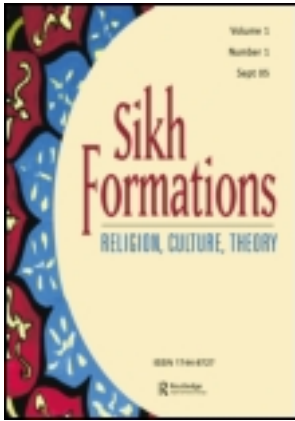


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### GURU NANAK AND RATIONAL CIVIL THEOLOGY

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**G.S. Sahota**

## GURU NANAK AND RATIONAL CIVIL THEOLOGY

*By the early sixteenth century, the conditions for a radical reorientation of Indic and Islamic religiosity and sociality had begun to crystallize with the simultaneous resurgence of anti-nomian rationalism and the expansion of mercantile capitalism across northern India. Combining insights about these dual processes, Guru Nanak formulated discursive and practical strategies for overcoming the social illusion of egoistic selfhood determined by the rise of commodity exchange, on the one hand, and the individualistic soteriological practices of existing faiths, on the other. Overcoming both required translating traditional religious concepts and categories into a framework of everyday collective life. The rational civil theology concertedly formulated in early Sikh scripture presents challenges for writing a contemporary universal history of reason. The essay concludes with an exploration of the incomplete dialectic of neo-Kantian notions of reason in the work of Georg Lukács by examining a point at which his writings intersect with early Sikh scripture – and what the reformulation of such a dialectic may mean for a postcolonial history of reason.*

It is curious to note that Sikhism has been considered or mistaken to be a part, combination, or reflection of any number of other religions – from Hinduism and Buddhism, to Islam and other Abrahamic faiths – but rarely has one questioned whether it is a religion in the first instance, and if so, in what way that is the case. In the Western academy, the religious or spiritual dimensions of Indian forms have been given pride of place for at least two centuries. Owing as much to the Western romantic reception of the *Geist* of the East as to the rich history of philosophical communication and spiritual experimentation in the Asian world, this immediate religious reflex in thinking about things Indian is reflected strongly, as if inevitably, in the early scholarship on Sikhism. A fairly obscure late-nineteenth century scholar of Islam, James Pincott, exemplifies the immediate resort to strictly religious categories in his entry on Sikhism in the 1895 *Dictionary of Islam*. For Pincott, Sikhism may as well be considered a sect or denomination of Islam, considering its concerted engagement with the central tenets of Sufism – such as the principle of the unity of all existence or *vahdat al-vaujud* – and considering how variegated the range of beliefs and practices were already under the rubric of ‘Muslim’ or ‘Muhammadan’. But the fact that it was not exactly Islam did not lead to a questioning of the religious designation itself. Rather, it led to association with other faiths: the religion of Guru Nanak, concludes Pincott, was ‘based on Hinduism, modified by Buddhism, and stirred into new life by Sufism’ (Pincott 1885, 591).

The decoding of Sikhism as a religion in the terms of another had various precedents for Pincott. H.H. Wilson (1904) included Sikhism in his 'Sketch of the Religious Sects of Hinduism'. Even earlier, after a visit to the Sikh College of Patna in 1781, Charles Wilkins (1799) gave a favorable assessment of Sikhism as a reflection of his own rational, idealized, and deistic Christianity.<sup>1</sup> From very early on the universals imagined of religion by colonial officials were recognized in Sikhism. Altogether these moments secured Sikhism's place within an emergent discourse of world religions, a discourse that arose with imperial expansion, and often times expressed the imperial ordering of things. The fact of Sikhism's inclusion came at the risk of sheltering it from inquiries which did not take matters of doctrine to be central for understanding religion nor reduced spiritual contents to articles of faith. V.D. Savarkar and the Hindu Right's pronouncements on Sikhs as '*keshadhari*' Hindus is the political counterpart of religious studies' definition of Sikhism as a mere assortment of different elements of more dominant religions. Whichever the case, the result is the same: under the weight of such heavy presuppositions and the distortions wrought by illusions of transparent or neutral categories, even the possibility of positing the autonomy of Sikhism as a spiritual, political, or social formation gets diminished, if not endlessly deferred.

