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## Exorcizing the Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Sikhism and Postcolonial Thought

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ABSTRACT: This review discusses Arvind-Paul S. Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (hereafter *ESW*), published in 2009 by Columbia University Press.

The spectral and suffocating presence of the West looms large over the study of non-western cultures. Denied agency by the totalizing discourses of Orientalism, modernity and certain forms of post-structuralism, the non-Western 'Other' has been forced to converse in a conceptual language alien to its own cultural traditions. Whereas decolonization was supposed to liberate colonized societies from colonial tutelage, it in fact had the opposite effect; universalizing the particular cultural traditions of Europe through the post-colonial 'secular' state and its associated institutions including, crucially for our purposes here, the academy and educational system. The urgent task of 'provincializing Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000) necessitates first a 'decolonization of the mind' which entails exorcizing the ghosts of a distant colonial past which continue not only to dwell in a neo-colonial present characterized by a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1993) and the post-9/11 'return of religion' to international politics, but also to define the subjectivity of post-colonial peoples.

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Using the case study of Sikhism, Arvind-pal Singh Mandair claims that 'a certain repetition of the colonial event seems to haunt the very manner in which different portions of humanity have attempted, or indeed have been permitted to engage with what has come to be called "the political"' (RSW: 1). Taking his cue from Derrida's insight into the untranslatability of the Judeo-Christian concept of *religio*, Mandair convincingly shows how the spectre of colonialism, and the 'ontological matrix' upon which it—and western conceptions of liberal, secular modernity—are founded, continues to 'haunt' subjectivity in South Asia and the Diaspora today. Whereas others have focused on the 'nation' as the main trope through which 'Sikh' identity has been constructed and articulated (Axel 2001; Shani 2007), Mandair examines the concept of 'religion', which he argues may have been alien to the cultural traditions of South Asia but exists as if it had been an indigenous concept all along (RSW: 434).

As such, it may be seen as a 'dividing practice' which like the discourse of development permits a 'biopolitical' (Foucault 2008) bifurcation of humanity along (neo)colonial lines into 'civilized' and 'barbarian', 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', and 'fundamentalist' and 'secular'. The exclusion of the turbaned Sikh male body from the domain of the 'political' simultaneously permits the construction of a distinct Sikh 'religious' tradition and a 'secular' public sphere in India and the West. However, whereas the Western public sphere is 'self-referential', defined in terms of its own historically specific cultural traditions which encompass the Reformation, Westphalian settlement and Enlightenment, the Indian public sphere is—despite the best attempts of Gandhi and his followers to redefine secularism in indigenous terms as *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (let all religions flourish)—'derivative' of western discourses (see Chatterjee 1986) and therefore reproduces colonial domination of the postcolonial Imaginary.

How then, given the impossibility of translation, can the subaltern be made to speak or must, as Spivak famously suggested, the subaltern be permanently silenced by the colonizer's discourse? Colonial power, Edward Said persuasively argued, was supported and made possible by the development of Orientalist scholarship which had the effect not only of distorting but of constructing indigenous narratives about their own societies. In *Orientalism*, Said claimed that Orientalism is a discourse premised upon exteriority, on the fact that 'the Orientalist poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West' (1978: 21, emphasis mine). The purpose of Orientalist scholarship, 'indology' in the case of South Asia (Inden 1990), was to render the 'Orient' an object of colonial knowledge and Orientalism in turn deeply influenced the self-perception and identity formation of indigenous elites.

In Part I of the book, entitled 'Indian Religions and Western Thought', Mandair traces a genealogy of religion within the colonial discourse of indology and the neo-colonial discourses of the various reform movements during

