

Guru Nanak and the 'Sants': A Reappraisal

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Abstract

Was Guru Nanak a 'Sant'? What does the term 'Sant' mean in this context? This paper surveys the state of academic responses to these questions. We make the case that both the concept of a 'Sant tradition' and the membership of Guru Nanak in that tradition are quite problematic. In doing so, we argue that previous attempts to frame disagreements on these issues in terms of 'historical scholarship' versus 'faith' are flawed, and sometimes ahistorical themselves. Instead, alternative answers emerge from within standard scholarly inquiry, depending on varying interpretations and combinations of fragmentary historical facts. We show how this process of interpretation and selection occurs particularly in W.H. McLeod's writings on the subject. We also discuss the nature of the sources used by scholars, and the biases that may thereby be introduced.

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I Introduction

Was Guru Nanak a ‘Sant’? What does the term ‘Sant’ mean in this context? This paper surveys the state of academic responses to these questions, and provides cautionary lessons, if not definitive answers. The questions and answers to them are important at several levels. The first question is obviously important to Sikhs and to scholars of Sikh history and doctrine. The second question is of wider significance, since the idea of a historical ‘Sant tradition’ has become widely accepted among scholars of Indian history and religion. The answers to these questions are therefore of direct interest. However, perhaps the greatest significance lies in understanding the process whereby the conventional wisdom in answering these questions has been achieved. This understanding has broad implications for evaluating future scholarship in the area of Indian religious history. It is also important in the context of the politics of religion in India, and we will acknowledge this link more explicitly than is commonly done by scholars working on these topics.

We begin in Section II by describing different answers to the two central questions, and how they have been arrived at. We comment on previous assessments of debate on differences in scholarly positions, and define our own approach. Briefly, we note that debate on these questions has sometimes been inappropriately framed as one of ‘belief vs. scholarship’. On the other hand, we argue that there are important differences in conclusions among scholars using similar methodologies. These differences are typically the result of interpretation, extrapolation from the scholar’s thinking on related issues, or even differences in expertise on various facets of the problem.

In Section III, we discuss the answer to the question “What is a ‘Sant’?”, focusing on analyzing the positions of the foremost scholars in this area, explicating their differences, and offering our own assessment. Briefly, we argue that the term ‘Sant’ is much more problematic than is acknowledged by some scholars working in this area. While it provides a useful categorization that sharpens some strands of the much broader Bhakti tradition of ‘medieval’ India, the use of the term can create confusion and a false certainty. In this context, it is important to comprehend that the ‘Sant tradition’ is a relatively modern construction, and *not* an understanding that was contemporary to the period of Guru Nanak.

The analysis of Section III naturally informs our discussion in Section IV of the question, “Was Guru Nanak a ‘Sant’?”, and the problems of defining the historical ‘Sant tradition’ make one cautious in answering the question affirmatively. Further doubts are raised when one compares the details of Guru Nanak’s teachings with those of the ‘Sant tradition’. There are clearly key similarities, but also important differences. Some scholars take the view that Guru Nanak was a very special ‘Sant’, and this might be considered the conventional wisdom. One might also decide that the category does not quite fit, as some scholars have argued. These scholars are typically Sikhs, leading to the suggestion by some that the disagreement is one of ‘belief vs. scholarship’, a view we challenge in Section II. Section V therefore concludes the paper by returning to the broader issues of methodology, and of the politics of religion.

II Framing the Debate

The recognition of a ‘medieval Sant tradition’ is widely accepted among scholars of Indian history, religion and literature. The origins of this construction go back to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Here is how Schomer (1987a) summarizes the evolution of the concept:

The idea that there is a coherent body of Sant teachings (*sant mat*) and that individual Sants belong to a common spiritual line of descent (*sant parampara*) distinct from that of sectarian Vaishnavas did not become fully crystallized until the mid-nineteenth century. Originating in certain late esoteric Sant circles more self-conscious about belonging to a tradition than were the earlier Sants, it has however gained general acceptance among the members of Sant panths (communities of shared belief and practice)...The pioneering works in this regard were Pitamber D. Barthwal’s *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry* (1936) and Parashuram Chaturvedi’s historical study published in 1952, *Uttari Bharat ki sant-parampara*....The more recent work of Charlotte Vaudeville and W.H. McLeod also reflects this point of view, as does the present volume. (pp. 3-4)

It may be noted, however, that the earliest quoted published reference to the term dates back to 1911, rather than the mid-nineteenth century. According to Juergensmeyer (1987), Tulsi Sahib uses the term in his *Ghat Ramayana* (1911), and the notion that he originated the term is implied by Chaturvedi (1952, p. 783). Furthermore, Juergensmeyer explicitly credits a specific group, the Radhasoamis, with ‘crystallizing’ and broadcasting the concept in the nineteenth century.

We will return to the origins and meaning of the term ‘Sant tradition’ in the next section. Here we outline the basic scholarly positions. As Schomer notes, McLeod is a proponent of the existence of a ‘Sant tradition’. Moreover, as the foremost Western scholar of Sikhism, he was the chief popularizer¹ of the position that Guru Nanak can be considered a ‘Sant’, and therefore his work merits particular attention. In his original work on the subject (McLeod, 1968), he states:

The pattern evolved by Guru Nanak is a reworking of the Sant synthesis, one which does not depart from Sant sources as far as its fundamental components are concerned. (p. 161)

We will discuss McLeod's position in more detail in the next two sections. Here, however, we note how he restates his case almost thirty years later (McLeod, 1997):

Must we conclude that Nanak was a Sant?

For devout Sikhs the answer must be a firm no. For them Nanak received direct enlightenment from Akal Purakh and, as the direct mediator of the divine message of liberation, there can be no possibility of antecedents....

Others, however, do not share that commitment and are required to give a different answer....If it is a strictly neutral question of antecedents and influences, the answer must be in the affirmative. Because he represents the essential concerns of the Sants, it follows that Guru Nanak must be located within the Sant tradition. (pp. 101-102)

In the period between his two appraisals, McLeod's views had, of course, been challenged by many 'devout Sikhs'. His response is to frame any disagreement with him as one of 'belief vs. scholarship'. The believers do not use scholarly methodology, and therefore their position is not supported by 'neutral' facts. Here we seek to challenge McLeod's constructed opposition. Certainly many 'devout Sikhs', while being diametrically opposed to McLeod's analysis and conclusions, would agree with him that scholarship and belief are incompatible. But that position is as problematical as McLeod's. McLeod seems to imply that a scholar cannot be devout; the devout explicitly assert that scholarly enquiry is antithetical to devotion. For both sides, a 'believing scholar' seems to be an oxymoron, at least for a particular range of inquiry. This puts a Sikh who wants to examine such issues in an intolerable position², where he or she is either in danger of being dismissed as a scholar, or as a believer.

Grewal (1998) has written a whole book on precisely the problem illustrated by the example of the question, "Was Guru Nanak a 'Sant'?" The title, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, suggests that it is not a simple question of fact versus belief, as McLeod would have it. Yet on the point of Guru Nanak as a 'Sant', Grewal seems to draw similar lines. He provides a detailed comparison of McLeod's analysis with that of Daljeet Singh, who argues against the view that Guru Nanak was a 'Sant', based on his reading of the ideas and implicit or explicit guides for social practice found in Guru Nanak's writings. Grewal concludes as follows:

McLeod ... does not attach much importance to the verses which are generally quoted in support of the revelatory status of his utterances. Daljeet Singh underlines the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's ideology; McLeod attaches importance to antecedents for his ideas in the context of his times. (p. 146)

McLeod virtually excludes God from his view of the universe. Daljeet Singh places God at the centre of the universe....McLeod approaches religion as a historian. Daljeet Singh approaches history as a theologian. Paradoxically, their contrast forbids a choice in favour of one to the exclusion of the other because their positions are complementary. (p. 147)

This is subtler than McLeod's own position, because the contrast drawn is between the historian and the theologian, rather than scholar and believer. Yet we will argue in this paper that Grewal does not go far enough in his analysis. 'The *nirguna sampradaya* ['Sant' tradition] of McLeod's conception' (Grewal, 1998, p. 147) is a construct that does not necessarily match with that of other scholars, who approach these issues with methodologies and training no different than McLeod's.

