

On commonality: The ambivalence of religious belonging

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Abstract:

Religion is fundamentally about belonging. This is how it is framed within the two dimensions, personal/individual and social, that dominate in definitions of religion: an experience of subjective belonging/identity at the individual level, and placement within particular social, institutional, and historical formations designated by the term "tradition." Yet, just as belonging is experienced differentially across a city, by residents of different kinds and in different social, physical, and cultural locations, so too may it be with religion, where belonging may not be in fact seamless, undifferentiated, and singular across those who comprise a religious social body. We can see this as a kind of ambivalence, a constitutive and productive internal tension. This is not, however, something generally accounted for in our definitions of religions. What are the implications of seeing this kind of ambivalence in belonging as fundamental to the "religious," as a phenomenon? If belonging itself can be multi-form and variable in degree, cannot multiple forms of belonging coexist, without undermining the belonging that seems to define the "religious"? And, if we allow for differential experiences/degrees of belonging, what does that mean for our understanding of religious differences between religions, as well as within them? How do we address the articulation of commonality across religions—which troubles our understanding of religious belonging by not adhering to religious boundaries—alongside difference? This essay explores these issues in the context of early modern South Asian religions, with attention to attendant placements in urban and semi-urban landscapes that inform their articulation, to argue that the effort to name and value commonality is in the current moment both intellectually and ethically imperative.

The concept of ambivalence that stands at the center of this special issue denotes "a continuous constitutive ambiguity."¹ Belonging is a central feature of it. According to the scholars leading the "Religion and Urbanity" project at the Max Weber Kolleg at the University of Erfurt, "[a] city can... be viewed as geared towards integration of its members, or as just a crossing point of networks of different kinds and extent (commercial, political, religious, intellectual) and as a

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¹ Martin Fuchs, Susanne Rau and Jörg Rüpke. 2023. "Ambivalence." Work-in-progress, 13.

meeting point of varied and diverse ‘communities’”: as they describe at length, there is not one way of belonging to a city.² As the authors note, “[w]e see in the different modalities of relation of inhabitants to cities the core question, or core ambivalence, underlying urbanity, an ambivalence for the inhabitants of a city (the subjective, internal perspective of social actors) as well as for scholarship on urbanity (the analytical perspective of observers).”³ As they describe, we cannot assume that the city is experienced the same by all its residents, and situatedness in a city does not entail a specific and singular kind of belonging to and in it. Our scholarly understanding of the city, and of the urban, must reflect this ambiguity of belonging.

Religion is fundamentally about belonging. This is how it is framed within the two dimensions, personal/individual and social, that dominate in definitions of religion: an experience of subjective belonging/identity at the individual level, and placement within particular social, institutional, and historical formations designated by the term “tradition.” Yet, just as belonging is experienced differentially across a city, by residents of different kinds and in different social, physical, and cultural locations, so too it is with religion, where belonging may not in fact be seamless, undifferentiated, and singular across a group of participants that comprise a religious social body. We can see this as a kind of ambivalence, a constitutive and productive internal tension. This is not, however, often accounted for in our understanding of religions. What are the implications of seeing this kind of ambivalence in belonging as fundamental to the “religious,” as a phenomenon? If belonging in general can be multi-form and variable in degree, cannot multiple forms of religious belonging coexist, without undermining

² Fuchs, et al. “Ambivalence,” 16. On the constellation of terms related to the urban, see: Susanne Rau, “Urbanity (urbanitas, Urbanität, urbanité, urbanità, urbanidad...) — An Essay,” *Religion and Urbanity Online*, Susanne Rau and Jörg Rüpke, eds. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020). Accessed 2025-06-24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/urbrel.11276000>.

³ Fuchs, et al. “Ambivalence,” 18.

the belonging that in both popular and scholarly understanding defines the “religious” in a fundamental way? And, if we allow for differential experiences/degrees of belonging, what does that mean for our understanding of differences *between* religions, as well as *within* them? How do we address the articulation of *commonality* across religions—which we can frame as a kind of religious belonging that does not adhere to some kinds of religious boundaries, but exists alongside them—alongside difference? The ambivalence of belonging functions across both religious and urban domains, and operates particularly, I will argue, at their intersection.

This essay seeks to engage with the problem of what is common as a kind of productive and creative possibility, an unresolved form of ambivalence or ambiguity, to understand parallels between purportedly separate domains of religious experience, expression, and tradition not as “crossing” or “mixing,” but as reflecting *shared* concepts and/or experiences that move alongside (and sometimes are fundamental to) declarations of religious belonging that can be exclusive. In doing so I do not seek to recuperate the problematic terms “syncretism” and the “composite,” which have received ample critique in recent literature: such terms rely upon the formulation of some cultural formations as somehow “pure,” that then are mixed, making the product of that mixing a mere by-product.⁴ “Fuzziness,” on the other hand—promoted in an earlier scholarly dispensation as a way of understanding sharing among South Asian identity formations—fails to account for articulations of belonging which accompany sharing and border crossing, and the intentionality of multiplicity, itself.⁵ I also seek to move beyond the idea of

⁴ Charles Stewart & Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Shaw, Rosalind, Charles Stewart. 1;1st; ed. London, New York: Routledge, [1994] 2003, doi:10.4324/9780203451090; Tony K. Stewart, ‘In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory’, *History of Religions* 10, 3 (2001): 260-87; for a broad overview of related phenomena and issues, see Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen, eds. *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004). The idea of the “composite” does still maintain interest for some: see, for example, Malik Mohamed *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India* (Oxford: Routledge, 2024).

⁵ Kaviraj, Sudipta. “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in *Subaltern Studies VII*, Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., 1–39 (Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, [1992] 1999).

"influence": as Carl Ernst has argued, the rhetoric of influence is all too often used to "explain away" phenomena, such that the "mechanical character of the influence metaphor obscures the role of selection and intentionality that takes place in any thinker's evaluation of previous formulations."⁶ Further heuristic tools are required for understanding the experience of commonality, and the dialogue and encounter that allow it to be produced.

At the same time, critique of ideas of syncretism has been equally problematic. Such critique has all too often allowed for a re-inscription of religious identities as solid and hermetically sealed cultural formations that were once seen to be able to mix and now are assumed not to. Tony Stewart played a foundational role in establishing this critique in the context of South Asian religions, with a nuanced exploration of the notion of "equivalence," arguing in his analysis of Bengali-language Muslim texts that "Bengali offered a potentially malleable medium for the message of Islam, which is to say that the ideas were not so alien that they could not be expressed in the extant vocabulary of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries"; he thus argues that expressions in Bengali that utilize what seem to be non-Islamic vocabulary, in otherwise Muslim texts, instead express equivalences for Islamic concepts.⁷ Thus the term for prophet, *nabi*, could be translated as *avatāra* because these were "twinned concepts, not identical, but sharing in the common core of meaning in specific local contexts."⁸ This is an important recognition. However, Stewart goes on to argue that "[t]he result is a *thoroughly* Islamic view of the world in a text that uses an ostensibly Hindu terminology to express it" (emphasis mine).⁹ It is important to examine this oft-cited assertion closely: in this argument,

⁶ Carl Ernst, *Refractions of Islam in India; Situating Sufism and Yoga* (New Delhi: Sage /YODA Press, 2016), 15, 17.

⁷ Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence," 269.

⁸ Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence," 281-2.

⁹ Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence," 286.

such texts are actually reflective of one tradition; they are “really” (and fully, and only) Islamic. Aditya Behl followed a parallel line of argument in his exploration of the *prem-kathā* (“love-story”) tradition of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries in early modern Avadhi, arguing that this work “embodies an Indian Islamic literary tradition, the acculturation of a monotheistic faith and a literary model into a local landscape,” where the Chishti Sufis “promoted a surface liberalism of outlook” that simultaneously asserted their own hegemony.¹⁰ He is able to accept *literary* mixing, arguing that the “formation of creolized or mixed literary genres implies a world of conversion and conflict, dialogue and intermingling,” but in religious terms, the Islamic frame is singular and unalterable.¹¹ For an additional example, Christopher Shackle has argued that understanding of the “two genres of religious poetry” in “two distinct traditions” (Sikh and Islamic) that provide us with our evidence of early Punjabi as a language cannot be “properly understood without wider reference to the larger religious and literary traditions by which it is so intimately informed”¹²: this counters an earlier argument of Shackle’s where he found that issues of class and status supersede those of religious difference in this genre.¹³ We can see a parallel problem across these scholars’ work: the reinscription of monolithic religious formulations. Exploring a parallel domain in literary terms, Francesca Orsini has argued in her insightful work on multilingualism that “the alternative to selective single-language literary histories [...] is not a

¹⁰ Aditya Behl, *Love’s Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19, 22.

¹¹ Behl *Love’s Subtle Magic*, 13. I discussed this issue earlier in Anne Murphy, “Sufis, Jogis, and the question of religious difference: Individualization in early modern Punjab through Waris Shah’s *Hīr*.” In *Religious Individualisations: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Martin Fuchs, Antje Linkenbach, Martin Mulsow, Bernd-Christian Otto, Rahul Parson and Jörg Rüpke, eds., 289-314 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020). (<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110580853>).

¹² Christopher Shackle “Introduction” in *Bullhe Shah: Sufi Lyrics*, Christopher Shackle (ed. and trans.), pp. vii-xxx (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), xi.

¹³ Christopher Shackle, ‘Beyond Turk and Hindu: Crossing the Boundaries in Indo-Muslim Romance.’ In *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. D. Gilmartin, B. Lawrence (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000), 55-73.

narrative of ‘composite culture’,”¹⁴ because narratives of absolute difference and of syncretism and “composite culture,” she argues elsewhere, both “have had to exclude much of literary production to prove their point”; she also notes however that “an alternative to those flawed narratives is yet to emerge.”¹⁵

In the present essay I consider the importance of the ambivalence of belonging with reference to our understanding of “religion” as a category of human experience and expression, to argue that commonality—once a mainstay of the idea of comparative religion, albeit in sometimes crude and simplistic terms, and now eschewed for the study of particularity and difference—must be configured centrally in our understanding of religious belonging.¹⁶ It also must be linked to the material circumstances of its articulation: in the gathering of people in places of density and encounter. In the first part of the essay, I frame this problem in relation to the idea of ambivalence in general terms for the study of South Asian religions, exploring exemplary recent work on Islam. I then move to these issues in the study of the Sikh tradition. In this context, I consider the content and structure of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh canonical scripture, and (in briefer terms) the Dasam Granth, a text associated with the final living Guru of the Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh, to examine questions of belonging and identity/difference that adhere in their contents. This is not to doubt their Sikh nature: both texts are fundamental to Sikh tradition, and distinctively Sikh. Instead, my purpose here is to foreground the ambivalence that we see in these engagements with “belonging,” highlighting this ambivalence as a powerful and generative feature of Sikh practice and thought, and productive of a set of ideas about

¹⁴ Francesca Orsini “How to do multilingual history?,” *Indian and Economic Social History Review* 49, 2 (2012): 225-46, see pg. 242.

¹⁵ Francesca Orsini, “Introduction,” in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. F. Orsini (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 1.

¹⁶ Here, I extend earlier work: Murphy, “Sufis, Jogis, and the question of religious difference.”

religious belonging that offer a new way of conceptualizing “commonality.” As I will show, this is achieved through the highly developed idea and practice of dialogue that these texts reveal. I will then, in the final part of the essay seek to locate these texts in both time and place: both reflect transitional, urbanizing contexts—the ways in which they do that is, I argue, relevant to their structure, contents, and forms of productive ambivalence. The link of these texts to the development of proto-urban social formations, I will suggest, can help us to understand the ambivalence of “belonging”—and the importance of dialogue—within them.

In the end, this essay considers the experience of commonality—that which is shared—as being at the core of the idea of “religion,” and indicative of a kind of “ambivalence” that reflects “the potential simultaneity of two (or more) tendencies that lead to states of tension with different subsequent effects”¹⁷ in religious belonging that are both constitutive and productive. This question is addressed here in the context of discussion of early modern religiosities in what is now north India/Pakistan, which offer multiple examples of shared social spaces and technologies of selfhood that offer the possibility of accommodation and sharing. Such possibility, to be sure, is accompanied by discourses of exclusion and difference, as well. But we still must account for what is common. There are important real-world implications of this work: our inability to name commonality—or shared religious (and other) culture—in intellectually rigorous terms has allowed only difference to remain, both in scholarly terms and in our world of lived experience. The forging of a nuanced language of commonality that does not efface difference, but moves across it at the same time, is in our best interest as humans today.

Ambivalence

¹⁷ Susanne Rau (January 22, 2024). “Urban Ambivalences.” *Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations*. Retrieved June 24, 2025 from <https://doi.org/10.58079/vmy9>

I open with two books that stake out the possibilities inherent in the idea of ambivalence. Shahab Ahmed's magnum opus, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016) seeks to challenge, in fundamental terms, the way Islam is understood. He defines pre-modern Islam through a "Balkans-to-Bengal complex"—a valuable and yet problematic formulation, in that it ignores Southeast Asia within its sweep—that, after the classical period, operated as a "common paradigm of Islamic life and thought by which Muslims (and others) imagined, conceptualized, valorized, articulated and gave mutually-communicable meaning to their lives in terms of Islam."¹⁸ In direct contrast to Muslims today, who are compelled to define and defend themselves, he argues, "they felt able to be Muslim in explorative, creative, and contrary trajectories... taking as a point of departure the array and synthesis of the major developments of the preceding centuries... In the dynamics of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, received elements and units of meaning are taken up, elaborated into a new relational and generational complex, and are made productive of new meanings in a new vocabulary of Islam."¹⁹ There are striking parallels, as well as considerable differences, between Ahmed's position and Thomas Bauer's earlier work, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, published in 2011, which was published in English translation in 2021 as *A Culture of Ambiguity. An Alternative History of Islam*.²⁰ The temporal scope of Bauer's work is earlier than Ahmed's, and his geographic scope narrower: while Ahmed focuses on the post-classical period, and the broader domain of the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex," Bauer's work is concerned with the post-formative,

¹⁸ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 75.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 81.