I submit that a step back from 'religion' as a reified category may be a step forward in understanding Sikhism's genesis in the early sixteenth century, especially its rootedness within generally antinomian and thus rational currents of thought and within an increasingly monetized civil society of the *qasbas* of Northern India. I will suggest that this intellectual orientation and this civil-social embeddedness combined to allow for a decoding of the structures of civil society such that a rational theology could be delineated. This theology, pitched in a sublime linguistic reworking of traditional Indian rhetorics of divinity, was generated from immanent social forms, modes of commodity exchange, and communicative codes. This rational civil theology – as Vico would have rightly recognized it to be<sup>2</sup> – arose from an antinomian cathexis of the immediate world, a rational grappling with this world's internal logic, and an unfolding of the results of such thought-experiments as practical strategies to overcome the determinate illusions – especially those of egoistic self-interest – that characterized early modern mercantile society. (It should be no surprise that the language of the early Sikh scriptures plays upon words like 'interest', 'profit', 'ego', 'stock and coin', for Guru Nanak was himself born into the *khatri* or Punjabi merchant order at a point in history that witnessed the vast expansion of the money economy.) What made Guru Nanak's social orientation a kind of theology was its acceptance of belief in a providential order (*hukam*) – 'By the command, forms are produced.' The providential wisdom is not set in advance, but rather is in dynamic movement: That 'the command cannot be defined' marks an openness to a totality to whose outermost dimensions language may not accede (Shackle and Mandair 2005, 4). Divinity was transposed from the skies to the earth, where its providential wisdom was deemed to unfold collectively, despite or against the grain of individualistic aims of the subjects making up this collective. The *hukam* that is invoked in the earliest of Sikh texts, Guru Nanak's *Japji*, suggests not only that this providential wisdom is collective – 'All are within the command/ Outside of it no one can live' (Shackle and Mandair 2005, 4) – but also that grasping it will require the cultivation of reason and the promulgation of practices and institutions that accord with nature and the determinate movement of history. Early Sikh scripture suggests that divine providence manifests itself in practices, institutions, and spiritual

principals for a good superior to that which humans have proposed for themselves. To be in accord with it depends upon the free use of the will, the disciplining of the mind to the natural law, and the subduing of impulses of the body and spirit as a measure of collective liberty and reason. This patent yet somewhat precarious strain of Sikh civil-rational thinking has many facets, both discursive and practical, and the valences of several of them may escape the boundaries of what has become 'religion' in the post-Enlightenment world.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most original and penetrating treatments of Sikhism, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society* by Niharranjan Ray (1975), unearths the roots of the late medieval world that early Sikhism replanted and cultivated in early modernity. Originally presented as three lectures in commemoration of the quincennial of the birth of Guru Nanak at Patiala's Punjabi University in 1969, Ray's analysis of Sikhism emphasizes the antinomian and rationalist outgrowths of medieval India that Guru Nanak made central in his elaboration of his message. For Ray, the force of these currents is captured in a term that figures centrally in this new intellectual formation: *sahaja*, whose meaning as organic or natural movement, concentrates the protestant this-worldliness of late medieval antinomianism. Combining the prefix (or *upasarga*) of *saha* – meaning 'with' and the root (or *dhatu*) of *ja* – meaning 'to be born', the term *sahaja* was central to several radical Buddhist tantric orders in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. It emblemized a strong resurgence of long submerged heterodox intellectual preoccupations and practices in the late medieval period. Along with the return of the cult of the mother goddess and systematic revolts against brahmanical monopoly over the sacred through devotionalism, developments that figure largely in Brajudulal Chattopadhyaya's (1994) periodization of the Indian medieval, the refurbishing of rationalist-materialist conceptualizations may also be included. Having their roots in the Buddha's critique of the utility of the Vedic sacrifice, the materialist and rationalist orientations figured largely in especially the tantric orders concentrated along the northeastern plains but whose message reverberated across the Gangetic valley. Ray reconstructs the message of the *Sahajayana* – the vehicle of organicism – as one distinguishing itself from diverse ascetic orders of the time – the Vajrayanis and Kalachakrayanis, the Nathapanthis and the Kapalikas, the Aghorapanthis and the Avadhutas.<sup>4</sup> Discursive and practical differentiation from these orders (or other similar ones) through dialogue helped establish early Sikhism's orientation. Ray spells out three essential points that distinguish the Sikh radicalization of the *sahaja* framework: (1) that the experience of the Absolute was immanent to the materiality of the body, the latter considered both the individual physical body as well as the social body, thereby challenging notions of an abstracted transcendent divinity and the authority of scripture based on such notions, (2) that true spirituality required a translation of actual celibacy and asceticism, penances and austerities, pilgrimages and formal religious exercises, worship of images and icons as mere metaphors, therefore questioning their value in actual practice, (3) that the phenomenal distinction between the concrete self (*atma*) and the absolute one (*paramatma*) could be overcome through rationally governed social practice, thereby contesting caste hierarchies based on authoritarian scripturalism and the sharp division between different faiths. The reversals of both orthodox brahmanical and *bhakti* otherworldliness and the commitment to the immediacy of the senses, the provocations of reason, the world of materiality, and the sociality of everyday life constituted several challenges for both Sikhism itself as well as the other schools of thought with which it was in dialogue. Ray's analysis of Sikhism meets its limit when it considers these challenges