the nineteenth century. Religion comes to be enunciated by native elites as the result of their emergence into the dominant symbolic order, the language of the colonizer. However, this language is not fixed, and subject to fluctuations. Mandair here distinguishes between two forms of Orientalism: the mainly sympathetic knowledge claims produced by scholars of Asian languages which were used to critique the excesses of European modernity, and the negative representations of Asia by modernizing colonial elites who sought to westernize Oriental societies through instruction in the English conceptual *meslium*. Tracing the reversal in the nature of indology during the first half of the nineteenth century, Mandair illustrates, through a painstaking examination of his often overlooked *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, how Hegel succeeds in establishing a firm theoretical framework for religion, thus enabling a classification of Oriental cultures on onto-theological grounds. Collectively, Hegelian-influenced indology succeeds in portraying India as an unchanging, idyllic and inherently religious civilization in distinction from the modern, rational West. As Tomoko Masuzawa has noted, when religion came to be identified, it 'came to be recognized as something that, in the opinions of many self-consciously modern Europeans, was in the process of disappearing from their midst'. The category of 'world religions' provided a way to 'preserve European universalism in the language of pluralism' (Masuzawa 2005: 19–20). Mandair credits Hegel with this transformation from ethnic/rational to universal/world religion while retaining a Euro-Christian hegemony. He subsequently shows how the category of 'world religion' was appropriated by neo-colonial elites in South Asia as the particular property of racially defined 'civilizations'.

Part II of the book looks at this process of 'religion-making' in the colonial and neo-colonial context as an effect of imperialism by providing a detailed genealogy of a Sikh 'theology' which can be traced to the commissioning of an official translation of the *Adi Granth* by the colonial administration in the Punjab. Although the consequent translation by the German Indologist Ernest Trunzup was widely criticized by the emerging Sikh reformist elites produced by the Anglo-vernacular schools and associated with the Singh Sabha movement, their response was to work within the narrative of 'world religion' and thus legitimize the colonial task of cultural translation (premised on the acceptance of the equivalence between the colonial idiom and indigenous concepts), in the process unwittingly becoming 'native informants' for the colonial authorities. In order for a 'Sikh theology' to emerge, indigenous concepts of time and language had to be de-ontologized by imposing structures of transcendence in the Sikh scriptures. Mandair reveals how this process of *transcendentalizing* pivotal concepts of the Sikh tradition such as *guru, sarda* and *nar* took place through a critical examination of successive commentaries by prominent Sikh reformers Kahn Singh Nabha, Bhai Vir Singh and Jodh Singh.

Central to this process was the privileging of a static, immutable Being which came to define the nature of God's unity and closely corresponded to

Trumpf's personal Protestant God which he found lacking in the Sikh tradition. The efforts by the Singh Sabha scholars to overcome this 'lack' did great violence to the ontology of the Sikh tradition and, as Harjot Oberoi (1994) has previously illustrated, was central to the construction of religious boundaries between Sikhs and Hindus in colonial North India. The problem for Sikh reformers was as follows: without providing ontological proof of God's existence they would be disqualified from joining the pantheon of 'world religions' and, consequently but somewhat paradoxically given its supposedly 'secular' nature, be excluded from modernity. However, the task of constructing a Sikh 'theology' was made difficult by the fact that the concept of religion itself is alien to the Sikh tradition and the broader Northern Indian culture from which it was derived. Consequently, Sikh reformers settled on the concept of the *gurmata* which they made to approximate the Christian concept of theology. The idea of a 'Sikh theology', widely held by orthodox believers around the world, can therefore be viewed as 'an ideological formation' that enabled the Singh Sabha reformers to disguise the work of translation as continuity rather than change within the Sikh tradition. As such, it may be seen as a kind of 'performative utterance': an enunciation which comes into being only after the imposition and acceptance of a certain regime of translation. In this case Trumpf's *Adi Granth* (RSW: 212). The discourse of Sikhism as 'world religion' thus has its origins in colonial indology from where it is appropriated and internalized by the Singh Sabha reformers and successive generations of 'Sikh' scholars before being ultimately rediscovered, revised and reinterpreted by post-war anthropologists and scholars of religion in western academic institutions, who in turn pass it on to the current generation of Sikhs as their own cultural heritage (Mandair 2010: 239). Undoubtedly the most influential western scholar of Sikhism was the late Hew McLeod whose classic study *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* is the subject of a critical examination in Chapter 4. Mandair points out the continuity between McLeod's revisionism and the very ideology of language that was adopted by the Singh Sabha reformers for whom *gurmata* corresponded to a 'Sikh theology'.