²⁰ Thomas Bauer *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Religionen im Insel Verlag 2011); published in English translation as: *A Culture of Ambiguity. An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). I am grateful to conversations at the "Ambivalences of Religion" conference, 15-17 November 2023, associated with the DFG-funded Kolleg-Forschungs-gruppe (KFG) "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations" (FOR 2779) at the Max Weber Kolleg, the University of Erfurt, that led me to Dr. Bauer's work.

classical period, primarily in Arabic, and with a focus on what he calls “the Near East.” There are further differences, discussed below. The striking parallel between them is their embrace of notions of ambiguity and ambivalence. Bauer posits the idea and practice of ambiguity, which he defines as “undermin[ing] the certainty of an unequivocal attribution of meaning precisely by opening the way to a more adequate understanding of the complexity of the world.”²¹ as a defining feature of classical Islam; he contrasts this both with modern Western epistemologies—particularly as associated with the Enlightenment—and with modern Islamist ideas, which are, in his words, “a phenomenon of the *modernization* of an Islam that cannot (and does not wish to) base its epistemological foundations on classical Islam (which, the Islamists maintain, was a distorted, decadent Islam), but adopts the epistemological foundations of the Enlightenment and modernity” (emphasis in original).²² A singular concern of Bauer’s work is contrasting the culture of ambiguity of classical Islam with the exclusionary and absolutist universalizing discourses of the West, which—as important as it is—outside of my interests here. His analytical mobilization of the idea of ambiguity is, however, powerful. Both Ahmed and Bauer protest the formulation of Islam within Western understanding, the way “the ambiguities and pluralities in the Islamic world are rendered invisible, and a monolithic Islamic-religious culture is construed which then confronts the modern Western culture as something quite strange and antagonistic,”²³ according to Bauer, and, in Ahmed’s words:

Symptomatic of the marginalization of exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, relativism and contradiction in the conceptualization of Islam is the fact that a unique feature of the study of societies of Muslims, as compared to other societies, is that so

²¹ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 15.

²² Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 267.

²³ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 150.

much value is given and meaning ascribed to the prescriptive and restrictive discourses of Muslims, such as law and creed, and so little value is given and meaning ascribed to explorative and creative discourses such as fictional literature, art and music. Simply, when Muslims act and speak exploratively—as opposed to prescriptively—as they seem to have spent a very great deal of their historical time doing, they are somehow not seen to be acting and speaking in a manner and register that is representative, expressive and constitutive of Islam.²⁴

Bauer’s earlier work also foregrounds how “norms and values were seen as perspectival and could not lay claim to universal validity” in the classical Islamic world,²⁵ and how “[i]n the precolonial Near East, ambiguity was not only tolerated, but also considered worth striving for... They endeavored to create texts that encompass as many meanings as possible in the narrowest space possible.”²⁶

Both authors foreground ambiguity—ambivalence, in the terminology we employ in this special issue—as an abiding and constitutive feature of Islamic societies. Significant differences emerge in their approach to understanding the role of Islam in this formulation. For Ahmed, Islam provides the broad civilizational grounding that undergirds the cultural diversity and ambiguity he valorizes, which is not best described by the Persianate, Islamicite, or the Persian or Arabic cosmopolis (the latter being is a newer term that had gained ground recently as a response to Sheldon Pollock’s formulation of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” that was configured in literary and aesthetic terms, not as a result of imperial ambition).²⁷ For Ahmed, Islam alone

²⁴ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 303

²⁵ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 216.

²⁶ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 180.

²⁷ For an early articulation of this argument, see Sheldon Pollock, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology," in *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, Jan E. M. Houben, ed., 197-247. (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996). See

undergirds this.²⁸ He denies the validity of the term “religion” to describe Islam, just as he argues against existing definitions of Islam.²⁹ As such he seeks to understand Islam in “expansive, capacious and contradictory terms,”³⁰ rejecting existing definitions of Islam for their narrow focus on law,³¹ personal piety,³² or some ahistorical inner “core”³³ or “faith,”³⁴ prescription or orthodoxy³⁵ and their inability to describe the actual historical diversity of Islam as a lived and historical religion. Instead of seeking to find “unity in the face of diversity,” he seeks to conceptualize “unity in the face of outright contradiction” as central to Islam.³⁶ He seeks an understanding of Islam that “conceptually accounts for the lived presence of ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction and paradox at the heart of human and historical Islam,”³⁷ but, at the same time, establishes Islam as the ground—it “always precedes the Muslim”³⁸—even as it is defined by contradiction. He defines it: “*Islam is a shared language by and in which people express themselves so as to communicate meaningfully in all their variety. And, by fact of being idiom—that is, by fact of being a means by and language in which people give meaning to experience in the self, and communicate that meaning to each other—Islam stakes an experiential claim to being more than idiom: it becomes, ‘in a sense’, the reality of the*

also: Sheldon Pollock *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁸ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 85.

²⁹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 197.

³⁰ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 83.

³¹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 125.

³² Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 161.

³³ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 172-4.

³⁴ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 263.

³⁵ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 273ff.

³⁶ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 72. In this way he counters an overwhelming tendency in the literature to locate “multiplicity and difference in culture, and unity and conformity in Islam” (Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 238).

³⁷ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 201. This focus on ambiguity aligns with the analysis of Thomas Bauer, published originally in German in 2011 (Thomas Bauer *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*. (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011)), and published in English translation as *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

³⁸ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 362.

experience itself” (emphasis in original).³⁹ Importantly for our purposes here, such an idea of “Islamic” is also somewhat radically non-confessional: he describes Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher, as “Islamic.”⁴⁰ Thus he argues that “[a]ny unit of meaning produced by a non-Muslim that is invested by Muslims with meaning-making capacity and that is inducted by them into the process of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation...: that is to say, it becomes a unit of meaning in terms of Islam.”⁴¹ In this sense “*whether or not an actor is Muslim is irrelevant to the matter of whether or not the act or the product of the act is Islamic*” (emphasis in original).⁴² Like Stewart, then, Ahmed argues that cultural formations that seem to blend Islamic and Hindu-Buddhist elements, such as in Java, instead involve “making objects and actions meaningful... in terms of the vocabulary of Islam.”⁴³ Islam is the ground that absorbs and overcomes all possibilities. There is no mixing: boundaries incorporate, but do not blur.

Before returning to Bauer’s alternative view, I would like to emphasize how common this view of a singular religious ground is in the general literature. We see a parallel view, for example, in an otherwise quite different book *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (2018), by Anand Vivek Taneja. In describing the complex religious domains of north India, Taneja argues along the lines defined by Ahmed that what underlies shared practices by Muslims and Hindus at shrines in places like Delhi—sites with extensive medieval and early modern sites related to Muslim shrine culture—is “the Invisible Religion of North India,” in which we can see “the Muslim saint shrines and their shared understanding of justice and ethics as being the recognized loci of North India’s historically

³⁹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 323.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 174. For another example, see Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 445.

⁴¹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 435.

⁴² Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 449, emphasis Ahmed’s.

⁴³ Ahmed *What is Islam*, 451, citing Timothy Daniels *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

evolved invisible religion, of which Hinduism and Islam as religious identities are merely the visible subsets.”⁴⁴ Then he singles out Islam: “the ethical and cosmological world of North India, its invisible religion, is impossible to imagine now without the presence of Islam.”⁴⁵ Both Ahmed and Taneja thus argue for a broad and encompassing idea of Islam, and configure this as the fundamental ground. Taneja does not articulate this as specific to Islam: he draws on the ideas of Visible and Invisible Religion articulated by Jan Assmann to conceptualize this “invisible religion” that undergirds (and contains).⁴⁶ This position resonates with the 2014 formulation of James Laine, seeking out a “meta-religion” as “the basis for dealing with multiple religions in the context of a common political community.”⁴⁷ For Laine, that which is shared as “meta-religion” is the grounds for commonality, what he calls “a truth so taken for granted that its proponents see it as consistent with what is only natural and reasonable.”⁴⁸

There are some uneasy questions that emerge from this body of work. How do we conceptualize ideas or practices that move between, are shared, and *understood* to be shared? Although Ahmed does grant that “something may meaningfully be Islamic and meaningfully be something else at the same time,”⁴⁹ this still suggests simultaneous full being within two different systems in a way that somehow simultaneously prevents these systems from meeting. How do we understand an “Islamic Act” that is equally meaningful in another religious idiom, *in a way that is shared with its meaning in Islam, that allows for an experience of commonality?* Taneja’s formulation too encompasses other religious identities within an underlying ground;

⁴⁴ Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 153, 169.

⁴⁵ Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 170.

⁴⁶ Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Chapter 1.

⁴⁷ James Laine *Meta-religion: Religion and Power in World History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 7.

⁴⁸ Laine *Meta-religion*, 12.

⁴⁹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 538.

along parallel lines, Laine argues for religion's role in "world-building," as a "critical part of the construction of the real world of legitimate power,"⁵⁰ where "meta-religions" offer "the One True Faith: the one reasonable, just authority."⁵¹ Is that all we can do, in the face of the possibility of commonality, of religious practices and the crossing of conventional religious boundaries: reassert boundaries, and assert one, universal cultural formation that undergirds and encompasses them (even invisibly)? The critique of "syncretism" and the "composite" referenced above resonates with this formulation, which in the end works to deny that which is messy, that which might be common.

It is the persistent ambivalence of belonging that such work cannot address, and which it seeks to disallow. In contrast, Bauer defines ambiguity as a simultaneity of beliefs that are held, rather than two separate and distinct systems that can coincide at times but never meet. Bauer's understanding of ambiguity, then, is parallel to that of "ambivalence" that I pursue here.⁵² For Bauer, indeed, the claim that "all is Islamic" is itself an example of what he calls "the Islamization of Islam," which "not only blocks from view the nonreligious areas of life in the Islamic world, but also distorts the image of fields more likely to be assigned to the religious sphere."⁵³ If any single meta-religion acts as "the One True Faith,"⁵⁴ how do we conceptualize religious expressions that move across religions, equally meaningful to both, and are integrated as a common experience into multiple religious systems, with value for the difference that this entails? Subsuming these within one hegemonic form denies the productive possibility that this represents. Only openness to ambivalence—Bauer's idea of ambiguity—can allow this

⁵⁰ Laine, *Meta-religion*, 2, 5.

⁵¹ Laine, *Meta-religion*, 4.

⁵² See Bauer *Culture of Ambiguity*, 18 for his different use of "ambivalence," as a mental state.

⁵³ Bauer *Culture of Ambiguity*, 138; see also 135-6.

⁵⁴ Laine, *Meta-religion*, 4.

simultaneity and co-presence of meaning systems, commonalities, and differences. As will be discussed, for example, we can see commonality in the language of renunciation, which moved across Yogic and Sufi circles in early modern South Asia to define a *faqīr*, or holy man—a word with an Arabic etymology—that was multivalent in its connotations and used as fully to describe a Shaivite Nath Yogi as a Sufi. We also see commonality in the use of the language and experience of longing in separation—*viraha*, a word of Sanskrit derivation—that was common across Islamic and non-Islamic domains in South Asia to describe the soul’s longing for God (alongside a celebration of human love and desire). This is an ambivalence, where a religious orientation is expressed in commonality, as a parallel and not as a difference, in a mode that embraces the commonality: it cannot be encompassed by a theory of religion that can only see religious difference and monolithic religious systems that overcome other articulations. This may seem like a “local problem,” for South Asian religions, not a problem for a broader understanding of “religion” as a heuristic category—which itself (as the scholarship has made clear) is notoriously difficult to define across its historical manifestations. But it is relevant in general terms. A broad and gestural definition of religion such as Thomas Tweed’s 2006 work, with his idea of “dwelling” and “crossing,” sees religion as inherently dynamic and moving: this can be seen to be allied with recognition of that which is shared.⁵⁵ But there are limitations: we see a lack of specificity about where the flow originates, and where it is going, and what the implications are of its movement.⁵⁶ The notion of “crossing,” too, suggests movement from one to another, and thus maintains the entities crossed and crossing undisturbed. Francesca Orsini’s trenchant critique of the flawed narratives of composite culture resonates here. This general

⁵⁵ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ For a valuable discussion and critique of Tweed’s work, see Aaron Hughes “Boundary maintenance: religions as organic-cultural flows: On Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006),” in *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, Michael Strausberg, ed., 209-223 (New York: Routledge, 2009).

theory of religion, then, exhibits the same issues as the theory of the “composite” in explaining South Asian religions, which reifies some religious identities and makes others mixed (“flowing,” in Tweed’s terms) versions of these, a *lack* of identity that now (in the modern period, which Ahmed describes as a “defensive” period) is a problem that must somehow be fixed.