to concern primarily eschatological and soteriological doctrines. One would do better in registering the challenge to follow the course of *sahajavad* itself and shift our attention from strictly religious matters to worldly ones. For the major challenge was discovering what an openness to the new money-mediated civil society of early modernity would mean for both its belief structure and practical orientation.

Guru Nanak's life (1469–1539) spans across the last of the Lodi Sultans of Delhi and the first of the Mughal emperors, Babar and Humayun. This was a period in which dramatic economic shifts come to a head. These can be traced in a variety of ways, but most tellingly, as several economic historians of India have noted, through numismatic evidence. This only makes sense considering the kinds of economic policy shifts that were underway in the subcontinent after the expansion of Islam and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the late twelfth century. The event that signaled a radical departure from the Indian feudalism characteristic of the medieval – the 'natural' economy of exchanges in kind – to the early modern was what Irfan Habib (2007, 60) has called 'the imposition of the cash-nexus'. Requiring the payment of land-tax in money side by side with the raising of the rate of land-tax to the level of rent resulted in 'a considerable expansion of "induced" trade, by which food-grains and other rural products were drawn to the towns' (Habib 2007, 6). Urban growth in turn created an expansive money-mediated civil society. The mercantile society that came to fruition in the northern plains of India, especially Punjab, necessitated a uniform trimettalic coinage. The ever-increasing dependence of the economy on the cash-nexus led to experiments with coinage untainted by any element of debasement, as devised officially by Sher Shah Sur during the last years of Guru Nanak's life. Central in the trimettalic scheme of the late Lodis was the silver rupee, which was used primarily for trade. Alongside the silver there were the copper coin, produced primarily for petty transactions, and the gold coin (*muhr* or *ashrafi*), which would advantage lending at interest as hoards of it were generated.<sup>5</sup> The creation of private money capital in early modernity helps one to grasp particular lines of thought expressed in early Sikh scripture, especially those central to civil society. It helps situate the theme of individualistic self-interest that was given greater scope for development as religion became separated de facto from worldly affairs, and both religion and the market from the state and state intervention. The rise of civil society in Punjab and northern India at the time of Guru Nanak was captured in the variegated terminology for cities, towns, markets, trading posts, money, and credit: *shahr*, *tamaddun*, *qasbah*, *ganj*, *mandi*, *bazaar*, *hat*, *sikka*, *sauda*, and so forth. As Guru Nanak distanced himself physically and spiritually from the imperatives of the market early in his life, he was able to affect the *vairagya* cultivated by *sannyasis* for at least two millennia and the authorial autonomy from the religious establishment perfected by the Sufi *pirs* that had appeared on the Indian scene in recent centuries. Yet, his recognition of Sufi dependence and thus general alignment with an oppressive state whetted a political edge to his critique of the existing spiritual options (see Grewal 2009a, 14, *passim*).<sup>6</sup> This critical detachment was what allowed for a rational civil theology to emerge in his thinking, a way of thinking the absolute and the impediments to union with the absolute as internally, immanently, and socially generated.