Does this mean therefore that the entire Sikh religio-political tradition can be considered a colonial construction, a by-product of the regime of ideological translation by colonial elites and their 'native informants'? Indeed, scholars such as Richard Fox (1985) and, more recently, Tony Ballantyne (2006) have come close to arguing that the very notion of a distinct 'Sikh' identity itself is an Orientalist construction. Fox follows Said (1978) in considering Orientalism a totalizing discourse, and has argued that contemporary Sikh identity is a re-appropriation of the colonial stereotypes, or *imagos*, of the Sikhs as a 'martial race' (Fox 1985). These seemingly 'post-colonial' accounts, however, reproduce the hegemony of the Orientalist discourse which they appear to be critiquing. Sikh identity appears to be a mere reflection of a colonial discourse which reduces the Orient to silence. As Peter van der Veer has pointed out, this is in itself an 'Orientalist fallacy that denies Indians

agency in constructing their society and simplifies the intricate interplay of Western and Indian discourses' (van der Veer 1994: 21). Colonial discourse did not reduce the Orient to silence but stimulated a search for an 'indigenous modernity': a modernity which could speak for and on behalf of the colonized. This took the form of first, religious reform movements which sought to construct religious boundaries (Oberoi 1994) and 'semitize' the various religio-political traditions of South Asia, and subsequently, a territorialized, secular nationalism which attempted to suppress the spiritual dimensions of South Asian life. However, to claim that there were no 'indigenous' elements to the religious reform movements or 'secular' nationalism is to reproduce the most pernicious conceit of colonial (and modernist) discourse: that the colonized were effectively 'people without history' (Wolf 1982) in need of (western) civilization. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, both colonial as well as 'indigenous' modernities arose as a result of a dialectical relationship between pre-existing religio-political traditions and the colonial state (Shani 2007: 17–40). Sikh, as well as Hindu and Buddhist, traditions pre-dated the colonial encounter and were modes of religious communication that were themselves in a constant process of dialogue and transformation. The fact that the Sikh tradition today has acquired homogeneity, fixity and, arguably, *identity* as a result of colonization and the rise of the 'Tat Khalsa' movement does not mean that it is merely a colonial construction, a mirror image of British Protestantism (Ballantyne 2006), which should in a (secular) post-colonial world be regarded as an anachronism and not a suitable cultural resource from which to construct a critique of western modernity and neo-imperialism.

Rather, as Mandair convincingly argues, the problem of representation emerges from the translation of 'indigenous' terms into a western conceptual vocabulary. The logic and articulation of Sikh identity itself is altered in the colonial period:

The enunciation of a Sikh identity does not begin in the colonial period... A Sikh identity, however anachronous it might have been, had already emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather, what changes in the colonial period is the way in which identity was conceived. It is the logic of identity that changes in the colonial period. In the precolonial period the articulation of a Sikh identity was never articulated in terms of a dualistic logic of either/or (e.g. A-A, B-B, but A-B). The logic of Sikh identity (instead of Hindu identity) prior to colonialism, and as far back as the sixteenth century, was articulated in terms of a complex or relational logic, according to which it would be perfectly valid to suggest A-B, the implication of which would be the existence of relatively fluid social and individual boundaries. (RSW: 236)

The failure of the Sikh insurgency following the storming of the Golden Temple complex by Indian troops in 1984, however, paradoxically opens up space for a radical re-articulation of the Sikh tradition and the place of the political within it. This new understanding of the political within Sikhism

is 'dependent on releasing the notion of *gurmata* from an ideology that had become both its defense mechanism and its jailor'. This requires 'not so much a rejection' but a 'ruthless re-examination' of the Sikh tradition and particularly the terms *gurmata* (teachings of the Sikh Gurus) and *sikh* (the process of learning that is necessary to becoming a Sikh). Mandair argues that this can only be done by engaging with the central texts of the Sikh tradition, such as the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and opening up the tradition from within as a 'ceaseless contestation' (RSW: 26). Such a 'ceaseless contestation' will undoubtedly not be welcomed by the guardians of the Sikh 'theology' in Amritsar who continue to define what constitutes the Sikh 'faith' from the confines of the Golden Temple complex almost a century after the Gurdwara Reform Movement wrested control of Sikh Temples from the colonial state.