It is generally accepted that the religious identities that we now understand and assume in our understanding of the religious landscape of South Asia do not map directly and unproblematically to early modern religious formations. A wealth of literature emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s that called into question our understanding, for another example, of “Hinduism” as a category. Although there certainly is a Hindu identity today—one which has fundamentally shaped politics in the state of India over the last decade, under the Hindu nationalist government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and which is central to *Jinnealogy*’s framing of the practices present in Delhi today—it is also clear that the category of “Hindu” developed historically over time, in different ways.⁵⁷ What was once an ethnic or geographical designation in its early usage in Arabic and Persian sources to describe those on the other side of the Indus—to those to the west of the subcontinent—later came to be used in a contrastive sense, to designate non-Muslims in broad terms, such that individuals who were identified as members of a particular community could simultaneously be described as “Hindu.”⁵⁸ We can see this usage, for example, in Sikh texts in the 18th century, where we see a

⁵⁷ For an overview of debates, see David Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, 4 (1999): 630-659, and Brian Pennington *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ On the origins of the term, see Carl Ernst *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1992], 22ff; Audrey Truschke “Hindu: A History” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, 2 (2023): 246-271, see pgs. 248-9. On the contrastive use of the term, see Lorenzen “Who Invented Hinduism?” 639-640. There was precedent for this, as Audrey Truschke notes, in the work of al-Biruni (Truschke, “Hindu: A History,” 249). On other contrastive connotations, see *Ibid.*, 249-250, 260.

broad sense of Hindu accompanied by clear articulation of a Sikh position.⁵⁹ Andrew Nicholson and Michael Allen have shown that there were centralizing and consolidating discourses in medieval and early modern philosophical circles—prior both to the advent of colonialism, but also the arrival Islam, as Allen argues forcefully, but these were not generalized: as Allen notes, such discourses were generally focused on the idea of “Veda,” rather than “Hindu,”⁶⁰ and in the early modern period (relevant to the work under consideration below) the term “Hindu” generally retained its geographical and broad cultural references. It was under the systematizing and categorizing drive of the colonial state that the modern form of the term, and the breadth of its application outside of philosophical and scholastic domains, took shape.⁶¹

Early modern religiosities in South Asia, more broadly, thus do not map to our modern understandings of religious identity. Yet, these modern understandings have made it nearly impossible to imagine these earlier worlds. So, too, have geo-politics. The cultural and linguistic region of Punjab, which is the locus of my exploration here, was divided along religious lines between the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan in 1947, at the close of British rule in the subcontinent, with Hindu/Sikh majority areas allocated to India and Muslim-majority sections to Pakistan. Massive population transfers ensued, purging both sides of the border of the religious diversity that once characterized the region. For this reason, many of the connections among religions in Punjab are difficult to see today. Our challenge today is to imagine the historical dimensions and living connections among the cultural worlds in this once diverse and mixed

⁵⁹ Anne Murphy “The *gurbilas* literature and the idea of ‘religion’,” in *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, edited by Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir, 93-115 (New York and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 107.

⁶⁰ Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Michael Allen *The Ocean of Inquiry: Niscaldas and the Premodern Origins of Modern Hinduism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2022), 182, 190, 194, 202, 204-6.

⁶¹ On how British administrative technologies shaped religious identities in the region, see the classic work by Kenneth Jones “Religious Identity and the Indian Census,” in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. G. Barrier, 73-101. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981).

region, in a time and place where separation is now a lived reality. Today, where sharing and commonality do continue, they are marginalized (although as Taneja so well demonstrates, in the Delhi context, they persist in a subaltern mode).⁶²

We must, however, recover these modes of religious being, if we are to understand and name forms of commonality that currently elude current intellectual models. The Sikh tradition provides a powerful opportunity to do this. There are dangers to exploring commonalities with reference to Sikh tradition. As Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh well pointed out, Sikh tradition has been too simply described as an amalgam of Hinduism and Islam, under terms that exhibit all of the problems of the notion of “syncretism” described above: lack of recognition of what is new and intentional, and the designation of some traditions as “themselves” and others as the product of others.⁶³ Kaur Singh has ably debunked such a formulation, as it should be. But this mistake—which Kaur Singh rightly corrects—cannot allow us to eschew investigation of issues of commonality and dialogue, particularly since these are articulated so clearly in the tradition itself. Our task then is to think outside of the divisive terms that have been imposed on our formulation of “religion”—understanding their historical derivation, and their particularly colonial character in the context of South Asia—and allow for that which exceeds and subverts categories that are now normalized, while acknowledging the formation of these same categories. Doing so allows us to consider the idea of “religion” more broadly as an inherently ambivalent construct, where belonging is complex, multiple, and differentiated.

⁶² On the continuing cross-tradition religious practices of the Indian Punjab, see Yogesh Snehi, *Spacializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab: Dreams, Memories, Territoriality* (New York: Routledge, 2019); for important work that looks at the Punjab region across the India-Pakistan border, see Virinder Kalra and Navtej Purewal. *Beyond Religion in India and Pakistan: Gender and Caste, Borders and Boundaries* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

⁶³ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, "Myth of the Founder: The Janamsākhīs and Sikh Tradition" in *History of Religions* 31, 4 (1992): 329-343. See discussion in Anne Murphy “Encountering Difference and Identity in South Asian Religions,” in *Encountering the Other*, edited by Laura Duhan Kaplan and Harry Maier, 39-48 (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

Commonality and Dialogue

Belonging emerges in Sikh tradition within dialogue. This should not surprise us: recent attention to the role of dialogue in South Asian traditions has demonstrated its centrality across traditions, and its role in the articulation of relationships among traditions, and within them.⁶⁴ We can see the centrality of dialogue in the visual portrayal of Guru Nanak in manuscripts from the nineteenth century, such as in a collection of compositions of the Gurus (fig. 1), and a version of the *janamsākhīs*, the life story of Guru Nanak that is extant in a number of versions, from probably the late 16th to 17th centuries (see Figs. 2 & 3).

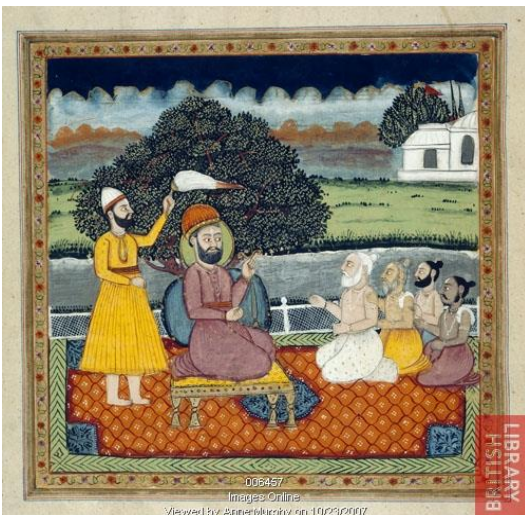


Fig. 1:
Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, in dispute with Hindu holy men. Image from Rani Jindan's book, originally published/produced in Lahore, 1828-1830. Rani Jindan's book. The manuscript contains three compositions from the Guru Granth Sahib, one by Guru Nanak and the other two by Guru Arjan. British Library, Mss.Panj.D.4, f.2

⁶⁴ We can see this in the works published in the Routledge Series "Dialogues in South Asian Traditions: Religion, Philosophy, Literature and History," such as: Brian Black & Laurie Patton, eds. *Dialogue in Early South Asian Religions: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Traditions* (London: Routledge, 2016); Naomi Appleton *Shared Characters in Jain, Buddhist and Hindu Traditions* (London: Routledge, 2016); Brian Black and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, eds. *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2019). See Black and Ram-Prasad *In Dialogue*, Introduction for useful discussion of the idea of dialogue in South Asian classical traditions.

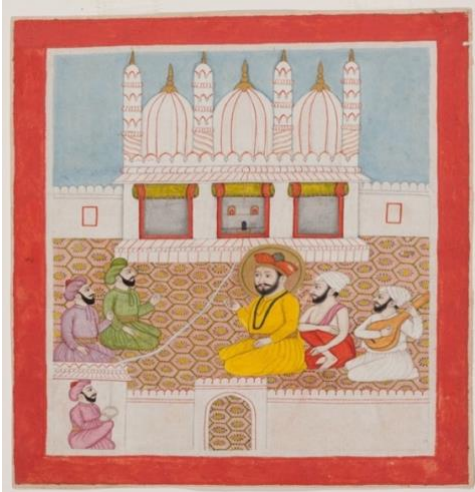


Fig. 2: Guru Nanak converses with Muslim clerics, from a manuscript of the *Janam Sakhi* (Life Stories), 1800–1900. India or Pakistan; Punjab region, Opaque watercolors on paper, Asian Art Museum, Gift of the Kapany Collection, 1998.58.22. Photograph © Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

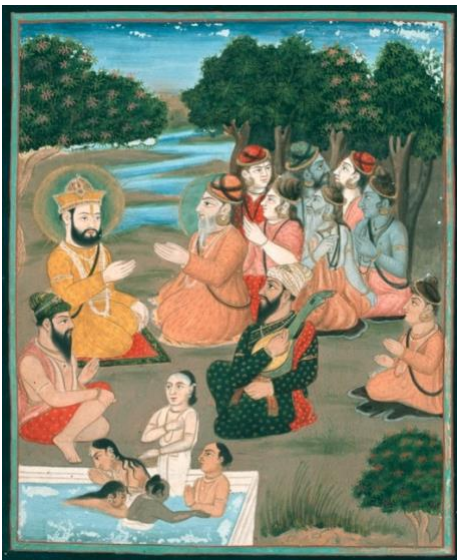


Fig. 3: Guru Nanak meets Nath Siddhas at the village of Achal Batala, from a manuscript of the *Janam Sakhi* (Life Stories), approx. 1800–1850. India; perhaps Bengal region. Pigments on paper. Asian Art Museum, Gift of the Kapany Collection, 1998.58.31. Photograph © Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

In these images (Fig 1-3), Guru Nanak, the founding Guru of the Sikh tradition, is portrayed in dialogue and debate. In such portrayals, he is often clad in clothing that identified him at the crossroads of Islam and Hinduism, as Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has shown, such as with the *sehli topī* typical of a Sufi holy man; this accompanies many instances of debate and encounter in the text, such as Nanak’s famous encounter with Sheikh Brahm, descendant of Shaikh Farid, Punjab’s most prominent Sufi saint, of the Chishti lineage, Farīd al-Dīn Ganj-i Shakar (d. 664 AH/1265 CE), a total of 116 of whose earliest compositions are captured in the *Guru Granth*

Sahib.⁶⁵ Another prominent debate portrayed is with the Nath Siddhas, followers of Shiva and practitioners of Yoga, which is captured in textual form in the text *Siddh Gosht* (“Debate with the Siddhas”), discussed below, and pictured in Fig 3.⁶⁶ Dress here signals a complex positionality, both drawing on difference and encoding a new kind of identity that both embraces and surpasses existing sartorial idioms; this is not unique to this portrayal, and reflects a longer history whereby complex identities and allegiances are signaled through the adoption and adaptation of different kinds of dress, as Philip Wagoner’s work has shown in the context of the visual and material practices of the Vijayanagara empire (14th–16th centuries).⁶⁷ It may be of interest to add that officials in the East India Company continued this dynamic, dressing in South Asian costume as a way of speaking a language of power and appropriation to local audiences—but perhaps primarily also to project their power back at home, grounded in a South Asian idiom that was wielded to impress.⁶⁸ It is notable that in two of these images (Fig 1 and 2), Guru Nanak is portrayed as larger than his interlocutors; clearly the Guru is at the centre here, even in

⁶⁵ Shackle “Introduction,” xii. For a helpful short biography for Farid, with attention to early sources of his works, see Christopher Shackle *Farid The Encyclopedia of Islam Three Online* K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas and D. J. Stewart (eds.) (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012). https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24429 There are 2 hymns by Farid under the Asa *rāg* (musical theme), and 2 hymns under *rāg* Suhi. The text features 112 *slok* or short aphoristic couplets, toward end of Scripture. These works occur on pages 488, 794, 1377–1384, within in the standard pagination of the Guru Granth Sahib, with additional *sloks* of the Gurus addressing Farid interspersed. This standard pagination is utilized in all citations from this text in this essay; translations are mine.

The only compositions in the vernacular by Farid that pre-date the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib were found by the scholar Carl Ernst: See discussion in Ernst *Eternal Garden* pp. 167–ff, Christopher Shackle, ‘Early Vernacular Poetry in the Indus Valley: Its Contexts and Its Character,’ in *Islam and Indian Regions*, A.L. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Avé Lallemand (eds), pp. 259–289 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), 269–ff.; P. Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 47 and Christopher Shackle “Sikh and Muslim Understandings of Baba Farid,” The 2008 Amrit Kaur Ahluwalia Memorial Lecture [presented at UC Berkeley, 19 April 2008].

<<http://southasia.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Sikh%20and%20Muslim%20Understandings%20of%20Baba%20Farid%20.pdf>>. (Accessed 4 June 2015; no longer available online).

⁶⁶ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh “Corporeal Metaphysics: Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art.” *History of Religions* 53, 1 (2013): 28–65.; W.H. McLeod, ed. and translator *The B40 Janam-sakhi: An English translation with introduction and annotations of the India Office Library Gurmukhi manuscript Panj B40, a janam-sakhi of Guru Nanak compiled in A.D. 1733 by Daya Ram Abrol.* (Amritsar, Guru Nanak Dev University, 1980), 60–69.

⁶⁷ Phillip Wagoner “Sultan among Hindu kings’: Dress, titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu culture at Vijayanagara” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 4 (1996): 851–880.