Guru Nanak's response to the *qasba*-based civil society he witnessed crystallize and the prevalent religious idioms he deemed obsolescent was two-pronged: establishing first the immanence of the absolute and then the impossibility of ever containing the absolute within any particular language, symbol, or image. Rhetorically, the first is

accomplished by generating the metaphor of the sublime through an identification with all phenomenal existence. Thus, from an early section of the Guru Granth, as translated brilliantly by Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Mandair:

It is You who are the water, and you are the fish  
 It is You who are also the net.  
 It is You who's the one that is casting the net  
 And You are the slime that's within it.  
 It is You who're the lotus, untouched and untainted,  
 Whose colour remains in the depths.  
 It's You who secure the release of all those  
 Who give You the briefest of thoughts.  
 There is nothing beyond You, Lord who's beheld  
 In delight through the Word of the guru.

(2005, 132)

The Absolute self is produced from within phenomenal reality, from the primal elements of nature, such as water and earth, and from the activities that intermesh with the elements, such as fishing. The absolute 'You' is the intuitive knowledge of the interdependence of the subjects in the new civil society. Being mindful of this essential intersubjectivity and interdependence is the first step in the project of reconciliation and ultimate release from the determinate social illusion of an unhappy consciousness trapped in a particular body. Behind the absolute 'You', which is also the Creator '[w]ho's hidden yet everywhere present,/[r]evealed and shown forth by the guru' (Shackle and Mandair 2005, 132) – is the heterogony of the subjects in the new civil society (where one can imagine this fish being put out to market). This is heterogony for though each abides by his or her own, serving his or her own particular purposes, they produce unwittingly and thus naturally collective results larger than ever imaginable. For Guru Nanak, subjects fail to see the larger workings and machinations of the providential wisdom to the degree that they remain trapped within egoistic self-interest and the logic of objectification for self-gain.

Guru Nanak and much of early Sikh scripture mark a historical break between the present world of an emergent civil society and its specific needs, on the one hand, and the world of past scripture and past necessity. Pitched in the immediately intelligible vernacular of northern India, the new idiom of sublimity brought home the inadequacy of the old encrusted and self-assured languages of the sublime for the new era. As J.P.S. Uberoi has noted in his stimulating study of Sikhism, *Religion, Civil Society, and the State* (1996), the message of the first Guru sought to suture the relations between the spheres that had become ideologically divided from one another, though socially interconnected: the socio-political sphere and the religious sphere, the this-worldly and the other-worldly, the collective and the individual, the exoteric and the esoteric. For Uberoi, Sikhism 'set out to annihilate the categorical partitions, intellectual, and social, of the medieval world' by rejecting 'the opposition of the common citizen or householder versus the renouncer, and of the ruler versus these two, refusing to acknowledge them as separate and distinct modes of existence' (Uberoi 1996, 16). *Sahajavad's* valorization of the world and attempt to imbue it with practices and principles from which it was considered constitutively exempt – salvific action, justice, reason, and, indeed, theology – necessitated a translation of the rich and variegated languages of the

sublime and divinity in India. The creation of what Uberoi calls ‘a single body of faith and conduct, religion-in-society-and-history’ could neither simply invoke prevalent Islamic or Hindu expressions of the sublime nor could it do without a sublime form altogether: for the situation called for another strategy for instilling mortal terror in the subjects of the new civil society, but without violating the rational principals of the order as a whole (Uberoi 1996, 17). Early Sikh scripture thus had to impose its new worldly wisdom as the supreme wisdom in order to perturb the listener and estrange the immediate world, to provide a distinctly different knowledge of good and evil than those on offer by the competing religions of the time, and to thereby establish the coordinates of an ethics based in reason, virtue, justice, civility, truthful relations with the other as the one and the whole. The absolute value that the rational civil theology of early Sikhism ascribed to the divine was one that absorbed and assimilated endlessly all the languages of the sublime combined – but which was fulfilled by neither one of them nor all in their totality. The very things that are posited to be the creation of nature and the force of the social totality are personified themselves, thereby turned into agents for the praise of the abstract divine, producing the sense of an absolutely incommensurate and internally independent force. This is a central thematic in the *Japji*:

To You sing the wind and the water and fire,  
 To You sings the Judge at the gate,  
 To You sing the writers called Chitra and Gupta  
 ...  
 To You sing too Isar and Brahma, adorned  
 In their glory along with the goddess.  
 To you sing too Indras enthroned on their seats  
 Along with the gods at the gate.