The final part of the book—post-colonial exists—discusses the possibility of decolonizing post-secular theory and, in so doing, reconstituting postcolonial theory. I share the author's own theoretico-political position that the very enunciation of the term 'Sikh' not only does violence to the pre-colonial multiplicity of traditions and practices which are subsumed under the category of Sikh but also reproduces the originary violent act of colonialism every time the term is enunciated. I am similarly very much in agreement with the author on his belief, illustrated by the opening quotation from Naoki Sakai, that it is 'impossible to undo the consequences of the history of imperialism no matter how desperately one wishes that imperialisms had never been effectuated' (RSW: 1). Unlike Sakai, however, I believe a 'decolonization of the mind' to be indeed possible through a rediscovery of the universality implicit in particularized 'otherness' in its various ethnic and 'religious' guises. Mandair provides a glimpse into how this could be achieved by questioning whether the subject of South Asia, normally regarded as a particular, can be seen as actively co-constituting the universal. This would go some way to 'provincializing' Western claims to universality and, in so doing, de-spiritualizing Hegel by attempting to undo his legacy in the humanities and social sciences.

Whereas Mandair focus on the *sobha-guru*—the belief that the Gurmata exists as Word, that the Guru is Word, and that the Word is revealed by the Guru—as a concept which can be rehabilitated from the distorting effects of colonialism arguing in a systematic, sophisticated and convincing manner in Chapters 5 and 6 that as an 'empty signifier' it has the potential to disrupt the 'subjective technology' that perpetuates the effects of imperialism: native informancy, identity politics, the enunciation of culture as religion, and its installation within the discourse of humanism' (RSW: 37). I have argued elsewhere that more explicitly political concepts such as *pant*, *khanda* and *nir-pant* can also speak to new generations of globalized Sikhs as long as attempts are made to resist definition and thus inscription in a western conceptual lexicon. In particular, the *embodiment* of sovereignty through the institution of the *Khanda* at Atarandpur Sahib in 1699, despite the attendant Christianized mythology

which surrounds it, is of particular importance to attempts made to 'move beyond the West' in International Relations theory (Shani 2008). By contesting the hegemonic narratives of the Westphalian order of territorialized nation-states, the *Khanda Pant* offers an alternative conception of sovereignty which is more attuned to the needs of de-territorialized peoples living under conditions of *globality*: a conception of sovereignty, in short, which cannot escape the long shadow of territoriality cast on South Asia by partition but also the spectre of West which continues to haunt it.

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## Decolonizing the Study of Religion

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**ABSTRACT:** This review discusses Arvind-Pal S. Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (hereafter *RSW*), published in 2009 by Columbia University Press.

In the introduction to *Religion and the Specter of the West*, Arvind-Pal Mandair raises a fundamental question facing the postcolonial project: 'Despite the proliferation of postcolonial critiques, why is it that the humanities and social sciences continue to reconstitute the hegemony of theory as specifically Western...?' The various 'post'-movements appear to have kept theory on what is considered to be its home ground, namely, the West (*RSW*: 40-41). In the last chapter, he returns to this issue while reflecting on Dipesh Chakrabarty's remark that key European thinkers are treated both as historical figures and as our contemporaries, who continue to provide intellectual guidance, whereas Indian thinkers from the past are approached purely as data for historical research. Indeed, barring the occasional attempt to sell *dharma* as an 'indigenous term' for the study of religion, few theorists in the field would turn to Indian intellectual traditions as resources for contemporary theory formation. Yet, as Chakrabarty says, 'past Western thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way'. This brings Mandair to restating his question: 'What prevents non-Western traditions of thought and practice (*gurmat*, *bhakti*, etc.) from being used as resources for conceptual thinking/theory rather than being regarded as living relics?' (*RSW*: 382-84). This is a central issue, not least because it points to a paradox at the heart of

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Mandair's own project: in order to theorize and address the need for decolonizing the study of religion, he turns to Western postmodern philosophy.

Mandair's concern is the dominance of the conceptual framework that views India as a country of many different religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Islam...) and that, correspondingly, carves up Indian society into distinct communities of believers or practitioners (Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims...). This framework reflects the Western cultural experience of India. When one speaks of 'the religions of South Asia' and studies 'Hinduism', 'Jainism' or 'Sikhism' as instances of religion, one is invoking a conceptual apparatus that results from the way in which Europe has come to terms with India. No semantic equivalents exist for the term 'religion' and its cognates in the Indian languages (RSW: 8). Yet this way of talking has become common in India also, particularly in English, but also through the creation of neologisms in Indian languages.

