s non-stop, since the pandemic started as a lot of young people didn't come and do *Seva*. I wish I lived closer, as I could help out. But it was older people, and she's on the frontlines. The ethos is to help people and come together, it feels effortless. (Participant A).

Participant A used the example of social media to connect to local *Sangat*. Especially during the last year because of the Coronavirus pandemic. The participant mentioned that being a part of an online social media groups allowed them to connect to a community that was their age and could relate to their experiences. The themes of community cohesion, creation, and collective memory are an important part of understanding lived religion:

What's interesting is, it's [social media] connected me to the Sikh Punjabi community more because I found you (referring to interviewer). I'm part of this "Kaur's reimagined" group, where there are a bunch of workshops, and we are storyboarding and writing, we are all going to submit our stories for this anthology. (Participant A).

The second finding from my research was the issues with Christian translations. These specifically related to the word "Lord". Participant B mentioned how they were raised as a Unitarian and how they have a background that felt uneasy with the use of the words "Lord" and "God".

When queried about what word the couple would prefer, they mentioned they both would prefer "Oneness", Participant A mentioned they prefer the Sikh term *Waheguru* or *Ikk Oan Kar*.⁵ The mentioning of Oneness links into the work of translation that Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh mentions in her work (Singh, 1995 and 2014a).

The translations are awful... [they] come off very Biblical. It's very hard to find a reference to God that doesn't say 'He' and just a lot of 'Lord'. Lord is a word that triggers us. (Participant B).

Participants A and B mentioned a strong dislike for the term "Lord" in English translations of Sikh scriptures. Participant B mentioned how these translations are Biblical. Thus, my interviews with Participant A and B point to how colonialism shapes modern Sikh identity and the key is the use of the word "God" and "Lord" in English translations.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh mentions how the English language carries its own set of impositions, where religious terms are imbued with Jewish and Christian meaning (Singh, 1995: 4). The language of the Guru Granth is vast, not only are Gurmukhi terms used, but Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit terms are used. For example, Raam (Sanskrit) and Rahim (Arabic. One of ninety-nine names of Allah, meaning

⁵ *Waheguru* literally means wonderful (*Vah*) teacher (Guru), it is a term Sikhs use for the Divine. *Ikk Oan Kar* refers to the *Japji Sahib* (first scripture in the Guru Granth Sahib, written by Guru Nanak) where the Divine is conceptualised as "One Being", this is a term that refers to the Oneness of the Divine.

compassionate one) are used in separate contexts, by different poets, and for different reasons. These nuances and meanings are lost when these words are translated to “God” or “Lord”.

Not only are English translations patriarchal and riddled with Biblical meaning, but they also suppress the distinct language of the Guru Granth. The Biblical language of “Lord” directly opposes the meaning of *Ikk Oan Kar*. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh argued the spirituality of the term *Ikk Oan Kar* is more egalitarian than using the term “Lord” (Singh, 2014: 611). Biblical feminist scholars (Daly, 1973) argue the word “Lord” upholds a hierarchical patriarchal frame of reference. From which a female experience is excluded, or the equal nature of the Divine is not recognised.

This is extremely pivotal in Sikh scriptures where feminine language is common. Especially in *Shabad Hazare* (Guru Granth Sahib, ang 94) where Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh notes ‘through feminine thoughts and feelings, the hymn express the yearning for the One, and tells us how to unite with That One’ (Singh, 2019: 69). Singh notes the inclusive literature of the Sikhs are treated as ‘foreign and alien’ (Singh, 2019: 37) that many translators’ approaches with distance and detachment. As seen in the work of Ernest Trumpp, who described the language of the Granth as ‘dark and unintelligible’ (Trumpp, 1877: a). The Singh Sabha and later English translations do not follow the blatant orientalism of Trumpp but do have their consequences.