(Shackle and Mandair 2005, 14)

And yet all of this goes only as far as the gate or the threshold of the divine, and none of it ever suffices as an exhaustive representational technique. Early Sikhism thus centralizes not a fully formed doctrine or fixed articles of faith so much as an openness to the course of historical movement itself, to the natural evolution of democratic customs, and the continuous reconceptualization of the mind and the spirit according to the circumstances at hand and according to the scope of possibility for reconciliation between self and other, the particular and the universal, afforded by ever new historical horizons, illuminated by providential wisdom. Guru Nanak in this manner dilated upon classical religious tropes. Their repetition in the new situation became the basis for imagining and cathecting the abstract as an immanent force. He established this abstraction as an opening beyond the traditional confines of religious thought, the very confines which keep it sheltered from the developments of rational self-reflection, closed from civil society, and separated from the force of historical movement. He thus devised an organic rational civil theology in which secular lessons are taken from religious piety. Within the mercantile society of early sixteenth-century Punjab, religion becomes the foundations for a civil-rational organicism that outgrows the limits of the secular and the religious all at once, creating a new collective ethos and political subjectivity.

There are several examples for how Guru Nanak held the iconoclastic abstraction of unity – *nirgunavad* – as an expression of reason, as Kabir, another influential *sahajavadi*,

had done a century earlier. What is sought is universality. This is patent in the oracular original apostasy of Guru Nanak, in which Sikhism originates: ‘*na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman*’ – ‘there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim’, or ‘no one is a Hindu, no one is a Muslim’. The original apostasy was universal negation, the negation of all, which has implicit within it the insight into negation itself as the necessary path to the universal. The abstract unity of existence became for Guru Nanak the vehicle for imagining the historically determinate universal of his time. Despite its expansiveness, the immanent absolute was generally not deployed for the purpose of trumping existing religions and their believers. Though there is no dearth of dialogues between Guru Nanak and figures representative of established faiths in the *Adi Granth* and the *Janam-sakhis*, the idea of merely reproducing the forms of these was obviously far from the mark. Such an activity would have merely reduced the true autonomous sublime of early Sikh scripture to a demand for faith pure and simple and general prohibition on speculation, divination, reason, and philosophy, a prohibition contrary to the antinomian heritage of *Sahajavad* itself. The very solution to this potential impasse was immanent in the simple insight that Sikh discursive practice must differ from orthodox forms, in the manner that *sahajavadi* proclivities had earlier, by engaging with empiricism, logic, and material, especially medicinal, investigations.

The shift to social practice and not merely doctrine made immediate activity the focus for rational experimentation. Considered in its totality, this was the source of the evils of everyday existence: the arbitrary discriminations of the caste system on the basis of traditional dogma, the endless clash of the ends of the state, the market, and religion with one another, the battle of egoistic self-interest – *the bellum omnium contra omnes* – of civil society in general. The latter especially threatened to reduce everything to a measure relative to self-gain. Thus the absolute of Sikh scripture attains unequivocal expression through the language of commerce. This is most succinctly and unequivocally put by the third guru, Amar Das, in *Anand Sahib*: ‘God has no price, and God cannot be valued’ (Shackle and Mandair 2005, 99). The relativization of value to self-gain generates the negating energy of the Absolute value for none of the particularistic aims ever suffice for the needs of the social collective and the experience of freedom beyond the primitive. The Word only attains its internal unity as the flipside of money as fetish. The Word recognizes and builds upon the recognition of the internal unity of civil society characterized by the interdependence generated by ever multiplying yet always particular exchanges.

With restraint as the furnace, persistence as goldsmith,  
 With awareness as anvil, true knowledge as hammer,  
 With fear as the bellows, with penance as burner,  
 In love as the vessel, the Name is dissolved,  
 Producing the Word in the mint that is true.  
 This is what those who are favoured perform,  
 Blessed by His grace of kindness and grace.