⁶⁸ Tara Mayers “Cultural Cross-Dressing: Posing and Performance in Orientalist Portraits.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, 2 (2012): 281–98.

dialogue. In Fig 3, however, both he and his main interlocutor are pictured in the same scale, and featured with halos, designating their special status (as was common within early modern Mughal and other portraiture).

We can contrast this with a modern image of Guru Nanak, to demonstrate how different current conceptualizations of the identity and subjectivity of the first of the ten Sikh Gurus are from those in the past. The premier painter of the twentieth century, Sobha Singh (1901-1986) provides an exemplary representation (Fig 4):



Fig. 4: Guru Nanak, by artist Sobha Singh
Image source: <https://bahga-sarbjit.medium.com/remembering-sobha-singh-a-saint-painter-abd4d6de0e12>

Here we see an image of a religious figure that adheres to our modern understanding of “religion”: a solitary figure, in meditation, eyes downcast. The fact that this differs so dramatically from earlier representations of the Guru should signal to us that a significant shift has occurred in our understanding of this figure, his relationship with others, and how his ideas and practice emerged. If we take seriously the visual idiom utilized in the early modern period, the idea of Sikh practice and thought as a dialogical enterprise can be seen as central to an

understanding of what it means to be “Sikh”—the term derives from the Punjabi verb *sikhṇā*, to learn, and “the Sikhs” are the students of the Gurus, or teachers. This represents a dialogical practice of subject formation, at a place of engagement with others.⁶⁹ Such dialogical practice does not mean that “being Sikh” is denied: Guru Nanak’s prominence and size in the paintings ensures that we understand the conceptual focus of these images, and Nanak’s importance within them. The balance of dialogue and the centrality of the Guru are both shown in the images.

This same kind of balance of dialogue and Sikh identitarian articulation can be seen perhaps most vividly in the structure and content of the Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture of the Sikh tradition, itself. The Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikh tradition, was compiled in 1604 and finalized and canonized in the beginning of the 18th century (the relationship of the 1604 text with earlier versions is debated).⁷⁰ The text is carefully edited and arranged—this distinguishes it (and texts like it) from some comparable early modern vernacular collections of verses from the period, such as the Fatehpur Manuscript (dated to 1582), which features a broad collection of works by the poet Surdas, among others, without significant organization. In some ways, such diverse and eclectic collections are reminiscent of performers’ collections: performers’ notebooks gathered together diverse materials, bound not by theological orientation, but by aesthetic and performative concerns.⁷¹ Such collections do contrast with the

⁶⁹ W. Owen Cole, in a recent exploration of “Sikh interactions with Other Religions,” has noted that the first Guru of the Sikh tradition, “was a person interested in the variety of forms of Hinduism in which he had been nurtured, though sceptical of some aspects of it, and also aspects of Islam and Jainism which he encountered” (W. Owen Cole, “Sikh Interactions with Other Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech, eds, 250-261 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 250).

⁷⁰ Jeevan Deol “Text and lineage in early Sikh history: issues in the study of the Adi Granth” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64, 1 (2001): 34-8; Balwant Singh Dhillon *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition: Myth and Reality* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, n.d.); Gurinder Singh Mann *The Goindval Pothis: the earliest extant source of the Sikh canon*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 1996); Gurinder Singh Mann *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). I utilize the term Guru Granth Sahib, rather than the Adi Granth, because the latter term has been used to designate the 1604 version, not the final version. In this essay I speak generally about the final canonical version, with its standard pagination.

⁷¹ Tyler Williams *If All the World Were Paper: A History of Writing in Hindi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 105, 110, 161.

organization and editing evident in compilations like the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh canon, which like other similar collections—such as that of the Dādūpanth community, centred in what is now Rajasthan (India)—is carefully crafted and organized: this leads Tyler Williams to argue that “there was a clear trend toward the establishment of canonized sacred texts in the form of physical books among *bhakti*-oriented religious communities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in traditions of the *nirgun* persuasion,” that is, communities committed to an understanding of God beyond form (*nirgun*), such as the Sikh and Dādūpanth communities.⁷² The Guru Granth Sahib is constructed in three sections: a first section of liturgical works, a middle section of a wide range of hymns in diverse meters and organized by *rāg* or musical mode, and a final section with praise poems by the *bhaṭṭ*s or bards, and shorter compositions not in musical mode by the Gurus and others. It was a norm within early modern vernacular circles for authorship to follow a particular figure: Kabir was a fifteenth century poet, whom many other subsequent poets wrote in the name of, signing their compositions with the *chāp* or signature Kabir. In this way, the “authority” of a particular figure was invoked in the signature line not the author of a particular composition in an individual sense.⁷³ This convention is followed in the Sikh tradition as well, and compositions of all the Gurus are signed with the name “Nanak.” Importantly, however, authorship is defined in the Guru Granth Sahib, so the individual Guru who authored a given composition is indicated, through the term “mahala” (“house” or “palace”): Mahala 1 for Guru Nanak, Mahala 2 for the second of the ten Sikh Gurus, Guru Angad, etc. Other poets included who were not Gurus—more on this below—were not so marked. There is clarity, therefore, within the Guru Granth Sahib about who is Sikh, who is a

⁷² Williams *If All the World Were Paper*, 156.

⁷³ John. S. Hawley, “Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, 2 (1988): 269-290; Christian Novetzke, “Divining an Author: The Idea of Authorship in an Indian Religious Tradition.” *History of Religions* 42, 3 (2003): 213-242.

Guru, and which Guru is speaking in each composition. We see care regarding authorship, and structure, in comparable texts of the Dādūpanth, such as the *Sarvaṅgī* of Gopāldās, compiled in 1627, in which authorship is defined—with “pride of place to compositions by Dādū and his disciples” and inclusion of “dozens of saint-poets that fall outside what is today considered the realm of *nirguṇ* devotion”—and compositions are organized by theme, “denoting an ‘aspect’ of religiosity.”⁷⁴ There, however, we do not see as highly organized a structure with reference to authorship and community membership as is visible in the Guru Granth Sahib. Strangely, Williams sees the Guru Granth Sahib as functioning as a form of law—for which he provides no justification, and there are no grounds to support—and that it allowed the Sikh community to “build itself as a polity,” even when his own evidence regarding parallels within other comparable communities provides counter-evidence.⁷⁵ As will be argued here, the structure of inclusion and organization in the text can, instead, be seen in dramatically different terms.

The Guru Granth Sahib is striking for its inclusion of the compositions not only of *bhaṭṭ*s or bards, who sing the praises of the Gurus, but also of fifteen non-Sikh saints (called *bhagats*, from *bhakta* or “devotee”), representing a range of traditions: two are Muslim, several are from dominant caste backgrounds, and several are from marginalized-caste backgrounds, from

⁷⁴ For quotations, Williams *If All the World Were Paper*, 177. Winand M. Callewaert *The Sarvaṅgī of Gopāldās: A 17th Century Anthology of Bhakti Literature* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993).

⁷⁵ Williams, *If All the World Were Paper*, 170-1; counter evidence is provided in multiple places, including 190. Elsewhere Williams more accurately argues that, in general, “bhakti communities may have constituted a type of early ‘polity’ in the sense that they represented a sovereign authority distinct from, but overlapping with, the political sovereignty of Rajput and/or Mughal states,” which was entirely typical of the layered and distributed sovereignty of early modern South Asia (Tyler Williams “Literary and religious history from the middle: Merchants and bhakti in early modern North India” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 59, 3 (2022): 299–334, see pg. 307). On such layered sovereignty and its relationship to martialized religious communities in South Asia—which includes later Sikh cultural formations—see Anne Murphy “War Outside the State: *Religious Communities, Martiality, and State Formation in Early Modern South Asia*” in *The Cambridge Companion on Religion and War*, edited by Margo Kitts, 443-461. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108884075>

traditions that in the premodern period would have been unlikely to be seen as “Hindu” (see discussion above on the relatively recent nature of that term). These poems are clearly indicated as different from those of the Gurus, again demonstrating significant attention to authorship and community membership. Pashaura Singh has countered what he calls the “traditional” view that the Bhagat Bani, as this group of verses by fifteen non-Sikh poets and holy figures is called, were included in the Sikh canon because of their “conformity” to the vision of the Gurus.⁷⁶ Singh argues that, instead, the inclusion of the works of these saints occasioned debate and clarification, as the Gurus engaged with the writings of the Bhagats—sometimes explicating their work, sometimes agreeing with it, and sometimes disagreeing with it.⁷⁷ “There is difference as well as identity,” he tells us.⁷⁸ Singh argues that even in their “sharing,” the Gurus were distinctive in their orientation—such as in their integration of *sagun* or materialist/embodied interpretations of divinity, with *nirgun* perspectives, which eschewed any conception of god taking material form.⁷⁹ Singh argues that the dialogues between the works of the Bhagats and the Gurus show how the “Sikh Gurus sharpened the process of Sikh self-definition.”⁸⁰ This represents a somewhat contradictory aspect of Singh’s work; he emphasizes the differences between the Gurus and the Bhagats, but then suggests that “the inclusion of the Bhagat Bani in the Adi Granth is historically linked with a genuine experiment of religious pluralism in India... [and] perhaps we can draw some inferences from this original impulse and develop a theory of pluralism.”⁸¹ I could not agree more with this later assertion, and take it forward here.

⁷⁶ Pashaura Singh, *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2, 7.

⁷⁷ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 7-8.

⁷⁸ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 8.

⁷⁹ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 21.

⁸⁰ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 34.

⁸¹ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 27.

It is important to take seriously the dialogical dynamic that governs the inclusion of these texts by non-Sikh authors within the Sikh canon: this does not require sameness, but instead appreciation of a ground for dialogue and the expression of *both* commonality and difference. It behooves us to remember the earlier observation noted, that small performers' text from the early modern period were not, generally, theologically defined, excluding that which was "outside" of community boundaries; as Williams has well argued: "Earlier literary histories of Hindi that took genre or theological orientation as their unit of analysis understandably tended to divide audience communities along generic or religious lines. Yet the manuscript record reflects a radically different literary and religious terrain of pre-colonial north India. This included individuals who preached *nirgun* devotion but practiced tantra and magic; or enjoyed Persian stories, vernacular Sufi romances, and Hindu religious works with equal enthusiasm; or studied works on renunciation while amassing wealth through trade networks."⁸²

Such an awareness needs to be brought to bear on a wider array of texts in this period. The inclusion of the Bhagat Bani is fundamentally dialogical: the Bhagats were not just included—the Gurus responded to the Bhagats directly. The inclusion of their work thus creates a set of textual dialogues (since these were framed solely within the text, not as debates in the lived world) that ensued both explicitly, in direct response, or less directly, through exploration of parallel themes, wording, or images. Indeed, in one verse, Guru Arjan, the fifth of the ten Sikh Gurus, who was responsible for the 1604 compilation of the text, added elements to a verse of Kabir (GGS 326); he also signed as Kabir in his compositions, too, when responding to him, invoking the idea of "authority" noted above, and enhancing the immediacy of his engagement.⁸³ He also composed a *shabad* (a verse for musical performance, known more broadly as a *pada*,

⁸² Williams, *If All the World Were Paper*, 226.

⁸³ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 16ff.

with a number of short rhyming stanzas and a refrain) in the name of the poet Sūrdās—a poet renowned for his devotion to Krishna—after a single line attributed to Sūrdās, in the standard edition (GGS 1253).⁸⁴ Jeevan Deol, in discussing the second example, calls this as an example of “intertextuality.”⁸⁵ We can push this further, to see this as a dialogical practice grounded in a recognition of ambivalence: of the complex interplay of commonality and difference among both authors and ideas, a productive ambivalence that does not need to be resolved. Indeed, it is in its irresolvability that this ambivalence has its full, productive, and transformative impact.

We can see the dialogical nature of the mode of inclusion of the work of Shaikh Farid. In *Rāmkaḷī kī Vār*—a composition in the *rāg* or musical mode “Rāmkaḷī,” in the *Vār* form, a folk narrative form mobilized by the Gurus in a distinctive, religious context—we see engagement with the compositions of the Bhagats by the Gurus.⁸⁶ Guru Arjan responds to Shaikh Farid, invoking the name of the saint he is addressing within his own verse—as Guru Arjan often did—while the paratextual matter indicates his authorship. Two compositions in this *Vār* respond to Farid:

farīdā bhūmi raṅgāvalī maṅjhī visūlā bāgu

jo nar pīri nivājiā tinhā aṅch na lāga (Gur Arjan, GGS 966)

[Oh Farid, the earth resounds in colour, but within it is a poisonous garden

The person who cherishes their teacher is not touched by its thorn.]⁸⁷

and

⁸⁴ See discussion: Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 106; see also, on the Kabir verse, Jeevan Deol, “Sūrdās: Poet and Text in the Sikh Tradition,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63, 2 (2000): 169-193, see pgs. 191-192. On the issue of the composition of Sūrdās and different versions of the canonical text, as well as the different possible identities of the poet Sūrdās, see Deol, “Sūrdās”; on the textual evidence related to the verse on GGS page 1253, see pgs. 184-193.

⁸⁵ Deol, “Sūrdās,” 190.

⁸⁶ On the *Vār* form, see Hamad Abdullah Nazar, “From pre-colonial to colonial forms of engagement with Punjabi pasts: A study of some *vār* texts.” Master’s thesis, Department of History, University of British Columbia, 2022.