The influence of the Singh Sabha’s use of theological concepts, in context to combat the criticisms of Ernest Trumpp, leads to Christian creedal statements that still influence modern-day translations. The revolutionary text by Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha (1986 [1898]) ‘*Hum Hindu Nahin*’ [we are Sikhs, not Hindus] attempted to define the Sikh religion, as well as conveyed the theology of the Singh Sabha Movement. Nabha used Christian Egalitarian methods of religion-defining. Including the use of creedal statements; ‘we acknowledge One, Eternal, Primal Lord. The whole expanse has originated from Him’ (Nabha, 1986: 19). The use of creedal statements is imbued in Christian meaning, the use of the translation of “Lord” and “Him” are words that suppress the equality that the term *Ikk Oan Kar* conveys. The influence of the Singh Sabha displaces the *Nirmala* (Vedantic school of thought) and *Udasi* (Historical tradition, who trace their tradition to Guru Nanak) influence on interpreting Sikh scripture (Singh, 2018a: 407).

Modern-day translations such as Sant Singh Khalsa’s (2017) written in the 1980’s showcases the long-standing history and influence of Christian-gendered language. There is a precise focus on a “Creator God” and the translation of *Japji Sahib* has a very similar language and understanding that are evident in Christian creeds. The methodology of the Singh Sabha, through the influence of colonialism, used language familiar to Orientals to accurately portray what Sikhi is. However, this understanding of Sikhi has become the uniform, creedal, patriarchal understanding of “Sikhism” that is evident in research, translations, textbooks, and in the education system. My participants mentioning the issues of the word “Lord” showcase the need to decolonise the academic understanding of Sikhi.

Issues of translations are also related to a discussion I had with a radio presenter on Twitter privately when finding participants for my research. The radio presenter mentioned they have made radio programmes for over twenty years covering religions. The participant mentioned that Sikhs translate their terms into English to help “outsiders” understand the religion better. My research presents an academic

understanding of how translations affect Sikh identity. However, in the lived religion of the Sikhs, many Sikhs may be comfortable with using colonial or familiar terms or may not even realise the implications of using colonial terminology. This is something my participant has highlighted,⁶

I learnt early on that many Sikhs - full of goodwill to help outsiders understand the basics of their religion - use words borrowed from Christianity to explain. By and large, I've tried to discourage this because it easily leads to misunderstandings, but in the case of 'baptism', it's been used so much and for so long that it's quite hard to dissuade people. The trouble is that there's no established alternative in English... I agree [original terms should be used] for a written text, but it's way too complex for radio. The listener only hears it once, and they can zone out very quickly if they don't understand. (Participant C).

The interactions with Participants A and B showcase that using original terminology is preferable than English. Highlighting the need for a decolonisation of thought and to stop translating every single term into English as it could compromise understandings of Sikh identity, these include words such as "Lord", "Temple", and "Baptised".

The third finding from my research is observational. The use of the term Sikhi by the participants rather than the term "Sikhism" was used in casual conversation, showing the participants prefer the term Sikhi. Participant B used the term "Sikhism" when discussing their experiences with translations 'bending over backward' (Participant B) to tie into Western theology. This reflects my argument that the academic understanding and presentation of "Sikhism" ultimately presents Sikhi in a Western and colonised lens.

Participant D, a female based in the West Midlands in their mid-twenties mentioned the respect and importance of the Panjabi language, the complexities of identity, and the issues of terminology.

The participant unknowingly discusses issues in the theme of this piece that links to the WRP as well as the long-lasting effects of colonialism. These will be discussed through an analysis of the interview. The participant started discussing how they would describe their faith, using examples of how important religious nurture was from their family. However external factors such as school disrupted this:

So, I was brought up in a really religious household and environment. So, religion is like, it's all I've known, all my life. Then I got to school, especially sixth form, because of Religious Studies. That's when I got completely confused and lost my faith, I didn't know what I believed in anymore (Participant D).