(Shackle and Mandair 2005, 19)

The metaphor of the mint as the machine that produces the Absolute truth of the Word demonstrates how much the new money economy generated the conditions for arriving at new intersubjective modes – love, in this instance – as negation of egoistic selfhood.



Furthermore, the emphasis here is on how spontaneous experience of Truth depends upon the form in which material practices are organized. If true knowledge is a hammer, then these forms are malleable. Against the grain of the civil-social practice of commodity exchange motivated by pure self-interest and individualistic works for salvific purposes, Guru Nanak sought to procure from within the occluded domains of interdependence and essential unity of the social the practices that would allow for a recognition of the true One: the one truth being that truth comes as encompassing unity. The recognition of the true oneness depended upon abrogating and overcoming the very ego-self promoted by commercialism and the very esoteric practices of salvation of the reigning faiths. For Guru Nanak, the illusion of a fundamental separation between the self and the other, between the subject and the object, had to be dispelled in experience and through practice, and not merely in thought. The focus was on cultivating collective norms and inculcating a mindfulness of the whole. Together these would allow for the experience of this unity as non-self-willed spontaneity, as utter ease, as the course of the *hukam* or providential wisdom captured in the classic metaphor of the middle voice.

As Arvind-pal Mandair and Christopher Shackle note, what is known as the ‘silencing of the ego’ in Sikhism ‘refers to a process of withdrawal at the very moment that the self names itself as “I” – where “I” is understood as the origin or starting-point in any relationship to an other’ (2005, xxviii). The practice that Guru Nanak calls for is one of renouncing ‘ego-sense’ and banishing duality through a variety of strategies, including the cultivation of collective rites and the inculcation in the subject of mindfulness of the whole. The medium was an abstract language of the universal dimension of language – the language of ‘shabad’ and ‘nam’ – which captures the semantic range from ‘sound’ to ‘word’ to ‘name’. A language reflecting the collective dimension of language itself had its analogue in a variety of practices: ultimately the creation of a text that would be imbued with the language of reason whose meanings would obtain reasonably through a collective in which reason had been inculcated. Something along these lines is recognized by Uberoi in his study of Sikhism. The logic of ‘the trinity of the Guru, Granth, and Panth’ (guru, scripture, and collective) is not one of ‘a simple unity of identity’ but rather one of ‘complex dialectical unity of opposition and mediation’ such that the antithetical positioning or alienation of any two is reconciled by the third:

The invisible Guru and the visible Granth, if they are contrasted, call forth the Panth that is both. The personal Guru and the group of the Khalsa are reconciled in the Granth’s body, the scripture-in-the-congregation. Where the Panth is in doubt and the mere words of the Granth, seem not to answer, then the Guru will speak through the spirit and the letter of the two together.

(Uberoi 1996, 137)

This dynamic democratic process is explicitly valorized within the Guru Granth itself: ‘Those who accept the guru find me at their feet/Attuned to love within, they’ve Nanak as their slave’ (Shackle and Mandair 2005, 128). Or: ‘Without trust in the mind, what wisdom can be preached’ (2005, 131). The tradition of a code that appreciates reason and cedes the future to the inheritors of reasoned inculcation is one that entrusts itself to the immanence of providential wisdom of rational civil theology.

The dynamic organicism of *sahajavad* which attained a rational-civil expression in Sikhism ultimately opened the possibility of overcoming the reifications and objectifications

of selfhood in early mercantile society. It is here where I depart from Uberoi, who does not seem to understand that it is the general social illusion generated by the logic of civil society that makes the latter a target in Sikhism. In other words, Sikhism's concerted effort to sublimate the ego does not seem to have accorded essentially with civil society:

The ego-centred wander in the fear of death,  
 Coveting others' homes they lose everything.  
 The ego-centred roam deluded in the wilderness,  
 Lost like evil wizards in cremation grounds,  
 Unaware of the Word, uttering evil talk.