Mandair examines how this translation of 'the concept of religion' has come about and how it gave rise to the dominant way of conceiving 'Sikhism' as a religion with its own theology and the Sikhs as a religious community with a distinct identity. One could recommend his book for this specific focus on Sikhism, for it certainly contributes intriguing analyses here. But this would mistake its theoretical ambitions, since Mandair intends to reveal general epistemic and political implications of the process of translation.

Throughout his book, Mandair makes the case that the work of translation that occurred during the encounter between India and the West was not as innocent or transparent as is still presumed. For several decades now, scholars have noted that there is something distinctly Western about the conceptual language of 'religion' and its creation of specific 'religions' in all cultures. Nevertheless, during the colonial era, educated classes all over the world adopted this way of talking. This has created a peculiar situation, Mandair points out: once Indians appropriated and internalized the term 'religion', as if it had always been part of their traditions, one could now call upon them to bear witness to the historical fact that 'Indian religions' have existed (RSW: 8). 'Religion' now exists as though it were an indigenous concept (RSW: 52).

One assumes that when Indians adopt this term and enunciate a religious identity ('I am a Hindu/Hinduism is my religion'), they refer to the same universal referent as Europeans and have mastered the meaning of the word 'religion' through normal acquisition of English. However, drawing on Lacan, Mandair suggests that this is not the case, but 'that the constitution of the Indian subject through the enunciation of "religion" during the colonial encounter does not reflect the operation of a culturally universal meaning, but the site of a trauma that marks the nature of Indian engagement with European conceptual' (RSW: 11). Speaking in the language of religion both represses and expresses the fact that one's experiential world resists the very concept of religion.

There is an important point here, which I would like to restate in simple terms: even though Indians adopted the term 'religion' and its cognates from Europeans, there is no certainty that they use such terms in the same way. They may be referring to a different kind of phenomenon in their experiential world, rather than mastering the meaning of the word 'religion' through normal acquisition of English, they mapped such English words onto terms from the Indian languages. Or they adopted them through the pedagogical mechanism of the Anglo-Vernacular schools that Mandair discusses: 'Through dictation the learner of English imitates, memorizes, and attempts to reproduce utterances not in order to say what he means, but to say what one is expected to say without meaning it' (RSW: 96-97). In that case, the way in which Indians have appropriated this terminology would reflect how different their experience is from that of the Europeans, rather than establishing any equivalence. Still, the European assumes that he is referring to the same object as the Indian, when he uses the term, and vice versa. There is no warrant for these mutual assumptions, as Mandair points out, since "religion" does not constitute the same "reality" for South Asians as it does for those who identify themselves with the formation called the West' (RSW: 11).

Importantly, this allows the author to challenge a new orthodoxy in the study of religion in India: the argument that the modern construction of religion in India was not the work of European Orientalists and colonial officials alone, but rather occurred through a process of dialogical exchange between colonizers and colonized. Mandair argues that we cannot just give 'dialogical status' to this interaction, for 'this particular understanding of colonial interaction depends on an implicit model of communication in which both parties are assumed to be capable of speaking and thinking freely with each other' (RSW: 78). As he suggests, the process of transformation that resulted from the interaction between Britons and Indians has not yet been adequately conceptualized (RSW: 81).

At a first level, the power relations of colonialism coerced Indians into adopting particular ways of talking and representing themselves. Mandair's account of Sikh reform shows this in a striking way. Originally, the British had characterized the Sikh traditions positively as a 'moralizing deism' opposed to the morally depraved pantheism they saw in Hinduism (RSW: 178-79). In response, the Orientalist scholar Ernest Trunpp gave a completely different 'sketch of the Religion of the Sikhs' (1877), which transformed it into a sub-branch of Hinduism, showing the same unhealthy mix of pantheism and atheism, without any room for a system of moral duties. The fact that Trunpp wrote this in the introductory essay to a translation of the *Adi Granth* commissioned by the colonial administration of Punjab gave great weight to his statement of 'Sikh theology'. It presented Sikh authors with a clearly defined task, namely 'to prove their commitment to the idea of God's existence, which meant a commitment to prove that their central texts could provide a suitable

concept of God, if they hoped to receive political recognition and patronage from Europeans as a valuable and useful religion' (RSW: 191).