The westernisation of the Sikh religion and the conflicting role of schools is a long-lasting effect of colonialism; Sikh institutions are also guilty of this. Jasjit Singh (2012) mentions that the institution of a school becomes an important 'other' factor where young Sikhs encounter plurality and question their faith (Singh, 2012: 16). For my participant to question their faith during school is not unusual, however, at the time, there would have been a lack of resources that would have helped them.

One of the most interesting findings from the research was the respect and importance of the Panjabi language. Especially as the specific details of this was something I was

⁶ Further research could build on this issue and include a glossary of terms that translate important Sikh concepts that could be used in academic and non-academic contexts.

unaware of. The participant mentioned that Panjabi was greatly valuable in both reading and writing in an everyday setting but also with prayers. The participant mentioned they only valued the language as they matured:

As I've grown older, I've realised the value of it. Just in terms of like reading *Path*. There is a big difference between reading in Punjabi and then reading in English (Participant D).

When questioned on the differences in Panjabi and English the participant mentioned that (*Gur*)*Bani* is more powerful in Panjabi,

My dad bought us all English *Gutkas* [small book of select prayers] because we hadn't learned how to read in Punjabi yet, and you know. The English *Gutka* does as good as it possibly can - but, if you look at Punjabi, there are so many variations of like the letter 'D' and so many variations of a 'G' like a 'C/K'. So many variations, it's really difficult to distinguish that in English and that's why learning how to read in Punjabi, it just is a whole new understanding of Bani and reading Bani and doing it correctly. Not like you weren't doing it correctly but reading-wise you probably weren't. It's just more correct... I don't know if that's the right word... English translations make me cringe because they are off... so off. (Participant D).

Another issue discussed at length with my participant is the issue with the term "God". They used the term Sikhi throughout the conversation yet used the word "God". When questioned upon this, they said,

I don't think I would openly be like "Waheguru is amazing" ... it depends on who I am speaking to, it does depend! Maybe if I was speaking to people from *Sangat* or something (Participant D).

When asked would they prefer to use original terms they answered, 'why not' (Participant D). This term ["God"] enters the subconscious of Sikhs due to the westernisation of the religion and the influx of Christian gendered language in texts and translations. The participant upheld the term Sikhi when asked what term they would use to describe their faith, and mentioned the issue of "isms",

I would just say I follow Sikhi. To be fair, initially, when we are at school. All you hear is 'ism this and ism that' and you don't understand at the time the whole education system is feeding to us is 'ism this and ism that' and that's not how it is (Participant D).

When I asked the participant about the way to encourage those to use the term Sikhi, they mentioned the importance of education in Sikh settings and school settings:

It is an educational thing. It's frustrating, we put so much of the faith into like schools to bring children up. You have to depend on schooling systems to get it right, say if you can't do that, I would expect people outside of schools – like even like *Gurmat* [Sikh] camps and stuff, make people aware that it is Sikhi. In terms of how we refer to our religion as, like make that aware. I remember going to *Gurmat* camps and sometimes you see 'Sikhism' and now that I think... at the time you didn't question it (Participant D).

This participant highlighted how the role of schools has failed. I pin this failure within the scheme of the WRP with the influx of an "ism" as an understanding of "other"

religions reflecting Christianity. The educational system has influenced a generation of young Sikhs to know knowledge in a (de)political “World Religion Sikhism” rather than the lived reality of Sikhi.

Jasjit Singh talks about how Sikh thought gets lost in translation through a rejection of Sikh terms such as Sikhi in favour of WRP influenced terms such as “Sikhism” through the framing of western translators, translations, and texts. As well as the norm of Judeo-Christian terms (Singh, 2018b) within Sikh thought. These impact the meaning of Sikh concepts and impact worship, knowledge, and meaning.