(Shackle and Majeed 2005, 60)

It is perhaps no surprise then to see that the daily routines in the commune Guru Nanak established in Kartarpur in 1526 emphasized in their totality a negation of this core illusion of civil society. Collective sociality rather than individuality is expressed at every level, suggesting that the ultimate negation of the source of evil – ego – can only be the actualization of practices that fundamentally undo it. According to Shackle and Mandair, 'they were instructed to live their lives according to a routine that included cleansing of one's body by daily bathing, cleansing of the mind through meditation on the Name, the regular singing of devotional hymns, the pursuance of a healthy work ethic and the maintenance of a regular family life' (2005, xiv). In other words, what had been discovered as the solution to the irrational antinomies of self and other, secular and spiritual, the one and the whole was nothing less than the organization of collective praxis, albeit on a rather modest scale in this early instance.

## Coda

My interest in placing emphasis on the rational underpinnings of early Sikhism in this presentation is not to suggest that Sikhism is not a religion today in the rather normal sense of the word (signifying an amalgam of transcendental truths as articulated in canonized scripture, a set of prescribed practices, a community that has come to be defined in relation to the scripture or the practice in the possible ways, and an institutional order that governs and adjudicates disputes that may arise about all of the above) (see Lincoln 2003). Nothing would be more pedantic, scholastic, or academic in the bad sense of the word – which is to say, easily disputed or generally irrelevant. Rather I became drawn to these dimensions of the tradition upon realizing how little investigation – aside from what I have cited earlier – has been undertaken on just these moments of the formation. A history of how Sikhism became a religion in today's sense of that word waits yet to be written.<sup>6</sup> Existing scholarship already indicates some points at which such religious standardization generates tension with the legacy of reason in Sikhism. Was not the dismantling of caste relations for a more egalitarian social order understood to mark a transition from divine to natural law? Did not the *masand* confederacy instituted by Guru Gobind after the founding of the Khalsa come to resemble egalitarian republics? Did not the intra-caste and intra-religious equality of the kingdom of Ranajit Singh symbolize the political liberalism of the Sikh state?<sup>7</sup> One could include in this list as well modes of argumentation on questions of justice

stemming from Guru Gobind Singh's letter to Aurangzeb (*Zafarnama*) as well as the social contents permitted by the radical aesthetic of progressive writers in the postcolonial period such as Rajinder Singh Bedi and Balwant Singh.<sup>8</sup> But what drew me specifically to this problematic was a point at which early Sikh scripture and the works of the great social theorist Georg Lukács intersect. Both Lukács and Guru Nanak comment on the old Indian idea that the world rests upon an animal – the horns of a bull most generally, though Lukács refers to the less common trope of the elephant.<sup>9</sup> The manner in which they do so is instructive for understanding the challenges involved in thinking about contemporary questions of reason, universality, justice, and recognition in a more truly postcolonial world than has emerged thus far.

The problem, as I have come to understand it, is one of an incomplete dialectic of particular norms that govern the antinomies of neo-Kantianism which Lukács sought to bring into dynamic tension in his famous 1922 essay on 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (Lukács 1971, 83–222). In this masterful resubsumption of Marx within the tradition of the Hegelian dialectic for the purposes of forging a revolutionary method that would unify once again theory and practice, knowledge and action, epistemology and ontology, a variety of residues of an imperial discourse remain. Such residues would hamper Lukács's thinking on the processes of revolutionary democratization within the Left over the course of his lifetime, especially during the sixties when such processes spilled beyond the categorical assumptions and privileged sites of metropolitan Europe.<sup>10</sup> In the reification essay the problem surfaces in the skewed manner in which Indian thought – especially its potentials – is presented. What is at issue in this work is the understanding and scope of reason itself – its various partial formalizations, and its substantial content. Reason is nothing other than history itself: the process by which collective necessity dissolves the conditions of possibility for irrational antinomies. The problem with neo-Kantianism – the apotheosis of 'bourgeois' thought for Lukács – is that it is too much like Oriental thinking, which is to say, irrational and superficially 'critical'.