We shall make this argument precisely by examining the statements and analysis of various scholars, including those who are quoted by McLeod as sources. In our view, this examination is overdue. The reasons for this may be adduced: the infancy of this field of study, the counterproductive effect of shrill attacks on McLeod's genuine scholarship, and McLeod's strong reputation as a Western pioneer and expert on the study of Sikhs. We do not question this reputation, but scholarly inquiry is precisely meant to transcend reliance on what one person says -- one of the dangers that arises in such inquiry is when assertions are repeated uncritically.

Finally, our analysis is not restricted to McLeod's work, since we critically examine what several other Western scholars have written. This aspect has broader significance, since these scholars typically rely on McLeod for situating Guru Nanak as a 'Sant', but provide their own original analyses and interpretations of the 'Sant tradition'. The differences in these interpretations are illuminating in terms of understanding the process of scholarly inquiry. Ultimately, we shall argue, they lead one to question the category itself.

Before we turn to our main line of argument, it is useful to relate our approach to the broader academic writing on the "insider/outsider" debate in the study of religion. McCutcheon (1999) provides a comprehensive survey and collection of analyses of this debate. He identifies four theoretical approaches to the general problem of understanding and analyzing human behavior, the problem of getting inside another person's skin. The first approach says that this can and should be done, through tools that "allow researchers to enter into the experiences and meanings of another, to access the private moments of human perception, thereby enabling one to bridge the gulf between subject and object...Such empathy allows the researcher to develop...a deep understanding of the actors' intentions and meanings." (McCutcheon, p. 3)

A second approach judges the "desires of the other to be opaque to the researcher" (*ibid.* p. 4). The methodological emphasis then shifts away from non-critical, empathetic descriptions of behavior to explaining and predicting human behavior using tools similar to the natural sciences. Naturalism and reductionism are two labels associated with this approach, and it is clearly the closest description of the tack taken by scholars such as McLeod. In this view, the understanding of

insiders is limited by incomplete information, unlike the understanding of the outsider scholar.

A third option attempts to adopt an intermediate position between the first two. McCutcheon terms this “methodological agnosticism”. While both the empathetic and the explanatory observer adopt different privileged positions of supposed certainty, the agnostic avoids “arbitrating and evaluating” in favor of “describing, cataloguing, and comparing” various claims in a “neutral” manner.

The final approach rejects the possibility of neutrality, and focuses on the reflexivity of scholarship. In this view, all scholarship has an autobiographical element. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) famously elucidates this case in the context of European scholarship on Islam.³ More generally, even “objective” scholars bring their personalities and biases to their work.

Where does the methodological approach of this paper fit in with the above taxonomy? McLeod, and to some extent Grewal, may be viewed as empiricists who strongly support a methodology of naturalism. They are very firmly in the tradition of David Hume, in his *The Natural History of Religion* (1755). Many of the other scholars we quote below fit more or less into this approach, though there are varying shades of the other three views in several of the scholars’ writings. McLeod is categorical in dismissing insider views (those of ‘believers’) as less than scholarly, though some might simply categorize them as taking a different methodological approach. The latter appears to be Grewal’s perspective. Our view in this paper is substantially different.

We attempt to make the case that, accepting the empirical approach to the greatest extent possible, the analysis of McLeod and others falls short on its own terms of reference. Furthermore, scholars who uncritically quote McLeod compound this methodological shortcoming. Hence, to a large extent we seek to sidestep the broader insider/outsider debate entirely, by adopting the ‘objective outsider’ position as much as possible. In our view, doing so provides the clearest and most useful perspective on the status of the answers to the central questions posed here.

At the same time, taking an empirical or naturalistic perspective does not necessarily imply total rejection of other approaches. In fact, we are more conscious than most of the writers on this topic of the problem of reflexivity, particularly with respect to some of the key sources used. The criticism of Sikh writers as nonscholarly believers, while the constructs of writers such as Barthwal and Chaturvedi are accepted as relatively objective, displays a striking inconsistency. The Orientalist problem is more general than just one of Westerners writing on the East!

III What is a ‘Sant’?

We answer the question that heads this section from several perspectives, looking first at the basic construct of the historical ‘Sant tradition’ by Indian and Western scholars, then its relationship to the broader currents of medieval Bhakti and the concurrent Sufi tradition. We then examine the transformations in meaning attached to the term ‘Sant’, and finally tie together and appraise these different perspectives.

The ‘Sant tradition’ as construct

Mark Juergensmeyer (1987) provides a summary of the ‘central Sant motifs’, based on the work of P. D. Barthwal (1936). Barthwal is acknowledged as a pioneer in attempting to identify “the major themes of Kabir, Nanak, Dadu and others of the ‘*nirguna* school’”, whose effort “has not been superseded”. Briefly, these themes are:

1. The Absolute as *Nirguna*
2. The Interior Path of Spirituality
3. The Necessity of a Guru
4. The Fellowship of *Satsang*

Much of Juergensmeyer’s elucidation of these themes draws on the modern Radhasoami example, though he also discusses Kabir and Guru Nanak. Certainly, these four broad themes can be found in the teachings of Guru Nanak, and we return to this concordance later in the paper.

Juergensmeyer, while acknowledging a medieval ‘Sant tradition’, is cautious on two counts: the definitiveness of the idea, and the Radhasoami claim that, “Radhasoami Mat and Sant Mat are the same thing”. Juergensmeyer lists the Radhasoami genealogy of Sants, and notes the similarities and differences with Barthwal’s own list. His assessment is revealing:

The differences between the lists indicate the imprecision of the term. Are such revered figures as Sur Das, Tulsi Das, and Ravi Das to be regarded as Sants or not? It depends upon one’s starting point and one’s standard. *If Kabir, Nanak and Dadu set the standard*, and that standard is devotion to a formless divinity (*nirguna*) rather than to one with definable attributes (*saguna*), Ravi Das is near their number, and Tulsi Das and Sur Das are progressively less so. *This suggests, perhaps, that there is a Sant -- or rather nirguna -- dimension to many medieval Hindi religious poets, rather than a specific, separate lineage of nirguna Sants.* (pp. 336-337, emphases added).

In the end, though, Juergensmeyer accepts the construct, albeit with caveats on the antecedents and analytical sharpness of the construct:

Yet the idea there are Sants, a Sant tradition, and specifically Sant teachings (*sant mat*) persists. *It is obviously to the benefit of movements such as the Radhasoami which rely upon connections to the Sant tradition for their legitimacy that such a tradition in fact existed. Indeed, there is some evidence that the term sant mat originated in movements that immediately preceded the origins of Radhasoami in the mid-nineteenth century,*

*and that the concept was crystallized and broadcast by the Radhasoami movement itself. But Radhasoami certainly did not create Kabir, Nanak, Dadu or Ravi Das....there are similarities among their teachings. The attempts to collect together the Sant writings is itself an important facet of the tradition, going back as far as the sacred Sant anthologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries -- the *Granth Sahib* of the Sikhs and the *Sarvangi* of the Dadu-panthis -- and continuing to the present century with the attempts by Radhasoamis and scholars of literature to present syntheses of Sant ideas....There is something there. Call it *sant mat*, the Sant tradition, the *nirguna* school -- a common *albeit tenuous and sometimes fuzzy thread exists* and ties the major figures together. (p. 337, emphases added.)*

Note that Juergensmeyer accepts Guru Nanak as a standard-setter of this fuzzy ‘Sant tradition’, and this, along with the inclusion of the verses of other Sants, makes the Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs a sacred Sant anthology. We shall further examine these assumptions below, and in Section IV.

Whereas Juergensmeyer accepts a fuzzy Sant tradition (with Guru Nanak firmly in it), McLeod (1968) is much more certain of the clarity of the construct:

The Sant tradition was essentially a synthesis of the three principal dissenting movements, a compound of elements drawn mainly from Vaisnava bhakti and the hatha-yoga of the Nath yogis, with a marginal contribution from Sufism. (p. 152)

McLeod is also categorical in tracing a historical evolution of the tradition:

[B]hakti elements provided the principal contribution to the Sant synthesis, particularly during the earlier stages of its development. Traces of Nath influence are by no means absent during these earlier stages, but nor are they prominent and in some cases they may represent subsequent additions. It is not until the time of Kabir that Nath concepts assume a significant role. In the thought of Kabir such concepts are both prominent and integral, and *it is accordingly at this point that we encounter the developed synthesis.* (pp. 152-153, emphasis added).