Specific Issues and Debates in the Sikh Diaspora

The movement from colonization to post-colonial times does not imply that the problems of colonialism have been resolved or replaced by some conflict-free era. Rather, the “post-colonial” marks the passage from one historical power configuration or conjecture to another (Hall, 2000: 213)

First, I evaluate how moving towards the direction of lived religion and away from historical forms of studying religion is a form of postcolonialism. Secondly, I question the role of the WRP and the colonial naming of Sikhi. Thirdly, I consider the application of colonial theory to Sikh and Religious Studies, concluding with how diasporic cultures navigate their own identity through contemporary use of music as a form of consolidating identity.

Challenging impositions of colonial literature is of utmost importance. Colonial power and forms of knowledge are supported and made possible through the development of oriental scholarship. This not only distorts narratives of identity but constructs “indigenous” narratives (Shani, 2012: 166). The first step towards challenging the impositions of colonial literature is through the focus on lived religion. Focusing on lived religion is important to move past colonial impositions of Sikh identity and wider imperial projects of misinterpreted or distorted versions of religion. Especially in an Indian context.

Postcolonial theory serves to challenge the stereotypes of Indian religion as examples of the mystic east (King, 1999: 4), which could be done by moving away from an exclusively textual approach to studying religion. Using this method to challenge the reliance on analysis and interpretations of religious texts (King, 1999: 6). The move away from studying religious texts as the only form of knowledge about religions allow for an understanding of religion as it is practiced. Something which is more important in the diaspora as identity can be fragile and is shaped mostly in reaction to racist and imperial connotations (Singh and Tatla, 2006 and Sanghera, 2021).

Postcolonial theory is a tool for deconstructing forms of power and knowledge. Allowing for a critical understanding of religion and what it means when the word “religion” is used (Goulet, 2011: 635). Uma Chakravarti (1989) addresses the “invention” of Hindu tradition, stating that Indian history was constrained and modelled in accordance with the British model of history (Goulet, 2011: 633), where a focus on Vedic origins was fostered to create an Aryan-Hindu nationalism [*Hindutva*].

This is similar to the proto-nationalist creation of Sikh masculine martial identity (Streets, 2004: 69) that was created using textual sources about the Sikhs. Ignoring the lived religion of the tradition, the control of textual sources encourages a “pure” and privileged version of religion (Goulet, 2011: 636). Participant D highlighted the

issues with a “pure” version of the religion, emphasising quotation marks when talking about following a textual, traditional family understanding of Sikh religion:

We did lots of *Sewa*, *Path*, tried to follow Sikhi as “closely”, I say that in quotation marks, because its different per interpretation – whatever my parents interpreted of it, we followed strictly (Participant D)

The wider issues of the WRP (Owen, 2011) are informed by the colonial creation of “Sikhism” as a World Religion. The colonial naming of “Sikhism” as a World Religion promised recognition of the Sikhs as a religion but constructed Sikh identity in line and reflective of the ‘disciplinary gaze of the British’ (Bhogal, 2014: 282). The construction of “Sikhism” as a modern World Religion has its implications, as it threatens the *Miri* and *Piri* dynamic, where sovereignty and public religion is threatened. “Sikhism” is presented as pacified and de-politicized (Bhogal, 2014: 283).

The knock-on-effect of colonial modernity becomes more explicit after Partition and the diaspora of the Sikhs, where Sikhs are not given a nation-state,⁷ unlike their Hindu and Muslim counterparts. Having to live with and adapt to an identity the British created, which is an identity many Sikhs seek or sought independence from (Mandair, 2009: 239). This leads to, within its colonial and postcolonial history, there not being a satisfying definition or idea of Sikh religion, due to reliance on ‘what “Sikhism” looks like’ including an emphasis on creed, text, and founders. Rather than how religion changes over time due to the lived and diasporic tradition of the religion.

The postcolonial construction of religion, especially Sikhi, is bound up with the secular politics of representing religious traditions as a historical ‘thing’ (Abeysekera, 2011: 124). A way to move past this is through the focus on lived religion, gender theory, and evaluating religion in ‘non-religious’ places [within the confines of ethnography (Spickard, 2018: 3)]. Thus, challenging the historical imperial confines of religion-making.