⁸⁷ All translations are mine.

farīdā umara suhāvarī saṅgi suvañnarī deha

virale keī pāīanhi jinhā piāre neha (Guru Arjan, M5, GGS 966)

[Oh Farid, that life is beautiful, with a lovely body

Very few are those we find who have true love for their beloved.]

These verses are also included later in the text, on page 1382, after a collection of *shalok* (from *ślokaḥ*, from Sanskrit, a hymn or verse) or short aphoristic poems by Shaikh Farid, followed by responses by the Gurus. There is no doubt that the compositions of Farid are at times more “pessimistic” than that of the Gurus, as Pashaura Singh notes.⁸⁸ We see this, for instance, in Farid’s mobilization of the bride and bride-groom motif, a common theme both in the work of the Sikh Gurus, and among *bhakti* poets in general, where the bride is generally construed as the soul and the groom is generally understood as the Ultimate.⁸⁹ In Farid’s verses at the opening of the collection of his *shaloks* in the Guru Granth Sahib, a striking verse portrays the groom as death, whose coming for the bride/soul is preordained (GGS 1377). It would be a mistake to see this as defining of the representation of Farid in the text, however. Farid’s verses are elsewhere more consonant with those of the Gurus: this is visible in a *shabad*, or longer verse, in *rāg āsā*, where we see praise of God; of those who love, serve, and are true; and of the mothers who bring them into the world—this is a message that resonates deeply with that of the Gurus:

dilahu muhabati jinnha seī sachiā

jinha mani horu mukhi horu si kāñḍhe kachiā

rate isaka khudāi raṅgi dīdāra ke

visariā jinha nāmu te bhui bhāru thīe (rahā’ū)

⁸⁸ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 64.

⁸⁹ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh “The Sikh Bridal Symbol: An Epiphany of Interconnections” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, 2 (Fall, 1992): 41-64.

āp līe laṛi lāi dari darvesa se
tin dhañnu jañedī mā'u āe saphalu se
paravadagāra apāra agama beaṅt tū
jinā pachhātā sachu churimā paira mūñ
terī panaha khudāi tū bakhasaṅdagī
sekh farīdai khairu dījai baṅdagī (Shaikh Farid, GGS 488)

[Those who have love in their hearts, they are true.

Those who have one thing in their heart, and another in their mouth, they are found to be false

Those imbued with the love of God are coloured by his vision

Those who forget the name are a burden upon the earth. (Pause [Refrain])

Those who are attached to the hem of the robe [of the Lord] are the true Darveshes at the door.

Blessings on those mothers, successful in coming to this world, who give birth to them.

You are the sustainer, limitless and beyond measure, without end.

Those who recognize the True one, I kiss their feet

You are the provider of your protection, Oh God..

Shaikh Farid says, give well-being to your servant.]

Returning to the selection of Farid's *shaloks*, in the final part of the canon, we see the Gurus responding directly to Farid's compositions, working with themes and imagery from his poems, bringing new shades of meaning and nuance, exploring both commonality and differentiation (in dialogue). We see this, for instance, in the interplay between these verses by Farid and Guru Amardas, the third Guru:

From Farid:

farīdā kālīn jinī na rāviā dha'ulī rāvai koi

kari sānī siu pirahaṛī raṅgu navelā hoi (Shaikh Farid, GGS 1378)

[Farid, those who did not enjoy the Lord when their hair was black, will they enjoy when [it is] white?

Love your Lord, and [your] colour will remain as new.]

From Guru Amardas

farīdā kālī dha'ulī sāhibu sadā hai je ko chiti kare

āpṇā lāiā piramu na laga'ī je lochai sabhu koi

ehu piramu piālā khasama kā jai bhāvai tai dei (Guru Amardas, M3, GGS 1378)

[Oh Farid, whether one is black or white [haired], the Lord is always there for those who remember him. One does not attain this love through one's own efforts, even if one might desire it. This is the cup of love of the Lord; if he likes, he provides it.]

Here we see convergence between the compositions: both agree that the lord is always there for the one who loves and remembers him. The Guru adds the element of God's grace—that this “cup of love” is given as the Lord likes—but this does not oppose Farid's articulation. It embraces Farid's earlier verse and extends it.

There is much more to discuss in this rich collection of dialogical verse, but we take a final, thematically defined example here, to show how ideas move across the poets incorporated within the Guru Granth Sahib (and, far beyond, outside of the domain of the Guru Granth Sahib). The theme is *viraha*, or longing for the beloved, which is used analogically to describe the soul's longing for God. This is visible across traditions captured in the Guru Granth Sahib (and far beyond, among *saguna* and *nirguna* saints, both, who are best understood as existing on a

continuum, not in opposition). It is expressed in the person of Sheikh Farid, for whom *viraha* was an important theme:

birahā birahā ākhīai birahā tū sultatānu

farīdā jitu tani birahā na ūpajai so tanu jāṇu masānu (Sheikh Farid, GGS 1379)

[The agony of separation is spoken of again and again—*viraha* [separation], you rule as Sultan.

Oh Farid, the body in which the pain of separation is not born should go to the cremation ground.

We see this embraced and extended upon by the second Guru, in an earlier section of the Guru Granth Sahib, where the specific treatment of the theme makes the reference to Farid’s verse clear.

jo siru sāñī nā nivai so siru dījai dāri

nānaka jisu piñjara mahi birahā nahī so piñjara lai jāri (Guru Angad, M2, GGS 89)

That head that is not lowered [before] the Lord should be thrown away.

Oh Nanak—that body in which there is no pain of separation should be taken and burnt

This pair of compositions highlights the dynamism and intimacy of the relationships between the Bhagat Bani and the compositions of the Gurus.⁹⁰ There are times when distinctions are made, which Pashaura Singh sees as contributing to the sharpening of Sikh identity:⁹¹ “[T]hey played an important role in defining what it meant to be a Sikh in relation to the commonly held Sufi ideals. By marking a contrast with the ideas of Shaikh Farid, the Sikh Gurus were clearly

⁹⁰ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 51.

⁹¹ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 34.

marking the outlines of the new Sikh community growing around them in the Punjab.”⁹² But as has been noted, this pair of compositions can also be seen as dialogical, a form of exchange, and not only as a form of othering/differentiation. We can see this in the engagement with the *viraha* theme, elsewhere. Farid’s composition states:

tanu tapai tanūr jiu bālaṇu haḍa balāṇnh

pairī thakāñ siri julāñ je mūñ pirī milāñnih (Sheikh Farid, GGS, 1384)

My body burns like an oven, and my bones burn like firewood.

If my feet were to grow tired, then I would walk on my head, so that I might meet the one I love.

This is followed by a verse that softens the severity of this verse, which is understood as a composition by Nanak:⁹³

tanu na tapāi tanūra jiu bālaṇu haḍa na bāli

siri pairī kiā pheṛiā āñdari pirī nihāli

Do not burn your body like an oven, do not burn your bones like firewood

What harm have your head and feet done? Look within to see your beloved. (Guru Nanak, M1, GGS 1384)

The commonalities and dialogue between these verses are lost if we only see differentiation and “sharpening” among them. We see engagement with the idea of *viraha* across the compositions of the Gurus, as well as in the work of Kabir (15th century), the most represented among the Bhagats in the Guru Granth Sahib, with a total of 541 compositions, many of them the short

⁹² Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 75.

⁹³ Singh, *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib*, 56-57.

aphoristic statements known as *shalok*. He too addressed the theme of *biraha/viraha*.⁹⁴ Thus he tells us:

Kabira birahu bhuyāngamu mani basai mañtu na mānai koi

Rāma biogī nā jīai jīai ta baurā hoi

Kabir [says]: the pain of separation is a snake in my mind: it does not answer to any mantra

There is no living in separation from Ram—if one lives, one goes mad. (Kabir, GGS 1368)

The longing for God, the Beloved, scorches and causes madness. As both the Bhagats and the Gurus tell us, this is a passion that is shared. Indeed, that is key to the notion of *bhakti* – often translated as “devotion” -- itself: it is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhaj-*, to share.⁹⁵

Debate and dialogue enshrined within another key composition attributed to Guru Nanak in the Guru Granth Sahib: the *Siddh Gosht*⁹⁶, a debate between Nanak and the *jogīs*—we can see this portrayed in the early nineteenth century Janamsākhī image (Fig 3): Guru Nanak here, again, is portrayed in dialogue and in debate. Such textual debates were a common feature in the early modern literature across communities: Tyler Williams argues that “[s]uch genres reflected actual pedagogical practices insofar as reciting and explaining poetic verses was a central part of religious teaching.”⁹⁷ In *Siddh Gosht*, we see the Guru referencing the imagery associated with the Jogis [the vernacular form of “Yogi”]—begging bowl, the mat, the loincloth—and providing

⁹⁴ By way of comparison, there are 974 compositions by Guru Nanak; 62 compositions by Guru Angad; 907 compositions by Guru Amar Das; 679 compositions by Guru Ram Das; 2,218 compositions by Guru Arjan; and 116 compositions by Guru Tegh Bahadur.

⁹⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Julie Vig (York University) for highlighting this in her reading of this work.

⁹⁶ Transliteration note: The spelling of this term in Gurmukhi differs from its rendering in Hindi, where a retroflex sibilant is utilized and an aspirated ṭh. In Gurmukhi, this aspiration is lost and the sibilant is replaced by śa. I have not utilized transliteration so as to avoid confusion on this point.

⁹⁷ Williams, *If All the World Were Paper*, 92; see also Jeevan Deol, “Sūrdās,” 174 on the prominence of the form in Sikh and related contexts.

an interpretation of these elements that is in keeping with his ideas and practices: we see commonality alongside differentiation:

ūndha ’u khaparu pañca bhū ṭopī

Let turning away be your begging bowl, the five elements [fire, earth, air, water and ether] be your cap.

kāñiā karāsaṇu manu jāgoṭī

Let the body be your grass mat, and the mind your loincloth.

satu santokhu sañjamu hai nāli

Let truth, contentment, and discipline be with you.

Nānaka gurmukhi nāmu samāli

Oh Nanak, by the gurmukh [one who faces the Guru], the Name is enshrined (Nanak, M1, GGS 939)

Heidi Pauwels has drawn important attention to a parallel image of Gorakhnath in dialogue with two Muslim saint figures—one, possibly portraying the Prophet Muhammad—to consider the how dialogue configures religious difference and accommodation in early modern religious texts, considering a range of texts that emerge in the two centuries after the time of Guru Nanak: the images she examines resonate with images discussed here (Fig. 1, 2 and 3).⁹⁸ As her work brilliantly shows, *goṣṭhīs* or debates (also available in parallel genres, such as the *bodh* or “awakening”) were a dynamic form in the early modern period in new Indo-Aryan languages.⁹⁹ In this, they drew on a long tradition.¹⁰⁰ We’ve seen above that textual constructions of dialogue

⁹⁸ Heidi Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate within the Intellectual History of South Asia: Early Modern Vernacular Inter- and Intra-Religious Dialogues,” *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasiastudien* 37 (2020): 96–123.

⁹⁹ Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate,” 99–100.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Black and Laurie Patton, “Introduction,” in Black and Patton, eds. *Dialogue in Early South Asian Religions*, 1–21, see pg. 2.

are complex, not always taking the form of a formal dialogue or conversation. In Siddh Gosht we see the latter: a more formal dialogue/conversation that seems to take advantage of the “inherently compelling and uniquely persuasive” nature of dialogue as a way to tease out differences and commonalities, stake claims and respond to them, and seek out resolution.¹⁰¹ The orality of the Guru Granth Sahib is multidimensional, in this sense: it is a performed and recited text, and in Siddh Gosht we see a further articulation of its orality, in the representation of a conversation, albeit one that is staged: a literary conversation, designed to allow for the articulation of Nanak’s message in dialogue, in exchange.¹⁰²

Let us look closely at the passage above, where we see the articulation of equivalences between features associated with the Jogi path, and that which Guru Nanak expounds; these equivalences function both to assert Nanak’s position, but also to relate that position to Jogi practice. This is an important passage, in that it expresses a set of internal intertextual relations, within the Guru Granth Sahib: a verse with similar features appears in its first composition, the foundational liturgical text, Japjī Sāhib (verse 28).¹⁰³ We see a compelling set of equivalences also articulated in the early eighteenth-century *Kāfir Bodh* that Pauwels explores (and earlier antecedents), which assert “commonalities between the two faiths of Islam and Hinduism, yet distinguishes yogis-fakirs [renunciates, both Muslim and not] as transcending both and being partial to neither.”¹⁰⁴ Later instances of related texts complicate this formulation, reflecting complex political and

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Geen, “The Power of Persuasion: The Use of Dialogues to Justify and Promote ‘Early’ Renunciation in the Jaina and Hindu Traditions,” in Black and Patton, eds. *Dialogue in Early South Asian Religions*, 191-205, see pg.198.

¹⁰² This is one of the features of dialogue that Black and Patton identify (Black and Patton, “Introduction,” 1, 3).

¹⁰³ This is another feature of dialogue that Black and Patton discuss (Black and Patton, “Introduction,” 1).