McLeod thus clearly asserts that Kabir is a seminal figure in the ‘Sant tradition’. However, he continues with his historical picture in a slightly different manner:

The first of the great Sants was Namdev (A.D. 1270-1350) who lived in Maharashtra and whose name is closely linked with the Varkari sect of Pandharpur. The Varkari sect was well within the bhakti tradition and its worship centred on the famous idol of Vitthal which is located in Pandharpur. Elements of traditional Vaisnava bhakti are evident in Namdev’s work, but his primary emphases are clearly in accord with Sant concepts. His influence extended into northern India as a result of his Hindi works and possibly as a result also of an extended visit to the Panjab. (pp. 153-154).

Here we may note that, in this construction, McLeod has already distinguished the two Sant traditions that are acknowledged by scholars:

The North India tradition should not be confused with the Varkari sect of Pandharpur in Maharashtra, the exponents of which have been commonly referred to as sants. It seems highly probable, however, that Namdev provides a direct link between the two Sant traditions. (p. 151, footnote 2.)

McLeod next places Raidas [or Ravidas], as the ‘second of the important Sants’, who chronologically follows Kabir, but whose ‘work corresponds more closely to that of Namdev’, before discussing Kabir in detail:

With Kabir the Sant tradition moves into a more complicated phase. (p. 155)

The basis of Kabir's belief was not, as has been commonly supposed, Vaisnava bhakti or Sufism, but tantric yoga. (p. 156)

The works of Kabir represent the highly personal record of an individual experience, but they nevertheless place him well within the framework of Sant beliefs. (p. 157)

Almost thirty years later, McLeod (1997) summarizes his initial positions with similar certainty, taking the construct as well-established, "though little known among Western scholars" (p. 89):

The Sant tradition of northern India can be viewed both as a sadhan, or method of spiritual liberation, and as a form of social protest. Both elements are inextricably linked. Most of the tradition's leading exponents...[reject] the relevance of caste status in matters pertaining to the soul's deliverance from the bondage of transmigration. (p. 91)

This [devotional] discipline was emphatically and exclusively interior, at least as preached by the more significant of the Sants. (p. 91)

In contrast to McLeod's certainty, Vaudeville, the best-known Western scholar of Kabir, and the source for some of McLeod's own analysis, is more cautious. In writing on one of the Maharashtrian 'Sants', (Vaudeville, 1996) she begins her piece by saying:

Sant mat (the teachings of the sants) and *sant parampara* (the tradition of the sants) are modern concepts. *The term sant actually has no precise meaning.* Parashuram Chaturvedi defines a sant as one who observes *satya* (truth) or *suddha astiva* (a pure way of being). The characteristic quality of a sant is often said to be *ekarasa*, the state of being immersed in one emotion, i.e. *bhakti*....But such a definition only refers to a moral ideal -- not to membership in any particular group....Historically, however, the term sant has come to refer to the early non-sectarian poet-saints of northern India and Maharashtra,... (p. 241, emphasis added)

In writing more broadly on the 'Sant Mat' (Vaudeville, 1987), she is equally circumspect:

Mostly Hindu, some of them Muslim-born, the Sants cannot be easily classified from a metaphysical or religious point of view. (p. 21)

The Sants are non-sectarian and do not hold a body of doctrine in common. (p. 22)

Having admitted these qualifications, however, Vaudeville does accept the category:

Yet ... they have certain characteristics in common which mark them as distinct from 'learned' poets on the one hand and sectarian religious poets on the other. (p. 21)

Vaudeville then applies the category particularly in situating Kabir, her subject of expertise, and the perceived leader of the northern Sants. What emerges from her view of the 'Sant tradition' is again the fuzziness of the category:

The monistic view of salvation as a total merging of the finite soul into the One Being, however, does not represent the prevailing view of the Sant poets as a whole. Kabir himself, the most *nirguni* of them all, is far from being consistent in this matter. (p. 27)

With the exception of Kabir himself, who sometimes refers to the ultimate State or Reality as 'the Void' (*sunya*), a view inherited from Tantric Buddhism, the prevailing attitude of the Sants is monotheistic. (p. 28)

In the final analysis, though, Vaudeville's view of the Sant tradition's building blocks is close to that of McLeod:

The Sant *sadhana* or the Sant ideal of sanctity therefore may be viewed as a subtle blending of two main traditions of Hindu mysticism, apparently antagonistic to each other: Vaishnava bhakti and an esoteric Tantric tradition, whose most popular representatives are Gorakhnath and the Nath Yogis, often referred to by Kabir and his followers. (p. 36)

Thus Vaudeville accepts the 'Sant tradition' construct, while recognizing its limitations more than does McLeod. This cautious acceptance seems to be the summary position of other scholars:

Considering the vast popularity of the Sant movement, the number of important figures which it has produced, and the lives of countless devotees (both Hindu and Muslim) whom it affected, one must marvel that so little can be said with assurance about the origin, early development and geographical provenance of the Sants. (Lawrence, 1987, p. 359)

Sharing almost as few conventions with each other as with the adherents of the orthodoxies they sometimes mocked, the North Indian Sants appear more as a diverse collection of spiritual personalities than as a distinct religious tradition. Such a tradition was, nevertheless, recognized by the Sants themselves (Gold, 1987, p. 305) ...they often make specific references to other Sants. (*ibid.*, p. 307)

The Sant tradition of the North presents a more fragmented picture. Instead of a single panth there are many, each with its separate history going back to a particular founding figure....What binds the North Indian Sants together is neither an historical connection nor an institutional focus, but the similarity in their teachings. That they themselves perceived this commonality is clear from the numerous references in their poetry to both "the Sants" as a spiritual fellowship and to specific historical Sants. (Schomer, 1987a, p. 4)

An important idea in these statements is that the commonality of the Sants was recognized by them: certainly there are specific references in Kabir to Namdev, in Dhanna to Kabir, Raidas and Namdev, and so on. However, the references to 'the Sants' as a spiritual fellowship seem to be a more problematic interpretation. We shall return to these issues in discussing the various meanings of 'sant', and in the next section, where we specifically consider Guru Nanak's position.

Sants, Bhakts, and Sufis

Some of the difficulties with the construct of the 'Sant tradition' emerge when one explores its connections to the wider Bhakti movement and the parallel Islamic Sufi tradition. Again, scholars differ on these matters, though there is broad agreement in some respects, particularly the broad connections to Vaishnava and Nath traditions. There is greater difference on the influence of Sufism.

To examine the connections among concepts, we must first describe Bhakti and Sufism. We begin with Bhakti. McLeod (1968) gives the following succinct characterization:

For bhakti the essential religious response was love, and in Vaisnava bhakti this love was directed to one of the *avatars* of Visnu. (p. 151)

Grewal (1969) offers the following additional observations:

Though the *bhakti* cult cannot be regarded as a break from older Vaishnavism, the introduction of some new elements and certain differences of emphases distinguish the new cult from the older system of belief and practice...However, the *bhakti* movement cannot be said to have come into its own before we come upon a development in which the path of *bhakti* is emphasized to the exclusion of the path of *jnana* (knowledge) or the path of *karma* (action). (p. 120)

But whereas his [Ramanuja’s] *bhakti* was directed towards Vishnu as Narayana, in the later *bhakti* cult it is the human incarnation of Vishnu as Krishna or Rama which becomes the object of *bhakti*. (p. 122)

Important differences are glossed over by using the general label of *bhakti* on the basis of superficial similarities. A more sophisticated, and also more valid, way of keeping the label has been to distinguish between the *saguna* and *nirguna* ‘schools’ of *bhakti*. Dealing with the Vaishnav *bhakti* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one is invariably confronted by the first ‘school’. But to identify the *nirguna* school of Vaishnava *bhakti* is not easy.