This is what the Singh Sabhā reformists set out to do, when they adopted the conceptual language of 'religion'. They felt compelled to argue for a radical disjunction between their 'monotheistic and scriptural religion' and the pantheistic 'Hinduism'. When discussing Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus, for instance, they systematically avoided translating the word 'guru' as 'guru', instead translating it as the 'Prophet' to whom God spoke and revealed his Word (RSW: 210-11). In this way, Trunpp and other Orientalists had basically succeeded in making the vocabulary of Christian theology into the frame of reference for future discussions on Sikh traditions and texts. Within this framework, it had become obvious that 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism' were two distinct religions whose doctrinal relationship had to be decided upon.

Second, the compulsion was also conceptual: Europeans had already set the framework within which the 'dialogue' could take place. Here, Mandair reveals the difficulty of understanding the construction of religion as a process of interaction between colonial and native agency. Once the basic conceptual framework and mechanisms of 'translation' had been put in place, the contributions of the 'natives' could count only in so far as they fitted within this framework. Even where Sikh authors meant completely different things with 'religion', 'God' or 'divine' than the Orientalists, such differences were eradicated accordingly as the latter interpreted what the former said within the dominant conceptual framework, namely, that of the Western cultural experience.

Third, this inevitably gave a privileged status to the Western scholar of religion, who seems to understand the doctrinal issues of Indian religions much better than 'natives' ever can. Mandair gives the eye-opening example of the great scholar of Sikhism, W. H. McLeod (RSW: 240-309). Building on the work of Singh Sabhā authors, McLeod formulated the classical summary of 'Sikh theology'. Next, he raised the fundamental question that the Sikh reformists seemed to have missed, namely: 'In what way is the divine word so presented to the human understanding that it can be recognized, accepted, and followed?' (RSW: 261-62).

What happened here? Let me add a few of my own reflections. By constructing a theological system out of the many aphorisms, sayings and instructions in the Guru Granth Sahib and translating this into an English language infused with Christian theological vocabulary, one comes to the point where 'Sikh theology' appears to be a deficient variant of its Christian counterpart. Christianity states clearly that God has revealed himself in Christ and how human beings ought to recognize and follow his will. After the exercise of translation, Sikh theology appears to discuss the same elements ('divine word', 'God's will', 'Prophet'), but never succeeds in fully clarifying the links between these concepts. In contrast, McLeod is able to articulate clear and fundamental theological questions that appear to follow from the Sikh formulations.

Even though the Singh Sabhā authors originally made the statements about 'God's will' and 'word', they remain unable to raise the fundamental question as to how we can understand and follow God's will, from the Sikh perspective. It is as though they do not see such implications and their significance, while McLeod is able to do so and hence reveal the questions that need to be answered to lay the foundations of Sikhism.

How could this be the case? It is unlikely that Sikh reformists lacked the cognitive capacities necessary to make these basic inferences. I would like to propose another possibility: they used words like 'God', 'the divine word', and 'Prophet' in different ways, which prevent one from making the inferences and connecting these concepts in the way that McLeod does. Even though the Sikh reformists aimed to make Sikhism look like Christianity, in order to distinguish it from 'Hindu pantheism', they did not understand the theological terms and utterances in the same way. They mapped such terms onto Punjabi and other Indian languages. Thus, they 'distorted' the meaning of the English terminology in such a way that the inferences that seem obvious to McLeod are not at all obvious to the original producers of Sikh theology. This way of formulating the problem, I think, generates further questions provoked by Mandair's arguments on the problem of translation. In order to understand Sikh thinkers and the way they discuss 'religion', 'God', 'Prophet', we should trace the systematicity in their 'distortive' use of such terms.

One of the strengths of Mandair's work lies in its exploration of the European background that shaped the dominant conceptions of religion in India. What was at stake in the nineteenth-century theological and philosophical debates in Europe and which roles did India and its 'Oriental religions' play? Unlike most of the postcolonial analyses, Mandair goes beyond the British sources to answer such questions and stresses the centrality of German Indology in that century. Interestingly, he shows how some of the chief concerns in the study of Indian religion had emerged from a controversy on pantheism, the so-called *Pantheismusstreit*, which divided the German intellectual world in the late eighteenth century.