¹⁰⁴ Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate,” 109. On the complex nature of the fakīr figure, see Timothy Dobe, *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

contextual circumstances.¹⁰⁵ In the end, these variants do coalesce in important ways: “While asserting equivalence between Islamic and yogic/Sant concepts, they all provide a self-definition as a third category to transcend this duality, namely that of fakīr.”¹⁰⁶ We can see elements of this dynamic in Siddh Gosht . The conversation between Nanak and the yogi Charpat, and other yogis, is amiable: we see no hostility or dismissal on either side. The discussion opens with simple questions from the yogis, about Nanak’s identity. He responds in the second verse of the text that “I speak the truth and pray to sacrifice myself unto the saints (*saṅta janā*)” (Nanak, M1, GGS 938). Indeed, in the third verse, Nanak tells the Siddhs that “sitting unmoving in the yogic posture [*āsana*] of Narayan, in this way [one] receives the teachings of the Guru” (*āsani baisani thiru nārāiṇu aisī guramati pāe*)—this is after the Siddhas are described as sitting in such postures, as a group, at the opening of the text (“*sidha sabhā kari āsani baiṭhe saṅt sabhā jaikaro*,” Nanak, M1, GGS 938). In the exchange in verses 7 and 8, commonalities are described between the yogi path, and that of Nanak. It is in verse 9 that we see, in response to the Yogi’s invitation to Nanak to follow their path, Nanak’s assertion that “by the *gurmukh*’s understanding, in this way the method of Yoga is obtained” (*gurmukhi būjhai joga jugati iva pātai*) (Nanak GGS 939) This assertion of the link between the *gurmukh* and true yoga is articulated throughout. He continues in verse 10 with the beginning of the equivalences articulated in verse 11, quoted above: “With the endless Word within as earrings, keep egotism and attachment at a distance” (*aṅtara sabadu niraṅtari mudrā haumai mamtā duri karī*). (Nanak GGS 939). Then the dialogue with the Yogi proceeds to define the nature of the divine, and how the mind is freed.

¹⁰⁵ Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate,” 117-8.

¹⁰⁶ Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate,” 119.

It is important to remember that at this stage of Nanak's life, he is understood to have been pursuing *udāsī*, a period of renunciation during which he traveled and shared his message—this is portrayed vividly in the *janamsākhīs*, the biographies about his life that emerged roughly a century after his death. And so, there is greater commonality between Nanak's position and that of the Yogis than is often appreciated, in this scene. In verse 17 we see a range of allusions—to trade, but also to the religious dress of ascetics, which the Siddhs note.

Kisu kāraṇi grihu tajiō udāsī

For what reason have you abandoned your home [as] an ascetic?

kisu kāraṇi ihu bhekhū nivāsī

For what reason do you inhabit this dress?

Kisu vakhara ke tuma vaṇajāre

What kind of goods do you trade in?

Kiu kari sāthu laṅghāvahu pare

How will you bring people across with you? (Nanak, M1, GGS 939)

Nanak is clear on the reason for his presentation:

gurmukhi khojata bhae udāsī

I have become an ascetic (*udāsī*) seeking *gurmukhs* [those who face the Guru]

darsana kai tāī bhekh nivāsī

For the sake of sacred sight (*darsana*), I inhabit this dress. (Nanak, M1, GGS 939)

The next verses of the composition do not, indeed, deny renunciation or the yogi path. Nanak, instead, expounds the nature of the created world, and the place of the self within it, in relation to the *hukam*, or divine order. We see this in verse 22:

hukame āvai hukame jāvai hukame rahai samāī

Coming by the order, going by the order, by the order remaining at one

pūre gura te sācu kamāvai gati miti sabade pāī

One earns the truth through the perfect Guru, the right path is obtained through the Word.

(Nanak, M1, GGS 940)

And, indeed, the pretense of dialogue is dispelled at this point: from verse 22 to 42, Nanak presents his vision of the world, the nature of ignorance, and the centrality of the Name in the discernment and practice of transformative liberation: the transformation of the *manmukh* (centered on the self) into the *gurmukh* (centred on the Guru), who is described at length (verses 27, 29- 31, 35-37, 41-42).

The description given, indeed, of the accomplished *gurmukh* is not distinct from the aims and path of the Jogis; Nanak tells the Siddhas in verse 32 that “Absorbed in the name [the *gurmukh*] considers the practice of Yoga; steeped in the name, they obtain the doorway to liberation” (*nām rate jog jugati bīcāru, nāmi rate pāvahi mokh duāru*) (Nanak, GGS 941). The Nām or name, a central feature of Nanak’s thought, is foregrounded here, but in terms that integrate in and valorize the achievements associated with Yoga. The centrality of the Guru is also extolled (for example, verses 38-39) and is placed at the centre of this practice. This is, of course, fully aligned with Yogic practice, for whom the Guru was fundamental. This is, therefore, further commonality that is asserted, a shared commitment in both Yogic and Sikh thought and practice.

Dialogue is resumed at verse 43, where the Yogis are portrayed as seeking out greater detail about the nature of the practices required to achieve full and complete knowledge/experience. Nanak asserts the centrality of the Nām or name, the source and experience of the *anahad śabad* or “unstruck sound” that is at the centre of Yogic practice, as

well as within Sikh thought, where this term defines, according to Christopher Shackle and Arvind Mandair, “an internalized Word” or “words or language that are not tainted by traces of ego and therefore not subject to ordinary communication in which words are merely labels for things,” indicating “a mode of communication where the ego no longer controls the production of words, nor indeed the process of making words into things.”¹⁰⁷ When asked by the Yogis to explain where the unstruck sound comes from, and what those who have experienced it are like, Nanak replies, in verse 53, that “When the nine lakes fill, they complete the tenth, there the trumpets of the unstruck void sound” (*na’u sara subhara dasvai pūre, taha anahata sunn vajāvahi tūre*) – a reference to the nine doors of the body and the opening of the tenth, at the culmination of the yogic process. In the next verse, Nanak describes how “Achieving spontaneous tranquility and love, joy comes into being/The *gurmukh* is awake, without sleeping” (*sahaja bhāi milīai sukhu hovai, gurmukhi jāgai nīda na sovai*) indicating an achievement associated with Yogic practice. In verse 60, we see clear articulation of the full congruity between Nanak’s vision and that of Yoga, but where the truth lies above the three yogic channels, merged with the Word of the true Guru (*nānaka tihu te ūpari sēcā satigura sabadi samāe*). The remainder of Siddh Gosht continues the exploration of how to still the mind, and on the nature of non-duality and its realization, until verse 72, where the Guru offers a summary of his teaching extolling the virtues and primacy of the name as the fulfillment of yoga, which is simultaneously affirmed and celebrated: “Listen to the end of my words, oh Avadhuta (Yogi): without the name there is no Yoga” (*sabadai kā nibeṛā suṇi tū a’udhū binu navai jogu na hoī*). He continues, asserting that “only by receiving the Name from the true Guru, oh ascetic, is the

¹⁰⁷ Arvind-pal Singh Mandair and Christopher Shackle, eds. trans. *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scripture* (London: Routledge, 2005), xxxi.

practice of yoga found” (*satiguru te nāmu pāīai a ’udhū joga jugati tā hoī*) (Nanak, M1, GGS 946).

We see here a discourse on the nature of yoga, and the nature of Nanak’s vision, as an integrated one. Pauwels has rightly noted that we “cannot necessarily take the dialogic element for granted as indicative of an open, let alone democratic attitude, neither in the past nor today.” Pauwels continues: “Debates can be staged to score points. The purpose may be on a one-sidedly victory declaration, mainly intended to celebrate the greater glory of one sectarian position. The dialogic aspect can be just window-dressing for a guru’s discourse, with disciples’ prompts for further exposition, the audience being already converted by his charismatic personality. We do not really hear ‘the other side’ of the debate.”¹⁰⁸ This is, indeed, how Siddh Gosht has generally been read: as expressing the triumph of Guru Nanak *over* the Jogis, his assertion of a Sikh path over and against that of the Jogis. The important in-depth study of this text by Jaswinder Sandhu and Kamala Nayar emphasizes how this debate or dialogue between Guru Nanak and the Nath Siddhas expresses “a distinct stance against individuals withdrawing from society in the pursuit of liberation from saṃsāra” in opposition to discourses focused on renunciation in Hinduism and Buddhism (although they also acknowledge that in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism there are complex and dynamic engagements with the world that do not require renunciation).¹⁰⁹ However, there are significant grounds for questioning this formulation. Firstly, recognizing that the period when the Sikh tradition arose and flourished was also characterized by the emergence and prominence of a wide range of traditions that were “this-worldly” in orientation—such as

¹⁰⁸ Pauwels, “Reviewing the Idea of Debate,” 62.

¹⁰⁹ Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu *The Socially Involved Renunciate* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 16 for quote, see 13-15 for discussion of non-renunciatory aspects of other traditions.

merchant-supported Vaishnava and Jain traditions, for example, which valorized the merchant community in its worldly endeavors (even with simultaneous commitments to renunciation) and gave it significant religious agency—we can recognize that the Sikh tradition is not unique in its orientations towards this-worldly engagement.¹¹⁰ Indeed, we can also see strong connections between merchants and a range of Sant traditions in this period, so there are complex kinds of worldliness that need to be accounted for in relation to vernacular religious formations at this time.¹¹¹

Further attention to a wider field of discourses makes it possible to see this discourse in another way. Recent work by Monika Horstmann has drawn attention to the affinities between *bhakti* or devotional practices in the early modern period and the practice of Yoga.¹¹² Rather than seeing these as operating in opposition, as has been suggested for understanding the transition from a martial ascetic to a *bhakti* orientation in William Pinch’s ground-breaking work on warrior asceticism, for example, we can see also more of a continuum.¹¹³ Indeed, as Horstmann’s work reveals, there are many different things one can understand by the term “yoga.”¹¹⁴ Dādūpanthis argued, she shows us, “for *bhakti* as yoga, a purely interior yoga, and against haṭha-yoga,” a more physically-grounded practice. It is possible that we can see Nanak’s Siddh Gosht as a part of this dynamic synthesis and larger conversation, entailing not a rejection of yoga, but

¹¹⁰ Shandip Saha “The Movement of *Bhakti* along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Puṣṭimārg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, 3 (2007): 299-318; Divya Cherian *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

¹¹¹ Williams, “Literary and religious history from the middle.” This is why comparisons should be made with contemporary traditions, not classical and idealized formulations, as Sandhu and Nayar pursue.

¹¹² Monika Horstmann *Bhakti and Yoga: A Discourse in Seventeenth-Century Codices* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2021).

¹¹³ William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹⁴ Horstmann *Bhakti and Yoga*, xviii.

a definition of yoga on different terms, in keeping with *bhakti* or devotional commitments and its emphasis on interiority. As Horstmann argues: “[b]hakti arrived at an understanding of yoga as *sahaj*, the stage of primordial union, accorded by grace and prepared by remembrance of the divine name.”¹¹⁵ While *sahaj*—that spontaneous and free state of full awareness and experience—is central to *haṭha yoga*, too, it also was central to the Sikh understanding of full awareness beyond the confines of *dubidhā* or duality, where full realization of the Name is articulated. We can therefore see this debate between Guru Nanak and the Siddhas as a debate or dialogue *within* a broader negotiation between bhakti and yoga in this period, one which was also being worked through in the Dādūpanth tradition that Horstmann focuses on, centred in what is now Rajasthan (which borders the greater Punjab region). Indeed, the Yogi figure named in the Siddh Gosht (verse 4) is Carpaṭ, who was a major figure in the reworking of Yoga in the ways that resonated with the devotional work of the Sants, the *nirguṇ* poets, with which Nanak’s work aligns.¹¹⁶ Brian Black has suggested that while many dialogues or debates “can be seen as culminating in a point of view that transcends difference,” encounters can also offer a possible reading in which debate could be seen as unfinished or unresolved.¹¹⁷

There is a productive ambivalence here that invites reinterpretation. Siddh Gosht provides for complex forms of dialogue, integration, and alignment, the framing of yogic practice in Guru Nanak’s terms, but also the framing of Guru Nanak’s message in yogic terms. There are complex equivalences staked out that play on the ambivalence of their relationship. As Guru Nanak tells us “The *gurmukh* realizes the yogic discipline” (*gurmukh jogī jugati pachhāṇe*) (Guru Nanak, M1, GGS 946). There is evidence of the reception of this dialogue in more agonistic terms, too,

¹¹⁵ Horstmann *Bhakti and Yoga*, xviii.

¹¹⁶ Horstmann *Bhakti and Yoga*, 8 ff.

¹¹⁷ Brian Black “Dialogue and Difference: Encountering the Other in Indian Religious and Philosophical Sources.” in Black and Patton, eds. *Dialogue in Early South Asian Religions*, 243-257, see pg. 253.

in the time of the Gurus: in the first Vār (a folk poetic form utilized by the Gurus) of the scholar and contemporary of the second through sixth Gurus Bhai Gurdas (d. 1636), he frames the encounter between Guru Nanak and the Jogis in more combative terms, expressing a negative assessment of the Jogis in Pauri (“step,” here referring to verse) 29, and noting at the end of their encounter that “Through the Word, he bested the group of Siddhs, and set his way apart” (*sabadi jītī sidhi maṅḍalī kītosu apṇā pañth nirālā*) (Bhai Gurdas, (Var 1, Pauri 31) ¹¹⁸Rahuldeep Singh Gill has argued that this Vār was composed later than the core set of Vārs composed by Bhai Gurdas, and may have been written specifically to present a life history of the first Guru in response to versions being produced at that time by a rival group: it does not surprise that a more agonistic reading might emerge in a time of contestation. ¹¹⁹ Overall, this is in keeping with the multiplicity of discursive possibilities I suggest we need to allow to co-exist, in a reading that allows for ambivalence.