At any rate, all those who did not belong to the *saguna* school were not necessarily the exponents of Vaishnav *bhakti*. (pp. 125-126)

Rawlinson (1987) provides a general conceptual framework for Bhakti along two dimensions, image and path. He offers the following structural scheme (adapted from Rawlinson, 1987, p. 54):

	LOVE Stress on relationship with God	MEDITATION Stress on God as a state of being
UNSTRUCTURED PATHS	ECSTATIC God as Beloved World from God’s view: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grace • spontaneity 	NIRGUNA God as <i>lila</i> God and the soul are identical World from God’s view: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effortlessness • purposelessness
STRUCTURED PATHS	NUMINOUS Obedience to the Lord Everything is God’s doing God as King Relationship always separate; distance, awe, fear World from man’s view <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effort • purpose 	SAGUNA Disciplined practice The Universe as God’s attribute God as Ordainer The soul is a mode of the Lord World from man’s view <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>samucchaya</i> • <i>prapatti</i>

The idea of '*nirguna bhakti*' becomes an important one, albeit a recent innovation, for mapping the Sant tradition, and distinguishing it from Vaishnava Bhakti:

The concept of '*nirguna bhakti*' as a distinct devotional mode contrasting with '*saguna bhakti*', and of the Sants constituting a separate devotional tradition, is relatively new. (Schomer, 1987a, p. 3)

In Indian tradition, *sant mat* has been equated with '*nirguna bhakti*'... This notion of the absolute as *nirguna* coincides with the Upanishadic concept of the Brahman-Atman and the *advaita* (monistic) interpretation of the Vedantic tradition.... The northern Sants, led by Kabir, mostly seem to adopt this stance... (Vaudeville, 1987, p. 26)

However, the concept of '*nirguna bhakti*' is itself problematic:

Actually, if we admit that there can be no real bhakti... without some distinction between the Lord (Bhagvan) and the devotee (bhakta), the very notion of '*nirguna bhakti*' seems to be a contradiction in terms. (Vaudeville, 1987, p. 27)

For *nirguna bhakti* is an Irish bull... It is a concoction of monistic scholars, artificially imposed upon Sant traditions. Indeed, one might even go farther and say that the idea of a *nirguna* deity itself was imposed by monistic Hindu philosophers upon a *saguna bhakti* tradition that managed, somehow, to absorb it. (O'Flaherty, 1987, p. 46)

McLeod avoids some of the semantic difficulty raised by Vaudeville by dispensing with the term 'bhakti' in describing the 'northern Sant tradition':

The term [Sant] is not used as a group or sectarian appellation until much later [than Kabir]. It is to some extent an unsuitable designation, for it involves the risk of confusion with the Varakari sect. The alternative appellation, *Nirguna Sampradaya*, or *Nirguna* tradition, avoids the risk of confusion in this respect, but the term *nirguna* ('attributeless') is not a wholly accurate description of the Sants' understanding of the nature of God, except insofar as they explicitly rejected its antithesis, the *saguna* concept of divine *avatars*. (McLeod, 1968, p. 245).

In fact, the suitability of the *nirguna* appellation for 'Sants' is perhaps even less than McLeod suggests:

According to Indian literary tradition, the Sants are supposed to be adepts of the *nirguna* aspect and the Vaishnavas adepts of the *saguna* aspect of the supreme Being. In practice, however, it is difficult to draw a hard and fast line between the two groups, at least up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, which saw the development of the two main modern Krishnaite sects in northern India... (Vaudeville, 1987, p. 37)

...the *nirguna* philosophy is expounded at great length from time to time in the Puranas, ... they are manipulated by Brahmans to inculcate people with ideas that Brahmans think people should have. The Sants, on the other hand, *choose* to mix *nirguna* and *saguna*; theirs is a free choice, as they have no canon or priesthood. (O'Flaherty, 1987, p. 49-50)

The relevance of this [model of the bhakti tradition] to the Sant tradition is two-fold. First, *this tradition partakes of all four dimensions of bhakti*; in other words, it is a rich tradition. Second, the four traditions that preceded and, from the historical point of view, helped to form the Sant tradition -- namely, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Tantra and Sufism -- are also rich traditions. (Rawlinson, p. 58, emphasis added)

In fact, Rawlinson, besides challenging McLeod's simple characterization of the 'Sant tradition', also questions the neat picture of evolution and synthesis painted by McLeod (and sometimes by Vaudeville):

Looked at purely from the point of view of its religious dimensions, the Sant tradition is not so different from the other four traditions we have mentioned. The real difference is that these four traditions have developed a considerable variety of peripheral trappings which the Sants assiduously reject. It is therefore misleading to see the Sants as syncretists -- i.e. as deliberately fusing diverse traditions -- or as being unconsciously influenced by those traditions and producing a distinctive combination by a sort of religious genius analogous to artistic genius. The traditions that preceded the Sants were their raw materials, but the guiding force that enabled them to unite the disparate terminologies and teachings was an understanding of the dimensions of bhakti based on their personal experience. (Rawlinson, p. 58)

Finally, Vaudeville (1987) draws out important ethical commonalities between the Sants and Vaishnavas:

If we give priority to Kabir and the northern Sants...we must admit that the hard core of Sant teaching is not assimilable by true Vaishnavas, even by the most liberal among them. This is true on the doctrinal or metaphysical plane, but on that plane only. In their religious sensibility, as well as in their ethical views, Sants and Vaishnava remain very close to each other....They share a pessimistic view of mundane life and of family ties...They cordially despise and fear women...(p. 38)

Our conclusion is that the picture of the 'Sant tradition' is much more complex than some scholars would wish. It is not a fairly homogeneous, well-defined category that fits neatly into a more diverse, broader, Bhakti tradition. The reality is closer to Juergensmeyer's depiction of a fuzzy and tenuous common thread, described at the beginning of this section. A further aspect of complexity emerges when one examines Sufism in relation to the Sants.

Grewal (1969) provides some background on the Sufis in the time of Guru Nanak:

However, the most important forms of Muslim religious life in the Punjab, as elsewhere by this time, were embodied in the beliefs and practices of the *Sufis*, the mystics of Islam. (p. 71)

Already before the mid-sixteenth century the influence of the *Sufis* had penetrated nearly all strata of Indo-Muslim society. (p. 72)

But the idea of union with God as the mystic's goal, with the associated ideas of *fana* (annihilation to self) and *baqa* (subsistence in God), was never discarded by any *Sufi* worth the name. (p. 84)

The Sufis believed that theirs were the true ethics of Islam. They inculcated a whole-hearted devotion to God alone. Devotion or piety in women was as much acceptable as in men. (p. 103)

McLeod is categorical in asserting that Sufism had a marginal impact on the Sants.

Sufi influence may also have contributed to the development of Sant doctrine, though if this is indeed the case its results are much harder to detect in the terminology of the

Sants than are features which derive from Vaishnava and Nath sources. (McLeod, 1997, p. 93)

However, this is not the only scholarly view:

McLeod has recently adopted an extreme position...he minimizes the influence of Sufi thought on the emergent Sants...But the accumulation of such affinities [of thought], especially in a time period markedly different from the period preceding it, cannot be lightly dismissed. Indeed, the conceptual overlap between Sant and Sufi poetry is so pervasive that it is difficult to agree with McLeod that “Muslim beliefs, both Sufi and orthodox, had at most a marginal effect.” Vaudeville, by contrast, has noted that “Sufi preachings had already spread all over Northern India in Kabir’s... time, and ...Sufi mysticism had impregnated the religious sensibility of the elite as well as the whole composite culture of the time.” (Lawrence, 1987, pp. 367-368)

While McLeod goes to great lengths to show that concepts of unity, interiority and mystical ascent from the Nath tradition combined with the practice of loving devotion in the Vaishnava community to produce the Sant synthesis of interior devotion to a formless, immanent, non-incarnated God, i.e., *nirguna* bhakti, it is evident that both elements were already present in, and widely known through, the Sufi movement of northern India. (Lawrence, p. 368)

In the context of this cross-fertilization, and the issue of language, Grewal (1969) notes:

(p. 102) According to Shaikh Muhammad Ghaus, the Jogis related the truths of gnosis only in a different ‘language’ from that of the *Sufis*.

Lawrence (1987) also notes that language is not a definite indicator of antecedents (see Section IV for more detail). He goes on to describe linguistic parallels between Sants and Sufis, and then notes:

(p. 369) But the major thematic equivalence between Sants and Sufis concerns the love relationship. It is fundamental to both groups...the theme of love as intense suffering is not common to all religious traditions of the subcontinent: it is absent from the Nath tradition, and cannot be traced in Vaishnava bhakti poetry prior to the Sant movement.