Decolonising terminology

[...] what I’ve often discovered, you know, plenty of the studies or books or courses and what-not will pay *lip-service* [emphasis mine] to the [project of decolonising] . . . they’ll say “Religion is a constructed category, bound up in colonial history and referring to Protestant Christianity.” And then, “Let’s just get on with using it, just like we would normally do.” That’s something that we should try and avoid! (Nye and Cotter, 2020: 20:00).

There is a consensus within Sikh studies that the term “Sikhism” is a western word coined by Christian outsiders (Mandair, 2013). These outsiders carry their impositions of what European religion looks like and apply this agenda into the making of a Sikh World Religion (Mandair, 2013: 3). The word Sikhi comes from the word Sikh. Its etymology begins in the Sanskrit word *Shishya*, in Panjabi this would be the word *Sikhna* (Mandair, 2013: 3).

The concept of learning and being a disciple is such a key concept in Sikhi, that the word Sikh means to be a learner or disciple. This meaning is philosophical, theological, historical, and metaphysical; where the Sikh would *Sikh(na)* [learn] from the Guru, the

⁷ There are calls for a Sikh nation state, encapsulated through the Khalistan movement.

word “Sikhism” doesn’t have this meaning. The term “Sikhism” is insufficient and inaccurate in its general presentation of “Sikhism” as a World Religion, where Sikhs are presented as a homogenous and unified community (Ballantyne, 2006: 25). However due to the diaspora, migration, and settlement this is not true.

Sikhi, in the terminology that I propose, recognises the religion of the Sikhs not as a “World Religion”; that is understood in Protestant terms, but as a tradition that must be understood as it is lived and used within its vernacular form. Rather than a rigid de-politicised entity. I seek not to only change the term “Sikhism” within academia, which is something I believe Arvind-Pal Mandair (2013) is seeking to do within his term *Sikhism*. I want to change and challenge how Sikhs are viewed in society and in their daily religious and non-religious life, where Sikhi informs both aspects of it. Current scholarly debates into the Sikh diaspora do not acknowledge the colonial implications of the term “Sikhism”. This issue extends to religious studies.

The main issue with the term “religion” as Talal Asad argues, is that it suggests and supports the trend to universalise a Christian Protestant notion of religion (Ahluwalia, 2011: 98). The term religion, as argued by Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), doesn’t exist as an analytical category, as it differs in its meaning within different cultures (Fitzgerald, 2000: 4). This is an issue in understanding “Sikhism” as the Christian Protestant notion of religion relegates “Sikhism” to the private sphere. Through focusing on the practice of religion in individual and de-political ways. This has implications for the *Miri-Piri* dynamic and the role of the *Sangat* (congregation)⁸.

The term “religion” has its origins in Western terminology, the history, and impositions it carries emerge out of colonial white European Christian traditions (Nye, 2019: 15). Western impositions and expectations that influence the study of religion can be difficult to meet. Especially with the baggage (Bauman, Bohannon, and O’Brien, 2017: 28) that religions must operate in the private sphere, must have a sole focus on creed, text, and founders, and finally the translation of texts into vernacular language.

The issues of “Sikhism” as a “World Religion” are largely overlooked. To combat the issue Protestant modes of studying religion bring; lived religion and the recognition of what it means when the term “religion” (Fitzgerald, 2000) is used are extremely important. Whether that be in a classroom, university setting, institutional setting, or in research. As found in research findings when Participants A and B discussed their issues with the term “Lord”.

There is a cause for caution when using the term “religion” and “Sikhism”. Despite the discussion of terminology, issues of the Christian translations haunt Sikh texts. Jasjit Singh (2018b) recognises the politics of translation, where there is a rejection of Sikh terms, such as Sikhi, *Gurmat*, or *Dharam* in favour of Christian terms. Even when these terms are not necessary and impact understandings (Singh, 2018: 346).