The conceptions of India and its 'Oriental religions' had been pre-determined by different positions in this controversy. While the participants differed in their assessment, the impetus behind the debate was a common concern, namely the individual thinkers' relationship to the Christian foundations of the European conceptual framework and identity' (RSW: 126). This same concern also shaped the philosophy of religion developed by the most influential thinker of the period: Hegel. In a close reading of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Mandair shows that Hegel often had Schelling's philosophy in mind when he discussed Hindu religion and its conception of God. In other words, the difference between the Indian traditions and those of Europe was reduced to an internal difference within the European framework: the opposition between Christian theism and the pantheism that had emerged in the work of Spinoza.

At the same time, Mandair attributes a somewhat bizarre role to what he calls Hegel's 'epistemograph' (RSW: 158-60). It is supposed to return implicitly in all kinds of writings and determine the human sciences; it is presented as the precondition for the emergence of the world religions discourse. In his introduction, he does explain that 'Hegel's role is better perceived as a spectral presence rather than a literal agent. Hegel's ideological influence functions like a cipher', but this does not do much to clarify the kind of role attributed to Hegel (RSW: 17). There is no doubt that Hegel's philosophy of religion is structured around a set of conceptual schemes that would return in later Indological writings and in the world religions discourse. However, this is not because of his 'spectral presence', but because his philosophy reflects upon deep problems that lay at the heart of European culture. It is the structure of these deep problems that one has to identify. Mandair goes some way in relating the pantheism controversy to the concerns about the Christian identity of Europe and the tendencies critical towards Christianity in Enlightenment thought and German Romanticism. Yet, instead of pursuing the deeper structures of this problem in the European intellectual tradition, he gives a mysterious omniscience to Hegel's 'epistemograph'.

Throughout this work, Mandair draws upon postmodern philosophy to explore his insights. At times, however, this postmodern turn gives rise to imprecise and even impenetrable statements. To give just one example, while discussing the fact that European languages continue to be privileged in theory formation, he raises the following question: 'what would it mean for thinking to become a thinking-between, in which concepts are allowed to compete before they are accepted as universal?' (RSW: 42). We cannot leave a clue what this would mean, because it does not make sense to talk of competition between concepts, which then leads to the acceptance of some concepts as universal. In the growth of human knowledge, it is not concepts that compete, but rather theories or even larger sets of theories that belong to specific research programmes. The concept of evolution by natural selection never competed with, say, the concept of divine creation. There is competition between two theories or research traditions. Similarly, it does not make sense to have, say, the concept of religion compete with that of *dharma*. What we need are several competing theories about the *phenomenon* of religion (not just the concept). If today's theories of religion reflect only the Western cultural experience, then we should reflect on the experience of Asian cultures to develop alternative theories that will challenge the dominant ones.

In this context, Mandair's turn to postmodern philosophy is understandable: the postmodern interrogation of dominant conceptions of religion, nation and language has helped loosen their grip on our thinking. The philosophy of Jacques Derrida or Martin Heidegger appears to possess emancipatory potential for non-Western thinkers here, since it breaks the spell of a conceptual framework that has prevented them from making sense of their experiential world. Still, as Mandair suggests, postmodernism remains a self-critical

shift: internal to Western thought (RSW: 386). Therefore, it is unlikely that this theoretical framework will allow us to decolonize the study of religion. It never approached the intellectual traditions of non-Western cultures as potential resources for our contemporary thinking about humanity; it never elucidated the experience of cultures where the Western intellectual tradition was installed as the dominant framework during colonialism. How then could it ever provide the conceptual apparatus necessary to access the traditions of the non-Western world for alternative theory formation in the social sciences and humanities? In other words: How does a Derrida fare any better in this regard than a Durkheim? Why is a Heidegger superior to a Hegel here?

Mandair clearly deplores the current conditions in the study of religion, where non-Western cultures are denied access to theory itself. Yet, it is to Western postmodern theory that he turns to conceptualize the related issues and potential ways out. While I think this 'paradox' indicates a weakness in his work, it also shows its urgency and significance: we do not currently possess the kind of theories required to access non-Western intellectual traditions as genuine alternatives and to grasp what has happened to these traditions during colonialism and its project of 'translation'. As long as we do not succeed in developing such theories, these traditions of thought will remain living relics to us.