Vaudeville (1987) agrees with Lawrence on this important point:

If love symbolism, especially on the viraha [separation] theme finds its roots in Hindu tradition, more precisely in the tradition of folk songs, the place given by Kabir and his followers to the viraha them, with its suggestion of martyrdom, is in keeping with the great Sufi tradition, very much alive in India as the time of Kabir. (p. 31)

The resemblance is even more striking in the description of the torments of the soul yearning for union with god. There is hardly any doubt that in this Kabir was influenced by Indo-Persian poetry. (p. 31, footnote 12)

These scholars therefore suggest once more that the ‘Sant tradition’ is a more complicated and fuzzier beast than McLeod, in particular, is willing to admit. Further complications arise when one examines the usages of the term ‘Sant’, including its capitalization as a descriptor of a particular tradition. We turn to this next.

Altered meanings

We have earlier given Vaudeville's comment on the meaning of '*sant*', including Chaturvedi's definition. Schomer (1987a) provides a similar perspective:

The difficulty begins with the term *sant* itself, which has several overlapping usages. Derived from Sanskrit, its root meaning is...a person who has achieved a state of spiritual enlightenment or mystical self-realization; by extension it is also used to refer to all those who sincerely seek enlightenment. ... '*sant*' has also taken on the more general ethical meaning of the 'good person' whose life is a spiritual and moral exemplar, and is therefore found attached to a wide variety of gurus, 'holy men' and other religious teachers. (pp. 2-3)

McLeod (1987) recognizes the importance and commonness of this usage of '*sant*':

For the [Sikh] Gurus, the term '*sant*' thus designates any seeker after truth and salvation who pursues his objective by means of a particular range of activities....In the works of the Gurus, '*sikh*' and '*sant*' are normally interchangeable, and the meaning which they express is also covered by several other terms [*gurmukh*, *sadh*, *sadhu*, *bhagat*, *sevak*, *gursikh*]. (p. 255)

However, McLeod muddies the waters by simultaneously asserting that:

When he [Guru Nanak] uses it (and he does so with considerable frequency he employs it in a sense corresponding precisely with the usage and understanding of the wider *parampara*.

Bhat re santa jana ki renu
Santa sabha guru paiai mukti padarathu dhenu

Be as the dust beneath the feet of Sants, brother
It is in an assembly of Sants that one finds the Guru; like the *kamadhenu*, [a gathering of Sants] confers the blessing of salvation

The Sant is thus identified as the pious devotee, he who in consort with others of like mind and commitment gathers in the *satsang* to sing the praises of God and seek the guidance of the eternal Guru within. (p. 254)

Here McLeod repeatedly capitalizes '*sant*' where it is completely unjustified. Indeed, McLeod has himself agreed with all scholars that the idea of a 'Sant tradition' is a much later construct. Furthermore, the implication of an organized group meeting implied in McLeod's presentation is completely out of place with the general sense of such verses. McLeod is thus subtly using language to support his general line of reasoning on the Sant tradition. McLeod repeats this unfortunate ploy with other verses in the same article.

A similar problem mars McLeod's discussion of the use of the term '*bhagat*' in the *Adi Granth*⁴:

Guru Arjan...chose it as the term to be used when designating works which were not by one of the Gurus. These were hymns attributed to people *whom most would probably call Sants*, notably Kabir, Namdev, and Ravidas. (p. 255, emphasis added)

This is a remarkable statement, because it is completely ahistorical: a nineteenth century construct is being applied to a sixteenth century context. While other

scholars of the 'Sants' avoid these pitfalls, it is worthwhile to note that members of the 'Sant tradition' do refer to others perceived to be in the same tradition. Guru Nanak, however, does not fall into that category, and we shall return to this issue in Section IV.

McLeod's main concern in the article quoted above is really to describe the modern usage of the term 'Sant' in Punjab. Here he provides some insight, though Juergensmeyer's (1987) analysis of the Radhasoami usage of the term is probably more relevant here than McLeod seems to acknowledge. It is the nineteenth century Radhasoami revival (or perhaps creation) of the '*sant mat*' that lies behind the modern Punjabi usage, which is somewhere between the 'special good person' (capitalized) and the general seeker after truth (uncapitalized), but closer to the former, although in a somewhat debased form. McLeod's linguistic effort therefore fails to convince. This is important to realize, because several other scholars seem to have relied on McLeod's analysis on points such as this.

Appraisal

Our appraisal of the 'Sant tradition' is a cautious one at this juncture. The chief *scholarly* (as opposed to political -- an issue we postpone till the paper's conclusion) motivation for defining such a tradition is greater clarity of understanding. Bhakti is much too broad a category, in this view, and a sharper subset of devotional figures can be identified. The problem, of course, is that sharpness requires more criteria, and that makes it harder for the grouping to hold together as a conceptual construct. If we recall Barthwal's four main themes, as summarized by Juergensmeyer (absolute as *nirguna*, interior path, necessity of guru and fellowship of *satsang*), only the first stands out as a truly distinguishing feature from the broader Bhakti tradition, with the others playing supporting roles. However, the 'Sant tradition' is not just *nirguna* bhakti, as we have discussed. It seems to draw on Nath and Sufi traditions (the latter more than McLeod is willing to acknowledge, but his position on this does appear 'extreme') more than does the Bhakti tradition in general. However, it does not seem to be a conscious or homogeneous synthesis, as McLeod wishes to claim. All the other scholars on this subject, while accepting the construct, acknowledge in varying degrees its fuzziness. Like the Bhakti tradition itself, the modern appellation 'Sant tradition' applied to religious currents of medieval northern India, remains imprecise, and somewhat problematic (as perhaps all such appellations must).

A key issue to bear in mind is that the construct is one that emerges from the nineteenth century or later. 'Sants' do refer to other 'Sants' in their work, but they do not go beyond general respect and recognition of those with similar expressions of spirituality. The medieval 'Sants' do not create organized groupings, and the attempt to read this into their writings by devices such as capitalization of '*sant*' in translations is illogical at best. The characterization that the Sikh *Adi Granth* is also self-consciously a 'Sant' collection suffers from the same problem of taking the nineteenth century construct and imposing it on a very

different sixteenth century context. Hence the case that the ‘Sant tradition’ is anything more than a modern academic construct remains doubtful.

IV Was Guru Nanak a ‘Sant’?

Some of the problems with the construct of the ‘Sant tradition’ become apparent when one critically examines a commonly accepted idea, that Guru Nanak was a ‘Sant’. While Barthwal and Chaturvedi, no doubt building on Radhasoami and pre-Radhasoami characterizations, confidently put Guru Nanak in this category, it is McLeod who has made the case most forcefully. The result is that most non-Sikh scholars take the case as proven, and the categorization for granted. Sikh scholars who have questioned this categorization are essentially dismissed by McLeod as nonscholarly. The position of Guru Nanak in the ‘Sant tradition’ indeed becomes so firm in this view that he helps set the standard for judging the inclusion of others (Juergensmeyer, *op cit.*).

McLeod’s position is characteristically clear and forthright:

The system developed by Guru Nanak is essentially a reworking of the Sant pattern, a reinterpretation which compounded experience and profound insight with a quality of coherence and a power of effective expression. (McLeod, 1968, p. 151)

At the same time, McLeod is ungrudging in recognizing the distinctiveness of Guru Nanak’s teachings at another level:

Plainly there is much that is profoundly original in the hymns we find recorded under his [Guru Nanak’s] distinctive symbol in the Adi Granth. There is in them an integrated and coherent system no other Sant has produced; there is a clarity no other Sant has equalled; and there is a beauty no other Sant has matched.

This kind of qualification leads one to reexamine from a scholarly perspective the basic premise of Guru Nanak’s membership in the ‘Sant’ category. We do so by examining theology, language and ethics in turn.