Lest we see this productive and creative ambivalence of commonality and difference as a feature solely of the Guru Granth Sahib, we can also briefly consider the Dasam Granth, a collection of texts associated with the tenth Guru (with significant debate over the attribution of the different texts included in the collection). As Robin Rinehart, who has done a fine book-length study of the text, notes, “debates about the Dasam Granth remain heated and unresolved, and to a great extent still revolve around the question of authorship.”¹²⁰ Rinehart’s work provides valuable context, placing the Dasam Granth

¹¹⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Jvala Singh (University of California Berkeley) for this suggestion and citation, July 2025. Bhai Gurdas Bhalla *Vārān Bhāi Gurdās* (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, 2011), 25.

¹¹⁹ Rahuldeep Singh Gill *Drinking from Love’s Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17-18.

¹²⁰ Robin Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

in “a broader framework of Indian literature,” to allow for “new frameworks for understanding the Dasam Granth and to move beyond the interpretive impasse over authorship and authenticity.”¹²¹ There is much to discuss with reference to this text, as Rinehart’s comprehensive study of the text has revealed, but our focus here is on the multiplicity of religious influences, positionalities, and discourses that it exhibits.

For example, the *Chaubīs Avatār*, a text on the 24 incarnations of the God Vishnu, or the *Chandī di Vār*, of ballad dedicated to the Goddess Durga (who goes here by the name Chandi) reflect the domain we would see today as Puranic Hinduism: a celebration of the major deities of the mainstream Hindu tradition (which was, as a religious formation, historically, only emergent at this time—otherwise, these can also be seen to represent separate traditions, with distinctive textual formations, rituals, and sacred geographies). In accounting for this material in a text associated with the tenth Sikh Guru, Rinehart offers a valuable discussion of how we need to rethink the religious nature of texts and the role of “belief” with regard to such materials: “the issue of whether such stories imply belief in and worship of gods, goddesses, and avatars may be a useful question to consider in the realm of not only Sikhism but Hinduism as well”; indeed, this is true in the broadest terms in considering “religious” material.¹²² Rinehart thus suggests that these religious references serve multiple purposes: for example, the “link between royal insignia and [the goddess] Durga’s insignia suggests that goddess mythology for both Sikhs and Hindus is not simply about religious belief and devotion but also about political power and legitimation.”¹²³ Sikh use of this symbolism thus may, or may not, be linked to religious belief or

¹²¹ Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 11, 7.

¹²² Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 14 for quote; see further discussion: 111–12, 171ff.

¹²³ Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 111.

affiliation (although Rinehart also explicates well the way the themes in the “Goddess sections” reiterate those expressed in the Bachitar Nāṭak).¹²⁴ This is a larger phenomenon: we see tremendous overlap in themes and both moral and divine figures among Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism as well, as Naomi Appleton has discussed.¹²⁵ In part, we can see the “inclusivity” as an assertion, but it also reflects what Appleton calls a “shared narrative universe,” and the effort to define both difference and commonality.¹²⁶ This is a larger issue in Sikh textual productions: recent work by Julie Vig has argued that the Vaishnava elements in Sikh literature of the eighteenth century be understood as reflecting a broader “language of power” that had become normative by the eighteenth century.¹²⁷ Her work demonstrates the wider worlds that Sikh interlocutors were a part of.

We face here a variant of the issues explored above. We saw that the Guru Granth Sahib includes authors who are not Sikh, but whose work is presented in conversation with the Gurus’ vision. Debate and dialogue characterize their inclusion. The Dasam Granth, regardless of the question of authorship—which Rinehart explores at length—features quite dramatic diversity that is assimilated into a text associated with the tenth Guru. In part there are historical dimensions to this discussion: some of the terms associated with Hindu thought that are reflected in the text—*dharma*, *avatār*, *purana* and *tantra*—are not “simply” Hindu: they have a far wider purview, that moved across religious traditions. (Tony Stewart’s observations on the usage of such terms in Bengali Muslim contexts is relevant here.) They are not, in Rinehart’s words, “self-evident, clearly defined concepts and categories of text and practice”: these ideas and practices

¹²⁴ Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 53, 69–70.

¹²⁵ Appleton *Shared Characters*.

¹²⁶ Appleton *Shared Characters*, 18-9.

¹²⁷ Julie Vig “The Use of Brajbhāṣa in Sikh Contexts: Connecting *gurbilās* literature to Braj Martial Poetry,” *The Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and Middle East*, 42, 2 (2022): 362-369.

were not, in short, “Hindu” in some clear way, such that their use in the Sikh context designates some sort of “Hindu”-ness.¹²⁸ Instead, as Rinehart suggests, what may seem multi-religious to us may reflect a particular moment in the development of a range of religious ideas, along diverse religious lines (aspects of which that we only now see as “Hindu”).¹²⁹ We must entertain the possibility that these ideas and images spoke to Sikhs, as well as to Hindus, and others, and that degrees of commonality and exchange underlay their mobilization. That commonality does not entail simple identity.

We can see, therefore, that these foundational Sikh texts are multivalent and multivocal; they do not fear difference or the articulation of commonality. They are dialogical, and articulate belonging in the ambivalence of both commonality and difference, embracing both. This acts as a productive and creative dynamic, giving these texts their breadth of impact and embrace of multi-vocality. Indeed, in so doing, they embrace the critique of duality (or *dubidhā*) that the Gurus assert undergirds attachment and grasping in this world, an impediment to full transformation and the achievement of *mukti*, or enlightenment. This embrace of ambivalence or ambiguity, beyond duality, resonates with the wider field we have examined, with both Bauer’s and Ahmed’s explorations of the ambivalent elements of Islam, explored above. We can see this in Ahmed’s discussion of a verse by the Sufi poet Bulhe Shah (late 17th-18th centuries), also of Punjab:

Law says, “Go to the Mullā and learn the rules and regulations!”

Love says, “A single word is enough: shut and put away all other books!” . . .

Law says, “Have some shame and decency: put out this light!”

¹²⁸ Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 13.

¹²⁹ Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*, 171, 165-6.

Love says, “What is this veil for? Let the visions be open!”

Law says, “Come into the mosque and perform the obligatory prayer!”

Love says, “Go to the wine-tavern, and having drunk, perform the superogatory prayer!”...

Law says, “O, Believer! go for Ḥajj—for you will have to cross the Ṣirāt Bridge!”

Love says, “The door of the Beloved is the Ka‘bah, don’t move from there!”

Law says, “We strung Shāh Maṣṣūr up on the cross!”

Love says, “Then, you did well; for you sacrificed him at the Beloved’s door!”¹³⁰

Here we see, according to Ahmed, “the confident assertion and widespread social circulation of the self-confident norms of the Sufi-philosophical amalgam.”¹³¹ Ambivalence, Ahmed thus argues, is at the centre of that which we should consider “Islam.” With Sikhi (the term in Punjabi used for what is termed “Sikhism” in English), as with Islam—as Bauer and Ahmed argue—modern (and colonial) understandings of religion have forced a more defensive, narrower stance.¹³²

Sikh tradition reflects and emerges out of a series of encounters and conversations that allow for creative exploration of commonality and difference as a kind of celebration of ambivalence—an ambivalence within which *knowledge* is found. This ambivalence accompanied

¹³⁰ Ahmed *What is Islam?* 96.

¹³¹ Ahmed, *What is Islam?* 96. Ahmed has argued that “we should conceive of the self-conception of these trajectories not as anti-nomian—against the law, but as para-nomian—that is, beside the law, or as supra-nomian—that is, above the law.” (Ahmed *What is Islam?* 97) Here, the “law is continually “contested” and negotiated by the epistemologies of Sufism and philosophy in the thinking and consciousness of Muslims. (Ahmed *What is Islam?* 97).

¹³² The impact of western religious discourses on Sikhi is explored at length in Arvind-pal Singh Mandair *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). An earlier influential work in this vein, Harjot Oberoi’s *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) relied too heavily on a then-popular idea of “fuzziness” to explain earlier Sikh cultural formations, ignoring clear articulations of belonging, as well as the intentionality and philosophical grounding of articulations of commonality. For discussion of the latter, see Anne Murphy, “Allegories of difference and identity: Reflections on religious boundaries and ‘popular’ religion,” *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. 7 (1) (2000): 53-71.

also clear articulation: of the self, of the other; of the same and the different; of the community and the individual. This productive ambivalence is not contained within one single religious ground, and neither does it produce one: it promoted a capacious dialogue and exchange at its core. I would argue that this is an underexamined aspect not only of South Asian religions, as suggested here through the examples of Islam and Sikhi, but religious traditions around the world.

Understanding of ambivalence can enhance our understanding of the commonalities and conversations that take place within and across religions. There is a wide provenance, for example, for Sufi and Jogi synthesis, where the commonalities discerned between these two traditions are grounded in the perception of allied practices and goals of self-transformation, even when distinctive theological and soteriological programs frame them.¹³³ This involved both extensive translation programs that brought Sanskrit texts into Persian, for example, and the production of a wide range of vernacular texts at this intersection, such as the Nath Yogi texts written for Muslim publics that Christine Marrewa-Karwoski has highlighted, some of which she argues were competitive in spirit, and some of which drew “equivalences or commonalities between the actions and beliefs of the Nāth Yogīs and the rituals of Islamic traditions” and “espouse a nonduality of religion.”¹³⁴ This was also reflected in less elite and formal folk traditions, where Sufi and/or Muslim and Jogi identities merged.¹³⁵ The exchange and dialogue

¹³³ The definitive work on this relationship is Ernst *Refractions of Islam*.

¹³⁴ Christine Marrewa-Karwoski “Voices from the Margins: Early Modern Nāth Yogī Teachings for Muslim Publics,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 27 (2023): 303–330; first quote 324, second quote 325.

¹³⁵ Such intersections can be seen, for example, in the story of the star-crossed lovers Hīr and Rānjhā, extant in textual form since the 16th century in both Persian and Punjabi, in which Rānjhā takes on the guise of a Jogi to win back his lover, Hīr. We also see it in traditions related to Gūgā Pīr, also known as Zāhir Pīr, who is popularly remembered as a devotee of Gorakhnath who converts to Islam at the end of his life; see Anne Murphy, “The Uses of the ‘Folk’: Cultural Historical Practice and the Modernity of the Guga Tradition,” *South Asian History and Culture* 6, 4 (2015): 441–461. The example Marrewa explores also involves figures with a strong presence in folk tradition, such as Khwājā Khizr and Bābā Ratan. See: Véronique Bouillier and Dominique-Sila Khan “Hājji Ratan Or Bābā Ratan's Multiple Identities,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37, 6 (2009): 559–595 and Michel Boivin and

that we see present within the Sikh examples provided here, therefore, are indicative of a far broader set of cultural and religious commonalities and dialogues. This does not mean, of course, that there were not moments of conflict. The Mughal state, for example, came into conflict with the Sikh community in the seventeenth century at several points. This resulted in the execution of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, within the broader retribution wrought by the emperor Jahangir on those he perceived to have supported his rival for the throne; later, the execution of the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, followed.¹³⁶ Persecution of the Sikh community in the eighteenth century is known today by the terms *chotā* and *vaddā ghallūgārā*, the small and great carnages. But even in the description of this violence—such as in a late eighteenth-century account of the execution of the ninth Guru—we can see the acknowledgement of commonality between Sikhi and Islam through a shared notion of religion.¹³⁷ Dialogue can continue, as the tenth Guru’s letter to the Mughal emperor, the *Zafarnama*—chastising the Emperor for his betrayal of his promise to the Guru, and seeking justice through reference to a shared moral universe—so well demonstrates.

Locating commonality

Fuchs et al. identify a kind of ambivalence in urban belonging that mirrors the multiplicity and interrelatedness of religious belonging described above. They write:

The very fact of ambivalence characterizing urbanity, and the wide array of mixes, combinations and intersections of integration and aloofness, deep belonging and

Manoël Pénicaud, eds., *Inter-Religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World: Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia* (New York/London: Routledge, 2024). See also the important work of Mukesh Kumar “Straddling Across Religious Borders: The Case of the Muslim Jogis,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2025: 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaf049>.

¹³⁶ On the punishment of those seen to support the emperor Jahangir’s rival, and son, Khusrao, see Munis D. Faruqui *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504-1719* (NY: Cambridge University, Press, 2012): 188, 197, 204, 226 ff.

¹³⁷ Murphy “The *gurbilas* literature and the idea of ‘religion’.”

pragmatic attachment, developing out of the basic ambivalence explains the failure of dichotomous models, and of determinate theories of the urban more generally.¹³⁸

There is, therefore, a deep parallel between the ambivalence of the urban with the ambivalence of religious belonging. The city as a location allows for both radical othering—that is, radical non-belonging of peoples, or belonging to different entities that are seen as entirely separate—and accommodation/integration/inclusion, a sense of belonging that operates at the level of both individuals and groups to transcend difference. This is often indicated by a set of practices and inhabitations, rather than an underlying ideology, definition, or overarching belonging. This latter state is what we usually think of as the “urbane,” the quintessentially urban, though it cannot be denied that cities too are sites of radical conflict and exclusion.¹³⁹ This is an abiding ambivalence, one that persists across space and time, the multiplicity of belonging and the simultaneity of both commonality and difference. Do the contact and intersection available in the city always make available both dynamics? Is there a way to discern a pattern, a predictable conditioning, that determines the direction of such dynamics, particularly with reference to religious subjectivities (our concern, here)? How can this pattern be named? I think that until we have a language to define commonalities, in rigorous terms—as part of a definition of religion, not as something at its periphery—we will continue to struggle to understand the different dynamics of religious plurality and commonality in the urban space.