This is an issue so ingrained in Sikh thought that Sikh translators such as Sant Singh Khalsa (2017) are guilty of this. Khalsa’s (2017) translation reinforces Christian norms, whereby the translated word becomes the meaning of the text. Such as the focus on the term “God” in his translation of *Japji Sahib* (Khalsa, 2017: 1). The term “God” becomes the norm within Sikh thought, texts, and translations.

⁸ Sikh traditions highlight the importance of the community as demonstrated through the creation of the *Khalsa*.

English words carry impositions and certain Panjabi/Gurmukhi words can be difficult to translate. This becomes even more problematic if certain words are rooted in Sanskrit, Persian, or Arabic etymology, where a word may have a double meaning.

I propose instead of translating Sikh texts word for word into English, some words can stand in their original Gurmukhi/Panjabi and can be explained in a commentary, or as a footnote. This would mean a focus and central importance on the reading of important teachings such as the terms *shabad-Guru* (commonly translated to special sound that is transmitted by a teacher, yet its meaning is a lot more philosophical),⁹ *nirgun-sargun* (translated as form and formless),¹⁰ and *anand* (translated as eternal happiness) (Abeysekara, 2011: 125).¹¹

This would follow suit with Biblical Studies, where some concepts are explained using the Hebrew word; this is especially important for names.¹² Sikh studies could use commentaries to explain important Sikh concepts, for example, in most Sikh translations of the word *anand*, it is translated as ecstasy (Khalsa, 2017: 917). Its philosophical, mental, spiritual, and physical meaning is reduced to the English translation, rather than explaining what the term *anand* means. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1995: 35) mentions the issue of the English language carrying impositions. As English words carry impositions, they avidly affect Sikh identity. The research process attempted to rectify this.

Pashaura Singh (2014b) notes that no translation can ever do justice to the original text and English translations by Indian authors are inadequate for academic use, due to a lack on quality (2014b: 632). Singh roots his propositions in recognising the colonial project of translation, as a tool, to create a vision of religious traditions that could be used to manipulate and control the general public (Singh, 2014b: 635).

These issues lead to Singh proposing for an international team of translators¹³ to do justice to the Sikh text, working in unison to protect the teachings and present the academic value that Sikh texts possess (Singh, 2014b: 636). This project would be reminiscent of studies in Biblical Studies, whereby a team of translators combine to translate Hebrew, Greek, or Latin texts. This method allows an honest and necessary insight into the issues of the English language.

The NSRV translation of the Bible acknowledges the use of Hebrew terms instead of English 'where it was deemed appropriate to do so, information is supplied in footnotes from subsidiary Jewish traditions... [hence recognising] occasionally it is evident the text has suffered in transmission and that none of the versions provides a satisfactory

⁹ *Shabad* is translated to mean sound, however, its meaning is a lot deeper than this. *Shabad* is a sound of wisdom that dispels the ego, the Guru is the one who gives the knowledge of this *Shabad*.

¹⁰ This concept shows the duality and understanding of *Akal Purakh* [meaning Timeless Being] as both *nirgun* and *sargun*, transcendent and immanent. This concept was wrongly understood by Ernest Trumpp, he translated these qualities as separate entities, accusing Sikhs of believing in pantheism (Trumpp, 1877, c). Showing the need for care over translations.

¹¹ *Anand* is more than happiness; it is a term most Sikhs struggle to translate as it is a metaphysical quality. *Anand* is immense joy and an inspiration to everyday life, it is inspiration on both a physical and mental, and even spiritual level.

¹² For example, the name *Sarah*, in English it can be difficult to understand what this name might signify, however in its Hebrew/Greek it means princess; this concept can be and is extremely useful for understanding a text and the role of the character (Fitzmyer, 2002,149).