Theology

The theological case for Guru Nanak as a ‘Sant’ is built on the four themes already mentioned in Section III. McLeod (1968) provides a detailed analysis of the teachings of Guru Nanak. Here we draw out some of the ‘Sant’ influences or commonalities that McLeod identifies. On the nature of God:

As in the case of Kabir monistic language does indeed occur, but the structure of monistic thought can provide no place for Guru Nanak’s concept of God. (p. 165)

As in the works of Kabir this emphasis upon the unity of God emerges in the names which Guru Nanak uses. (p. 166)

For Guru Nanak, as for Namdev, Kabir, Raidas, and other Sants, there is certainly a revelation of God, partial no doubt but commensurate with the understanding and experience of man and accordingly sufficient for salvation. (pp. 173-174)

Wherever I look there I see Thy light...They are familiar words, both in the works of Guru Nanak and in those of the Sants who preceded him. (p. 174)

...Guru Nanak, in common with other Sants, goes further. The Nirankar who is immanent in all creation is specifically immanent in one particular part of creation...God who dwells in all creation has His particular abode within the human heart. (pp. 174-175)

On the nature of humans:

The word *man* [pronounced 'mun' as in 'mundane'] as used by Guru Nanak has no satisfactory English translation. It is usually rendered 'mind', but the translation is unsatisfactory as the English word lacks the breadth of meaning and association which *man* possesses in Sant literature and Sikh scripture. (p. 178)

It comes much closer to the Yoga notion of the *manas* as 'the inner sense'. Even here, however, the marked divergence from Yoga as a developed and integrated philosophy makes comparison risky, although there seems to be no doubt that in this, as in so much else, the Sant concept has roots in Nath doctrine. (p. 179)

In laying this stress upon the role of *man* Guru Nanak stands within a well-developed tradition. Dr. Vaudeville has described the importance which the *man* held for the Siddhs and the Naths. (p. 180)

Guru Nanak's understanding of the *man* is essentially that of Kabir. (p. 181)

In unregenerate man the dominant impulse is that of haumai, a concept which is to be found in the works of Kabir and those of other Sants, but which receives appreciably more emphasis in those of Guru Nanak. (p. 182)

On divine self-expression:

It is when we proceed from this point to inquire precisely how God communicates with man that we encounter the specific contribution of Guru Nanak, a contribution which offers the most significant example of his positive originality. This is not to imply that his work is wholly original, for this can never be the case...There may have been earlier Sants who had arrived at similar conclusions concerning the medium of divine communication. In many there is silence at this point...(p. 189)

For Guru Nanak, as for Kabir, the Word of the *Satguru* is the true revelation...(p. 190)

Sabad is one of the terms which evidently descended to Guru Nanak through Sant channels from Nath sources. (p. 191)

The difference between the thought of Guru Nanak and that of Kabir emerges not so much in their understanding of the ultimate experience of union, not so much in their conceptions of the condition of *sahaj*, as in their differing notions of how that condition is to be attained. (pp. 193-194)

It is within the Sant tradition, however, that we encounter a major modification of the traditional doctrine [of the *guru*]...In Guru Nanak's case we must first note the characteristic emphasis upon the absolute necessity of the *Guru*. (p. 197)

On practice:

Guru Nanak...too lived in an environment which set great store by birth, scriptures, ceremonies, and ascetic practices, and like Kabir and other Sants he inevitably denounced them as entirely alien to true religion. (p. 208)

The rejection of such notions [of caste and impurity of birth] was common among the Sants and was particularly strong in the case of Kabir. (p. 210)

Truth consists, in this respect [of disciplined worldliness], of living in the world yet unaffected by the attractions of the world. It is a common emphasis among the Sants and Guru Nanak uses the conventional figure of the lotus to illustrate it. (p. 211)

It is at this point [loving devotion] that Guru Nanak shares with the Sants a particular debt to Vaisnava bhakti. (p. 213)

The above extracts represent a fairly complete picture of the connections that McLeod draws between the teachings of Guru Nanak and those of the Sants. Taken together, they may be conclusive for many. However, it is when one turns to Guru Nanak's original contributions that doubt can set in. Note that we are not framing the argument in terms of divine revelation. Originality can presumably occur without appealing to that explanation (though McLeod does not seem to believe in total originality at all -- see his quote above, from p. 189).

As we have noted, McLeod pinpoints the communication between God and humans as Guru Nanak's most significantly original contribution. Accordingly,

Guru Nanak's concepts of the *Sabad*, the *Nam*, the *Guru*, and the *Hukam* carry us beyond anything that the works of the earlier Sants offer in any explicit form. (p. 161)

...we find in Guru Nanak's doctrine of the divine Order (*Hukam*) and in his emphasis upon divine grace elements which carry him beyond Kabir. (p. 190)

...it is in Guru Nanak's use of this word [*Hukam*] that his development beyond the thought of Kabir and other *bhagats* is most obvious...(p. 191)

The fundamental importance of the *Hukam* in the thought of Guru Nanak is emphasized by its exposition at the very beginning of *Japji*. (p. 200)

McLeod goes on to discuss the concept of *Hukam* in Guru Nanak's teachings. As is indicated by the quotes above, this is the point at which appeals to 'Sant' antecedents fail him -- there is no reference to any parallels with Sants in this discussion. McLeod does consider Islamic influence:

This regularity and this consistency distinguish it from the Islamic concept. In Islam the divine Will, if not actually capricious is at least 'unpledged', whereas the *Hukam* of Guru Nanak's usage is definitely pledged and dependable. (p. 201)

Here McLeod is using a definition provided to him by 'Canon Kenneth Cragg', who is otherwise unidentified. Hence it might seem that he is too quick to dismiss the Islamic parallel. However, his opinion is shared by Lawrence (1987), who has a deeper knowledge of Islam:

...the one term that claims conspicuous attention because of its centrality in Guru Nanak's thought, namely, *hukam*, can only be fitted into the Sufi technical lexicon by imputing a far-fetched and uncharacteristic emphasis to the Perso-Arabic word *hukm*, meaning 'regulation, belief, wisdom'. (p. 367)

This fails, however, to clear up the mystery. Lawrence's definition of the Perso-Arabic word as 'regulation' does not have the right connotation, rather different from McLeod's own interpretation of the divine Will in Islam, and there can be no

question that the word comes from Arabic. Other scholars, such as Grewal (1969), seem to be silent on this point, though Grewal discusses the meaning of the concept in Guru Nanak's teachings at some length. Of course, Grewal does emphasize that "The concept of *Hukam* is basic to the thought of Guru Nanak." (p. 245) Thus, we seem to have a central concept in Guru Nanak's doctrine that does not appear to have Sant roots, that is etymologically a borrowing from Islam, but with a distinct meaning. In other words, Guru Nanak is being quite original!

In general tone, also, Guru Nanak seems to depart from Kabir and the other 'Sants'. It is well known that Kabir is quite scornful of much around him in many of his verses -- his tone and his language are rough (Vaudeville, 1987, Hess, 1987b). His worldview seems quite different from that of Guru Nanak. The selection from his verses in the Sikh scriptures is somewhat distinct in nature from his overall work, with shades of devotion being more prominent in the Sikh collection (Hess, 1987a).

The idea of a divine Order, the laying out of a method to understand this Order (McLeod, 1968, p. 194), and a generally 'positive' emphasis therefore serve to distinguish Guru Nanak from Kabir and the other 'Sants'. Rather than Guru Nanak being a standard setter for the 'Sant tradition', he begins to emerge more as an outlier, and perhaps even as not a real member of the grouping at all. This view is positively reinforced when one examines Guru Nanak's ethics. Before doing so, we briefly examine the issue of use of language, where commonality with the 'Sants' is used to support the argument that Guru Nanak was a 'Sant'.

Language

Grewal (1969) offers a summary of the view that the language used by Guru Nanak provides a clear connection with the 'Sant tradition':

This verbal correspondence [between Guru Nanak and Kabir] may best be explained in terms of the *sant-bhasha*, a specialized terminology developed by the *sants* of northern India, which was accessible to both Kabir and Guru Nanak. (p. 127)

It turns out, however, that Grewal is relying on McLeod in this statement. So we are back to a detailed look at McLeod's (1968) statements:

These beliefs the Sants expressed not in the traditional Sanskrit, but in a language which was closely related to that of the common people to whom they addressed their teachings. Within the tradition and amongst other *sadhus* there evolved a language which, with minor modifications, was used by Sants all over northern India. This language has been called *Sadhukkari*. Its basis was Khari Boli, the dialect spoken around Delhi, and to this were added elements drawn from Old Rajasthani, Apabhramsa, Panjabi, and Persian. (p. 153)

Here McLeod is referencing an older work of Vaudeville, *Kabir Granthavali (Doha)*. Vaudeville herself, however, is much less ready to pin down the language of Kabir or the Sants. At the same time, she is much more explicit in tracing the term *Sadhukkari*, which also turns out to be one person's modern construct.