Emplacing the texts explored above helps to materialize their relationality further. The Dasam Granth and the Guru Granth Sahib as texts emerged out of a network of sites associated with the Gurus and the unfolding of their lives, in place, in the world, as people came together at

¹³⁸ Fuchs, et al. “Ambivalence,” 19.

¹³⁹ Susanne, “Urbanity (urbanitas, Urbanität, urbanité, urbanità, urbanidad...)”

sites founded by the Gurus, to live, work, and practice, and the Gurus founded centers for their community (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5:

This demonstrates a larger pattern that we see in the early modern period: the building of infrastructure, administrative structures, guest houses (*sarāī*) etc., in association with the growing power of religious communities and their leaders. This was practiced by all religious communities of this period, and was particularly prominent among Sufi charismatic leaders, who conceptualized their ‘*vilāyat*’ or ‘spiritual rule’ over territory, where “sovereignty over the realm was theirs [the Sufis] to grant.”¹⁴⁰ Through this process small towns and urban sites emerged, a set of secondary urban centers at the center of trade networks, in relation to grander, imperial

¹⁴⁰ A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 74.

centers such as Lahore.¹⁴¹ (The imperial capital also traveled, of course—“with all sorts of satellite populations and commercial economies constantly traveling with it”¹⁴²—so our understanding of an urban space in the Mughal context must be flexible.) The sites of the Guru were interlinked, as is visualized in this modern image (Fig. 5), which links the places associated with the travels of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final living Guru. Fig 5 is a modern map that lays out the travels of the tenth and final living Guru, after his urban center at Anandpur was attacked by local independent kings with the support of Mughal forces, and he forced to flee in the opening decade of the eighteenth century: it represents a network of rural and urban sites, joined into a narrative of the past of the Guru that coalesced in the eighteenth century, not long after the time of the Guru. As Susanne Rau has noted, urbanity itself should “be understood as a form of relation, not as a state or condition.”¹⁴³ A set of urban and urbanizing sites thus emerge in relational terms, amid overlapping networks of memory, trade, and governance. This mapping of memory happens within individual sites, too, such as at the destination on this map, Damdama Sahib, at Talwandi Sabo, where the Guru took rest during his flight from Anandpur, and at the Golden Temple, to use its current English name (discussed below), where the *parikramā* or circumference of the site features numerous places associated with the Gurus and saints: for instance the place where Guru Ramdas supervised the construction of the sacred tank is a bathing place associated with healing. Space itself is conjoined to the articulation of a Sikh past in this way, as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Anne Murphy, “Which Urbanity? Secondary Urban Centres and Their Attendant Religious Formations,” *Religion and Urbanity Online*, Susanne Rau and Jörg Rüpke, eds. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022). Accessed 2025-06-24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/urbrel.11327907>

¹⁴² Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 131.

¹⁴³ Susanne Rau, “Urbanity (urbanitas, Urbanität, urbanité, urbanità, urbanidad...)”

¹⁴⁴ Anne Murphy *Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

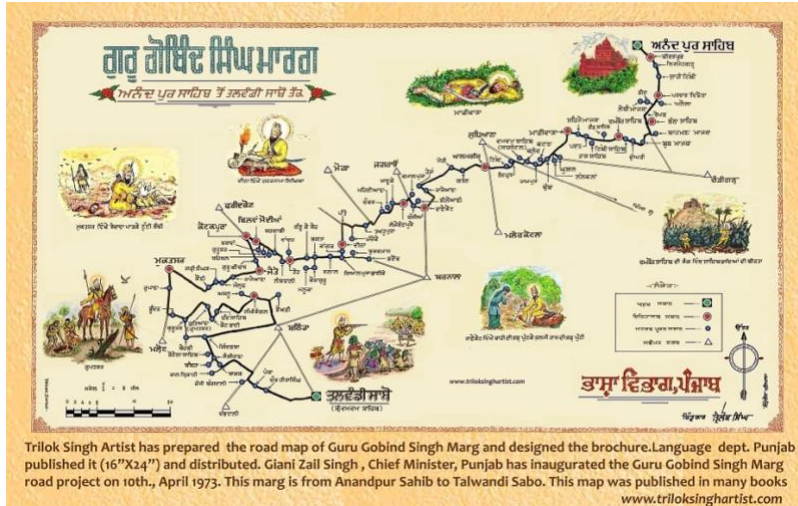


Fig. 5: Guru Gobind Singh Marg: From Anandpur to Talwandi Sabo (Languages Dept, Punjab)

The city of Amritsar was the site of the foundation of the first standard form of the Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Arjan, canonized in 1604. The city was founded by the fourth Guru, Guru Ramdas, and was known as Ramdaspur: the emperor Akbar is said to have gifted land to the Guru, but this cannot be verified. Later, with the digging of the sacred pool at its center, it came to be known as Amritsar, for its pool (*sar* or *sarovar*) of *amrit* or nectar. The fifth Guru took over from his father (he was the youngest of his sons) to further develop the site, and build the central shrine there, known in Punjabi as Harmandir Sahib—the term “Golden Temple” was later coined in English to describe the site after it was encased in gold by the ruler Ranjit Singh, who ruled the greater Punjab state from Lahore from the beginning of the 19th century to his death in 1839; annexation by the East India Company followed in 1849. The city—located a short distance from the imperial centre of Lahore, along established trading networks—developed into an important urban centre. The trade routes that shaped Amritsar’s history were important to the wider social landscape of the Punjab region, within which Sikhi emerged alongside Islam,

Jainism, and the range of devotional traditions now termed as “Hinduism”: as Hardip Singh Syan notes, as Khatri tradition communities (from which the Sikh Gurus hailed) spread along the trade routes that connected urban and semi-urban centres across what is now North India and Pakistan, “religious traditions had clear commonalities and would have allowed merchant castes to create a *bhakti* culture that provided castes with the flexibility to be different and to have a mutual language of religion” across what we see today as conventional religious boundaries.”¹⁴⁵ For this reason, Syan calls Sikhi a “mercantile *bhakti* religion.”¹⁴⁶ This is consistent with the broader connections of merchant groups to the founding and flourishing of *nirgun bhakti* traditions across a wider region.¹⁴⁷ The site and its growth are directly linked to the formation of the text: its shape, and the celebration of inclusion and ambiguity that constitutes it, reflect in an important way its origins in an urbanizing site and location within larger networks.

Then there is the city of Anandpur, the “city of bliss.” Anandpur was founded in the mid 17th century by the ninth Guru¹⁴⁸ and grew into a major center under the tenth and final living Sikh Guru, part of a larger pattern of the founding of centers by the Gurus of the Sikh community (Fig 5). Anandpur is located at the foothills of the Himalayas on the eastern border of the Punjab region (hills that, because of their strategic location in relation to Punjab and some-time integration into the region, have been often called the “Punjab hills”). The tenth Guru was able to move in and out of Mughal territory in the Punjab hills, through alliances with local hill kings that granted him sanctuary and support. Anandpur now is very much a city in terms of population and density, but held this status on a smaller scale in the decades after its founding, as

¹⁴⁵ Hardip Singh Syan, “The merchant gurus: Sikhism and the development of the medieval Khatri merchant family,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 51, 3 (2014): 303–330; see pg. 306.

¹⁴⁶ Syan, “The merchant gurus,” 308.

¹⁴⁷ Williams, “Literary and religious history from the middle.”

¹⁴⁸ This is generally accepted as happening in 1665. The title of Anandpur came later, after the installation of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) as Guru, after the death of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675).

a secondary or tertiary urban site. Historian Purnima Dhavan has explained the diversity of Sikh texts of this period, such as the Dasam Granth, through an understanding of the “affective communities” gathered at Anandpur, around the Guru, a community of followers who had pledged allegiance to the Guru but were not necessarily Sikh themselves.¹⁴⁹ Dhavan’s idea of “affective communities” is meant to account for the diversity of religious affinities present in texts like the Dasam Granth, which represent the Guru’s community at Anandpur, this small city of the Guru, the “city of bliss,” a literary articulation of a religious culture of encounter and sharing. But, to be clear, this was also a place of the clear articulation of being Sikh: it is Anandpur where the Khalsa, an orthopraxic form of Sikh identity, was formally established in 1699, demonstrating how the clear articulation of religious practice and religious boundaries accompanies articulation of sharing and commonality.

It is the urbanity of these texts—their emergence at locations of the intensification of human habitation and organization, around charismatic leaders who founded and developed these centers and within communities of purpose gathered around them—that we need to account for in our analysis of them, rather than discourses of religious identity, in isolation. Those discourses, in short, share the ambivalence, the ambiguity, of the lived experience of these urbanizing sites, the diversity of people gathered there, and their multiple affiliations and organizations, coming together with intention. The promise and creative possibility of ambivalence emerges at the intersection of the religious and the lived urbanizing space.

Closing

¹⁴⁹ Purnima Dhavan *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 7.



Fig 7: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Credit line: A Gathering of Holy Men of Different Faiths, by Mir Kalan Khan (active ca. 1730–75). Attributed to Lucknow, India. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Friends of Islamic Art Gifts, 2009 (2009.318). www.metmuseum.org.

Why is the ambivalence of religious belonging important? Why should we seek to name commonalities, and attend to dialogue, as constitutive features of religious life, rather than as secondary and peripheral features, an aside that distracts from the march of existing singular narratives? One of the criticisms of the idea of “religion,” as articulated by a wide range of thinkers, is that the western origins of the term do not allow its application in other contexts, where a directly parallel idea may or may not exist. If we allow for a definition of “religion” that emerges out of expressions of commonality among religions—their own emic understandings of how they do constitute a category, a discourse of commonality—we have somewhere different to begin. We can look to articulations of commonality—where that which we name as “religion” comes together to name common ideas, processes, and practices, alongside difference—to discern what a border-crossing (that is, universalist) term might look like. The ambivalence of commonality and difference represents one way of imagining this domain.

What would it look like, to consider a theory of religion grounded in such an emic expression of commonality, of grounds for comparison within nearness and that which is

shared?¹⁵⁰ In the brief examples given above, we have the passionate desire for oneness, for merging, as expressed in the language and literature of longing, or *viraha*. This is an idiom that is found across religious traditions: intensely individual, and socially encoded and embedded. We can look to the shared “beyond” of *anahad śabad*, beyond binaries and expression, to re-enliven a now-stale exploration of “mysticism” across traditions. Another example we have is the language of power that is invoked, often utilizing diverse idioms, such as we see in the Dasam Granth. This power is not necessarily about the power of God per se—enabling us to avoid the need for God at the centre of a definition of religion—but the mobilization of a discourse of power, worldly and otherworldly, divine and courtly, to transform our social and lived world in relation to community and conscience. This allows us to revise Laine’s idea of “meta-religion”: we can perhaps find this “meta-religion” also in different locations of commonality, not owned by a single “religion” or political authority. This is a place where both commonality and difference reside, in ambivalence and in multiplicity, in contestation and in accommodation.

We have trouble naming commonality that does not entail sameness. The *bhagat bānī* are included in the Guru Granth Sahib because of perceived commonality (without sameness) between the ideas of the Sikh Gurus and those of the Bhagats or saints; this is lost if our interpretation focuses on the articulation of difference alone. Indeed, it is argued here that it is crucial in our understanding of religions that we accept commonality as an important constitutive feature of “religion” itself, without erasing differences of identity/definition. It is crucial that this be recovered and allowed to remain, as a form of ambivalence—that which is similar is not the same, and cannot be resolved; that which is single can be multiple, too. In the Janamsakhis, biographical/hagiographical texts about the first Sikh Guru that appeared approximately a

¹⁵⁰ I explored this idea in preliminary terms in Murphy “The *gurbilas* literature and the idea of ‘religion’.”

century after the death of Guru Nanak in 1539, Nanak is portrayed as saying "there is no Hindu, there is no Musalman"—there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim. This formulation can be seen, I would argue, as expressing the notion of “Hindu” discussed earlier—as a broad contrastive term: in this rendering, this phrase means “there is no Muslim, there is no non-Muslim.” Here, Nanak utilizes this term in critique of a *binary formulation*—*dubidhā*, or “duality,” as noted above--not to name an identity. We must recognize the ambivalence of religious identity, that allowed and can allow people to gather and share things in common, beyond the binaries that divide, as Guru Nanak suggests. We see this productive possibility portrayed in this eighteenth-century portrait of a range of nirgun poets, reminiscent of a larger genre that Murad Khan Mumtaz calls “Majlis paintings” that portray gatherings of Sufi saints and followers, but here are utilized for a portrait of diverse figures, across a wider religious spectrum (fig. 7).¹⁵¹ Indeed, it seems to me that it is in these commonalities, intrinsic to traditions and not imposed from outside as an idea of “religion,” that constitutes the enduring relevance of that idea (“religion”) across religious traditions. These traditions already feature emic definitions of commonality and sameness, that which is shared. Let us name this, and learn to leave our preoccupation with difference aside.

¹⁵¹ The following description is from the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: “The main figures can be identified (from right to left) as Ravidas, Sena, Namdev, Aughar, Kamal, and Kabir. Though trained at the Mughal court, the artist Mir Kalan Khan moved to Lucknow, where he became the leading court painter of Shuja’ al-Daula (r. 1754–75) and Asaf al-Daula (r. 1775–98), producing a substantial body of work in a style that was widely imitated.” Murad Khan Mumtaz, *Faces of God: Images of Devotion in Indo-Muslim Painting, 1500–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 292; see discussion of this image, 166.