



## Sikhism: a guide for the perplexed

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living their lives in negotiation with textual Islam. The chapters are user-friendly, assisting the student with a preamble to the research and ending with suggestions for further reading and a biographical note on the author. When many students are wrestling with the challenges of 'objectivity', analysis and knowledge collection under conformity to academic rigour and the new emphasis on reflexivity, subjectivity and methodology of the fieldworker, these case studies show the way to finding one's own voice in the field.

I found that the case studies gave me plenty of ammunition to consider the debates over the relational nature of fieldwork, but also the relationship between the vernacular and 'official narratives', if indeed, such a dichotomy exists. Field work has always allowed the student to go beyond 'official narratives' and observe how much of religion belongs to the vernacular. It is even argued that all religion belongs to the realm of the vernacular. This is a book that is very strong on the place of the fieldworker as part of an interactional network. It consciously places itself in this debate. However, it is equally strong on the relations between vernacular and official religion but has less to say explicitly on that theoretical matter. The introduction could have addressed it but perhaps the implicit is needed too in order to provide the student with something to tease out of the extraordinary narratives of the field.

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**Sikhism: a guide for the perplexed**, by Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 241 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4411-0231-7

*Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* is one of about ten introductions to Sikhism authored by Sikh Studies specialists in the present century. After Mandair's monumental *Religion and the Spectre of the West* (2009) and the renderings of Guru Granth Sahib that he translated with Christopher Shackle (Shackle and Mandair 2005), this *Guide* is a welcome distillation of his take on Sikhism (for which, like an increasing number of Sikhs, he would prefer to use the Punjabi word 'Sikhi'). He approaches his subject as a Sikh, with a disciplinary base in philosophy. It is his philosophical approach which particularly distinguishes the *Guide* from other recent introductions.

Mandair introduces his subject with a deft summary of how ‘religion’ and ‘Sikhism’, two western concepts, have come to stand for such indigenous Punjabi terms as *sikhi*, *gursikhi*, *gurmat* and *dharam*. In his *Guide*, Mandair aims to bypass the ‘religion-secular binary’ since, for Sikhs themselves, spirituality and politics have been indivisible. By allowing historical and philosophical approaches ‘to actively inform each other’ (8), Mandair can treat the themes of violence/non-violence, authority and Sikh thought as central to his narrative. Indeed, violence – martyrdom and militancy – is the subject of chapter two. He defends his chosen focus on ‘sovereignty’, conceived of in terms of loss of ego rather than with reference to ‘a transcendental source such as “God”’ (10). Usefully (13), he sets out his stall, mapping the book ahead and making his own perspective clear. The book consists of three parts: the evolution of the Sikh tradition; teaching and practices; and pluralism and its challenges.

Mandair’s insights are stimulating – one example (on 29–31) is his exposition of Guru Nanak’s spiritual discipline as a process comprising *satguru* (the non-human, immanent source of enlightenment), *satnam*, referring to ‘the practice of imbibing the true name within one’s consciousness’ (30) and *satsang*, the ‘community of those who travel together on the path towards a liberative experience’ (31). Each insight demands critical reflection, rather than being taken on board as a definitive interpretation. For example (33), Mandair’s exposition of Nanak’s famous words ‘there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim’ as meaning that Hindus’ and Muslims’ conceptualisations of God need to include each others’ is a thought-provoking challenge to longer-established interpretations.

Likewise, readers must form their own view of Mandair’s characterisation of the final stage of the creation of the Khalsa in 1699 as ‘immolation of the God-King’ and his statement (65) ‘if the meaning of violence itself is centred around ego-loss, self-sacrifice, we should ask whether Guru Nanak was in any way less “violent” than Guru Gobind Singh.’ Rather than being a ‘guide for the perplexed’, Mandair’s densely written book is food for thought for those already grounded in the subject and calls for stamina to translate it into teaching material for classroom or lecture theatre.

‘Sikh Ethics’ is an especially helpful chapter for religious education teachers, as authoritative treatments are scant. Mandair usefully distinguishes between the universal, poetic character of the Guru Granth Sahib and the prescriptions of Sikh Rahit Maryada, aimed as they are specifically at Sikhs. Then he proceeds to address contemporary questions of the sort that RE syllabuses pose, under the headings of ‘Good and Evil’, ‘Use of Force’, ‘Behaviour, value and culture’, ‘Gender: Equality and difference’, ‘Sexuality’, ‘Diet, drugs, alcohol and tobacco’, ‘Life and death’, ‘Suicide and euthanasia’, ‘Abortion’, ‘Contraception and reproductive technologies’, ‘Health and disease’, and ‘Genetic engineering, stem cell research and the environment’.

Also, of particular interest will be chapter seven ‘Sikhs and the Public Sphere’ with its excellent survey of ‘Sikhs in the diaspora’, which brings the reader right up to the shootings of Sikhs in Wisconsin in August 2012. Mandair discusses the representation of Sikhs in film and Sikh television channels and their online engagement, as well as outlining the development of academic Sikh studies, Sikh schools and Sikh music, the very different genres of *bhangra* and *kirtan*. Once again, a binary is collapsed, this time between scripture as text and its musical form.

Authoritative though the book’s tone is, readers need to be vigilant for occasional error: for example, the statistics on page 2 are misleadingly inaccurate. The 2001 Census (the last for which religion data has been released at the time of writing this review) showed 19.2 million Sikhs in India i.e. 1.9% (not ‘1.5%’) of India’s population. Also the number of Sikhs in Canada (at about 455,000) now exceeds the number in the UK, if the UK’s 2011 Census figure of 432, 429 is to be believed. Mandair apparently relies not on the census but on unofficial sources for his figure of ‘0.6 million’ UK Sikhs, although on page 190 he attributes the 0.6 million to ‘United Kingdom and Europe’.

Further proofreading would have ironed out minor errors (e.g. on 179, ‘contraception’ and ‘conception’ appear to have been confused) and inconsistencies in transliteration such as Jat/Jatt, paisa/paisse. On 132, the title of an important source document, the Puratan Janamsakhi, has been misspelled. There is a helpful glossary of Indic terms and an index, which could well have been expanded.

Mandair’s *Guide* is a must for all engaged in Sikh studies, or whose teaching includes *Sikhi*/sm, and I commend it to religious educationists more generally, as well as to those in the field of diaspora studies.

## References

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