Here is how Vaudeville (1993) herself views the language issue in the context of Kabir:

Besides Old Avadhi, the ubiquitous Nath-panthis ...made use of various dialects: especially the Dingal (old Rajasthani) and the Pingal impregnated with Braj-Bhasha. It seems that, in Kabir's time, Dingal was dominant, as the language of the Buddhist Siddhas. On the other hand, before Kabir, many Sufis had made use of the old Hindi dialect, mixed with Panjabi and Arabo-Persian vocabulary. It is certain that Kabir used more than one of these languages, according to the audience and to his own fancy. (p. 113, emphasis added)

Kabir's own language and the languages in which his 'Sayings' were originally composed have long been a matter of controversy. According to Ahmed Shah...Kabir composed his poetry in the language spoken in his own area, i.e., in Benares and its neighbourhood...For Grierson, the basic language of the Bijak is Old Avadhi. (p. 118)

Following R.C. Shukla, most Indian scholars have stressed the heterogeneous character of Kabir's language, which seems to borrow freely from a variety of dialects. Shukla, however, draws the conclusion that Kabir's nondescript idiom is essentially based on the idiom used before him by the Nath-panthi Yogis and other itinerant preachers, and he proposed to call it *sadhukkari bhasha*, lit. Sadhu's jargon. (p. 119)

Several points emerge from these observations by Vaudeville: the non-exclusivity of the language to so-called 'Sants', its heterogeneity and regional variation, and the fact that this *pot pourri* of languages and dialects is simply '*sadhukkari*' is, like the 'Sant tradition' itself, a modern academic construct on which there are multiple points of view. The simple certainty that McLeod attempts to convey is thus undermined.

Vaudeville goes on to provide still more varied opinions on Kabir's language from other scholars. She also notes, based on P. Chaturvedi's analysis, that recorded versions of the same composition differ in different collections. She goes on to analyze linguistic differences in Kabir's *pads*, *dohas* and *sakhis*. Here she notes:

As to the Rajasthani and Panjabi forms in the *sakhis*, Barthwal, like Shukla, is of the opinion that they reflect "the language of renunciates" discourse (*sadhukkari bhasha*), prevalent at the time. Actually the language of Kabir's *sakhis* resembles the language of the Gorakh-banis...(p. 121)

Though agreeing with Shukla and Barthwal about the influence of the Nath-panthi language and style on the language of Kabir's *sakhis*, Chaturvedi remarks that many such *sakhis* appear directly influenced by folk-songs and ballads in *dohas*. (p. 122)

Thus, contrary to McLeod's argument, it is not clear that similarity of language helps pins down Guru Nanak as part of the 'Sant tradition'. Indeed, in addition to the Sufi usage of such language, and its heterogeneity, its very prevalence leads one to question that line of reasoning:

It may not be too much to presume that the *sant-bani*, like the *bhakti* cult, was in the air in the Punjab of our period. (Grewal, 1969, p. 128)

...the spiritual evolution of the latter [the Sants] was almost entirely shaped within a predominantly Hindu-oriented, Hindi speaking environment, no matter how drastic the changes to which that environment was subject in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And the religious/poetical language of the Sants reflects their environment. (Lawrence, 1987, pp. 368-369)

During the course of the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, old Hindi or Khari Boli had become to be recognized as a lingua franca fit for the propagation of popular religious teaching -- mostly unorthodox and anti-Brahmanical: one may say that Hindi was the language of the Indian 'Reformation'. (Vaudeville, 1993, pp. 123-124)

We conclude by noting how the Sikh *Adi Granth* fits into this scheme of language. The conclusion that emerges is that further doubt is cast on language as a tool to locate Guru Nanak in the 'Sant tradition'. There are, of course, similarities, but these are consistent with the wider currency of the language that has already been discussed:

...the language used by the Sant poets, whose works are preserved in the [*Adi*] *Granth*...are composed in a very similar language. (Vaudeville, 1993, p. 122)

The language of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, as taught here, is of very mixed character, since it draws upon a variety of local languages and dialects, as well as incorporating a good many archaic forms and words. In these respects, it is entirely typical of the written languages in which the religious literatures of medieval India are mostly recorded....the language has been referred to here as 'the sacred language of the Sikhs', abbreviated to SLS. (Shackle, 1983, Preface, p. ii)

Although the language of the other saint-poets, such as Kabir and Namdev, whose compositions were included by Guru Arjan in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, is generally very similar in character to that employed by the Sikh Gurus, no special attempt has been made to include a full description of the distinctive local grammatical forms encountered in their verses. (Shackle, 1983, Preface, p. ii)

In particular, Shackle is McLeod's (1997, p. 174) source on the language of the Sikh scriptures, and he is rather obscure in his only comments on the language. If one abandons the notion that the Sikh scriptures are necessarily 'Sant' writings, then one avoids the circular reasoning and puzzlement illustrated in turn in these quotes:

The attempts to collect together the Sant writings is itself an important facet of the tradition, going back as far as the sacred Sant anthologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries -- the *Granth Sahib* of the Sikhs... (Juergensmeyer, 1987, p. 337)

It is a striking fact that most medieval texts inspired by non-sectarian Bhagvatism or Vaishnava bhakti do not seem to distinguish between the terms *bhakta* (*bhagat*), *sant* and *Vaisnava*. In the *Guru Granth* of the Sikhs, the Sant poets are referred to as *bhagats*...(Vaudeville, 1987, p. 37)

Guru Nanak certainly did not refer to any other 'Sants', and the idea that the *Adi Granth* was a self-consciously 'Sant' collection seems unsupported.⁵

Ethics

Some of the differences in Guru Nanak's position on practical matters follow from his different, more positive worldview. We have quoted Vaudeville's

(1987) summary of the 'Sant' and Vaishnava positions: "They share a pessimistic view of mundane life and of family ties...They cordially despise and fear women...(p. 38)". This is quite different from Guru Nanak's views on women, as McLeod (1997) admits:

Guru Nanak's words carry us well beyond the conventional view of his time, or, for that matter, the present time as well. Without a woman, man is nothing, so why should she be called weak and why should she ever be regarded as unclean? (p. 242)

Similarly, Guru Nanak, while recognizing the snares of family attachments, "approves of the life of a householder who can cultivate detachment and devotion." (Grewal, 1969) While much of Guru Nanak's ethical teaching is incidental to his central religious message of how humans can connect with God, his work is filled with examples of positive ethical guidance. While McLeod tends to downplay these examples, Grewal (1969) is more explicit:

Naturally Guru Nanak lays a good deal of stress upon the individual's actions. He exhorts men to adopt good speech...he emphasizes the need of helping oneself...[but not] for one's mundane activity...The thief, the gambler, and the slanderer shall inevitably receive punishment; so shall be punished those who indulge in illicit sexual intercourse...one must earn one's livelihood honestly. One should cultivate true humility and be of service to others. (pp. 184-185)

Thus Guru Nanak's teachings do seem to imply a clear, stern moral code, far beyond, and different in temper than, anything one can perhaps find in the 'Sant tradition'. Guru Nanak is not a social critic in the modern sense, and Sikh ideals may involve considerable extrapolation in some cases, but as Grewal (1969) concludes:

Guru Nanak's compositions may not 'prove' a radical departure from the existing [social] order, but a radical departure would be justified by his compositions. (p. 196)

We turn to an overall appraisal of the different strands of the argument.

Appraisal

Was Guru Nanak a 'Sant'? If one is unwilling to accept the 'Sant tradition' as a historically valid category, then of course the answer is 'no'. However, despite all its problems, the 'Sant tradition' may have a role as a relatively modern academic construct, applied to a complex historical situation. Then the question of Guru Nanak's membership remains a valid one. McLeod takes the most forceful position in answering 'yes', though many other scholars accept the categorization without question. Yet McLeod's own most-detailed analysis leads him to hedge: Guru Nanak was a unique member of the category, both because of his teachings and because of what grew out of them. The distinctiveness of Guru Nanak leads McLeod to overreach somewhat, when he tries to downplay originality by appealing to unknown, unrecorded Sant precursors as antecedents of the original facets of Guru Nanak's theological conception. It also leads him to oversimplify the issue of language, and to downplay social dimensions that emerge from Guru Nanak's writing.