¹³ This project suggestion is currently evident by the research being undertaken by the Sikh Research Institute through *The Guru Granth Sahib Project* (2020) to tackle some of the issues currently seen in English translations of Sikh scripture.

restoration' (NSRV, xiii). This is something Sikh translations do not do. Instead, they mostly translate into English word for word from the original Gurmukhi. If the move for an international effort to translate Sikh texts takes place, its methodology must recognise the shortcomings of colonial translations and how certain modern Sikh English translations have replicated these shortcomings; it must strive to move past these.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that colonialism negatively affects understandings of Sikh identity through texts and translations. The religion and culture of the Sikhs is understood under historical oppression and success across two empires: the Mughal and the British. The Sikhs stayed sovereign in their manner, this sovereignty was threatened and suppressed through the annex of Panjab in 1849 through to the Partition of India and Pakistan and splitting of Panjab in 1947. Colonialism shaped Sikh identity explicitly through accounts of "praise" on Sikhs by the British, yet Sikhs were still seen as inferior, despite these "positive" accounts. The dynamic of *Miri* and *Piri* was threatened by the colonial encounter with a supposed sacred-secular binary and the privatisation of religion. The methodology of focusing on lived religion combats this through showcasing how religion is enacted within the secular and sacred realms, an idea that upholds the *Miri-Piri* dynamic.

My research highlights the lack of decolonial studies within Sikh studies and within the Study of Religion(/s). Postcolonial studies are commonly mentioned in academic discourse, yet there is little focus on the effects on how to move past colonialism. Rather scholarship investigates historical encounters with colonialism with very little interpretive analysis, showcasing how many scholars just pay 'lip service' (Nye and Cotter, 2020, 20:00) to the effects of colonialism.

Throughout this paper, I proposed the Christian colonial creation of "Sikhism" as a World Religion leads to a loss of identity through relegating the religion to the private sphere. A feminist critique of the study of religion helped to highlight this. I proposed the need to move past the problematic colonial construction of "Sikhism" as a World Religion. While scholars such as Balbinder Singh Bhogal (2015) negotiate this through combining *Gur-Sikhi* and "Sikhism". I propose this is a postcolonial construction of the religion and not a decolonial one. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair maintains the "ism" in negotiating the postmodern identity of Sikhs as well as the historical term that is accurate to Sikhs; Mandair (2013) uses the term "*Sikhism*" to portray this. I critique both terms as although they understand the historical and postmodern understanding of Sikh religion. Mandair (2013) and Bhogal (2015) use the "ism". This is derogatory, and in the WRP deeply affects the religion through privatisation and a lack of focus on the understandings of lived traditions of Sikhs to understand what and who a Sikh is. I propose to move away from colonial hermeneutics, highlighting the construction of "Sikhism" as a World Religion and to focus on Sikhi in its lived reality.

Through understanding Sikhi in its lived reality rather than a balance between modern and historical methods is a form of decolonisation. The study of Sikhi must move away from the privatisation that the term "ism" imposes on the study of religion. The historical methodology does have a place within Religious Studies. My literature review traces historical sources during the colonial period from the 1700s; with the focus being on a critical lens of accounts of Sikh religion. A way to decolonise the understandings of

Sikh religion and to account for the issues of colonial texts and translations would be to include footnotes in Sikh translations or inclusions of original terms. There isn't a need to translate everything into English as it severely affects Sikh terminology and meanings of Sikh texts.

Pashaura Singh proposes that an international team of translators should work together to produce a translation of Sikh texts that do justice to them in its academic value (Singh, 2014b, 636). I would propose a translation that can be used in non-academic settings as well. In aid of a translation, I would propose a glossary of terms that can be used in non-academic and academic circles to address issues of race and racism that can be used by schools, police, governments, universities, and research to improve the understandings of Sikh religion. Hence improving accuracy and knowledge about the religion.

Throughout my research, I recommend moving away from the Christian-colonial language such as 'God', 'Lord', and 'Baptism'. Instead highlighting the need to use original terms that are more familiar to Sikhs. A postcolonial approach to religion is not enough, it is important to understand how to decolonise the study of Sikhi.

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