Previous critics of McLeod have erred grievously by unnecessarily ascribing improper motives to him. That is not only wrong, but it has obscured the argument that we have developed here: that the placing of Guru Nanak in the 'Sant tradition' is not without problems, beyond the problems of clearly defining the tradition itself. Guru Nanak himself gives no hint of belonging to such a tradition. His writings clearly demonstrate familiarity with the broad religious currents swirling around him, but that is all. As Grewal (1969) notes:

The closest he [Guru Nanak] comes to an explicit appreciation for any kind of individuals, it is for the *sadhs* and *sants*. But he does not refer to any particular *sadh* or *sant*; he does not refer to Kabir. For him, 'the true believer does not adopt a *marga*; he does not belong to a *panth*; he is concerned with true religion alone'. (p. 233)

This can be interpreted in a 'Sant' way of course. Yet Guru Nanak cared enough about his message to permit a community to grow up around him, and to appoint a spiritual successor, who explicitly carried the 'spirit' of Nanak within him.⁶ The main point here is that, unlike other 'Sants', Guru Nanak makes no reference to individuals of this tradition. There is no evidence that he saw himself as 'reworking and expanding' the 'Sant synthesis'. It may still be appealing to put him in the category. But disagreement on this score is not necessarily a matter of 'belief versus scholarship' or 'history versus theology'. There are open issues that can be explored with continued historical scholarship.

V Conclusions

In this paper, we have made the case that both the concept of a 'Sant tradition' and the membership of Guru Nanak in that tradition can be questioned as problematic. We have attempted to do this in terms of scholarship only, by laying out at length the positions of various scholars writing on these topics. In doing so, we have been conscious of previous attempts to frame disagreements on these issues in terms of 'historical scholarship' versus 'faith'. In our view, such a framing is inappropriate, though to some extent it has been made more salient by those who write from the perspective of faith. Our suggestion here is that alternative answers can emerge from within standard scholarly inquiry, depending on varying interpretations and combinations of fragmentary historical facts. We have tried to show how this process of interpretation and selection occurs in the writings of one of the most forceful proponents of a particular perspective on the questions at hand.

We offer one additional perspective on the debate. Ultimately, the scholarly questions at hand are about matters of cultural identity. Of course this is why they generate so much heat for those whose identity is being questioned and, in the work of some scholars, implicitly downgraded. This problem is, perhaps, inevitable: subjective perceptions are bound to differ. What is interesting to note here, in that it has scarcely been remarked on by Western scholars writing in this

area (though Juergensmeyer is a perceptive exception), is that the implicit politics of the sources used is important. Western scholars here rely heavily on Hindi/Hindu sources, treating them as neutral scholars, while Sikh scholars with alternative perspectives are portrayed (especially by McLeod) as tainted by their faith.

It is not at all clear that scholars such as Barthwal, Chaturvedi and R.C. Shukla, in defining the 'Sant tradition', its language, and Guru Nanak's membership in it, do not bring their own biases and preconceptions to the issues at hand. For example, Barthwal (1936, p. 255) asserts that Guru Nanak accepted the Hindu *trimurti*, a claim that does not stand up to detailed contextual analysis (McLeod, 1968, p. 166). Barthwal is in fact replete with such examples, in which he defends either orthodox Hinduism, as he perceives it, against 'heterodox' challenges, or holds up Kabir as the epitome of the 'Nirguna School', which he equates with the 'Sant School':

...the Nirgunis have used the Avatara theory to the advantage of the Sadhus in general and the Gurus in particular...And the criticism that it causes a loophole for hypocrisy to enter in, can more aptly be levelled against this use of the Avatara theory than against the Hindu Avatara theory...(p. 67, 1978 ed.)

The Nirguna Panth *as devised by Kabir* thus fulfils the need both of philosophy and religion, of head and heart. Some of the later saints like Nanak and Sibadayal' who admittedly owe their inspiration to Kabir made a departure from his philosophy but they faithfully followed the path chalked out by the great deliverer of souls. (p. 89, emphasis added)

Macauliffe's assertion that Nanak allowed meat is not warranted by the Guru's teachings. Though he did not make it a crucial point, he distinctly discouraged it. [The actual quote from the Guru Granth Sahib, p. 69, is ambiguous] (p. 184)

Within the fold of the Nirguna School we have thus a host of sects. *Kabir-panth, Dadu-panth, Nanak-panth Jagga-panth...*, *Satnami-panth...*, *Dariya-Panth...*, *Sahib-panth* (by followers of Tulasi Sahib at Hathras) and *Radhaswami-panth* (by Sibadayal), to name some of them. The last two are very recent developments of the *Nirguna-panth*. (pp. 214-215)

But to deny Nanak the greatness due to a reformer within [i.e., within Hinduism], is unjust. He did not make a greater departure from the popular faith, than was necessary in the interests of truth. (p. 255)

Dr. Trumpp may be an unreliable translator, *which I don't think he was*, but incidentally or otherwise his estimate of Nanak's views is nearer truth than that of Mr. Fredric Pincott. The said Doctor says – "Nanak remained a thorough Hindu"...(p. 256, emphasis added)

Barthwal's book is permeated with the attitudes illustrated by the above quotes. His entire introductory chapter, in fact, frames the 'Nirguna School' as something like a purification of traditional Hinduism in the face of an antagonistic cultural invader, but one that did not reject all the essence of Hinduism. In his view, even the Sufis' "monistic pantheism was a gift from the Hindu philosophy" (p. 9)!

To summarize, Barthwal and Chaturvedi are used as authorities by Western scholars seeking to construct *a posteriori* a medieval ‘Sant tradition’, and to situate Guru Nanak within it. Aside from the direct shortcomings in the arguments used, the sources are also problematic.⁸ This is especially so in light of attempts to respond to criticism by constructing false oppositions between ‘scholars’ and ‘believers’ or ‘historians’ and ‘theologians’, when the sources used by Western scholars are themselves subject to the same potential criticism.

In the light of our understanding of the politics of religion in India from the nineteenth century to the present, this issue deserves a fresh and more detailed look. The nineteenth century in Punjab saw a major attempt at clarifying and even reshaping identities, spurred by the presence of a new external power – the British. The politics of identity have been well recognized in histories of that period in Punjab, including the emergence of conflict between Hindus and Sikhs. What seems to not have been understood is how those same currents have played out in twentieth century academic writing on Sikh identity. While Juergensmeyer’s (1987) comments on the Radhasoami Revival, and their reconstruction of older traditions to support their worldview, are a notable exception, scholars such as McLeod, and even Grewal, seem to have failed either to realize or to acknowledge the full significance of this issue. While we have concentrated in this paper on directly questioning the ‘Sant’ construct and its application to Guru Nanak, looking at sources has pointed toward these larger issues that need to be addressed in more detail elsewhere.

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Endnotes

* I am grateful to the referee and the editor of the journal for helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ He is not the originator of this idea, which, along with the overall concept of a 'Sant tradition', can also be traced back to Chaturvedi and Barthwal.

² Here, of course, the author must acknowledge his self-perceived membership in both groups, scholars and believers.

³ This summary of the four methodological approaches barely introduces the range of issues and arguments that can be considered. The reader is referred to McCutcheon (1999) for more detail.

⁴ This is called the Guru Granth Sahib by Sikhs. Scholars use both appellations and variants.

⁵ In general, scholars of medieval Hindi literature are not very familiar with the Sikh scriptures. Vaudeville (1996, p. 139) alludes to the difficulties that face the 'non-initiate'. Schomer (1987b) makes an outright error when she states, "For Sikhs, thus, the ultimate 'witness' to spiritual truth is not the authoritative utterances...of the Sikh gurus, but the person and life of Guru Nanak." (p. 83)

⁶ All the successors of Guru Nanak very explicitly considered themselves as imbued with his spirit, in a way that is quite distinct from any of the other 'panths' included in the 'Sant tradition'.

⁷ Sibadayal was the founder of the Radhasoamis, and this clubbing of Guru Nanak with him is revealing. There are strong differences in the writings of Sibadayal and Guru Nanak: for example, see Barthwal's quote from Sibadayal on how a disciple must serve a Guru. (p. 116, 1978 ed.)

⁸ It may also be noted that Barthwal's own account of the history of Sikhism (pp. 254-258, 1978 ed.) contains at least one serious factual error. This certainly raises concern about his grasp of the subject on which he is writing.