By confining itself to the study of the 'possible conditions' of the validity of forms in which its underlying existence is manifested, modern bourgeois thought bars its own way to a clear view of the problems bearing on the birth and death of the these forms, and on their real essence and substratum. Its perspicacity finds itself increasingly in the situation of that legendary 'critic' in India who was confronted with the ancient story according to which the world rests upon an elephant. He unleashed [*aufwarf*] the critical question: upon what does the elephant rest? On receiving the answer that the elephant stands on a tortoise 'criticism' declared itself satisfied. It is obvious that even if he had continued to press apparently 'critical' questions, he could only have elicited a third miraculous animal. He would not have been able to discover the solution to the real question.

(Lukács 1971, 110)

Though Lukács had sought to overcome specifically the neo-Kantianism of abstractly derived ideal-typical categories *à la* Weber, when it came to the question of the universality of the European experience, he had no doubts. Whereas Lukács was quite hostile to Weber's relativization of reason in accord with incommensurate callings (*Beruf*) – each of which can be equally rationalized and none of which has any higher claim than the other – he was uncritical of Weber's inconsistent designation of Europe as the locus

classicus of truly universal reason.<sup>11</sup> With limited knowledge and perhaps little patience for things non-European, Lukács could hardly, it seems, imagine the non-European world as a possible site of a universally generative dialectic. Even more unthinkable for Lukács, it seems, was that precedents for the kinds of critiques he wished to enact could have existed in the Indian – or any non-Western – past.<sup>12</sup>

This is relevant to the discussion at hand for Guru Nanak's *Japji* expressed dissatisfaction with the very same problem of infinite regress embedded in the resort to ever more miraculous animals for the support of the world in this classic idea of Hinduism. This notion is gracefully dismissed and refigured for the purpose of establishing the new premises for a rational civil theology. It too is turned upside down, as is so much of the imagery inherited from the classic corpus of brahmanical compositions. Rather than taken literally and fixed by faith, the bull is made into a metaphor of intersubjective mediation, such as mercy, compassion, and the set of feelings captured by the term *daya* as well as the notion of right in *dharma*. All of these are posited as immediately experienced and universally intelligible:

The Bull that is righteousness, offspring of mercy,  
Is tethered in the place with rope of contentment.  
If we can see this, we indeed must acknowledge  
What the burden must be which lies on the bull.  
There are many worlds beyond earth, then yet more.  
What strength must the one who's beneath them possess?  
(Shackle and Mandair 2005, 9)

This rhetorical question casts critical doubt on this ungrounded idea burdened by infinite regress. What is offered in its stead is the more tenable concept that the world – the immediate social world – is dependent upon practice conducive to the unfolding of the *hukam* or providential wisdom: rightful duty, compassion, and the contentment of all. The recognition of these intersubjective modes of being is the first step in this first of the works of Sikh scripture in the direction of establishing upon the basis of the classical metaphysical metaphors the foundations of a rational civil theology.

There is no doubt that generations of minds have been inured to such erroneous notions concerning the limitations of non-Western intellectual traditions due to the authorial weight of figures such as Lukács, let alone ideologues of imperial hegemony and reaction. It is ironic that all forms of bourgeois thought are collapsible into the dialectical movement of history in Lukács, except the surety of the illusion that the West is the exceptional paragon of rationality whose own historical experience is the sole one for the unfolding of universality. Even a more critical history of such concepts is necessitated by our present than perhaps Lukács could have ever imagined.

## Notes

- 1 A letter from Charles Wilkins, Esq., containing 'Observations on the Seekers and their College'. See Wilkins (1799, 292).
- 2 I have drawn here from the new translation (Vico 1999) as well as the standard scholarly edition (Vico 1984) of Vico's magnum opus. The most relevant paragraphs for

the concept of the ‘rational civil theology of providence’ are 385, 342, 344, and 1108. The manner in which Vico’s system allows for the absorption and reconfiguration of the historically necessary kernel of previous forms of thought distinguishes his understanding of Reason from the ahistorical binaries characteristic of more canonical ‘rational’ Enlightenment critiques of religion or superstition. Not unlike Nanak, Vico sees such translations of past tradition as resulting ultimately in natural reason, taking hold politically and socially as natural equity. On the theme of natural reason in Vico, see paragraphs 973, 927, 326, and 924. The question of the interrelation between reason and translation cannot be discussed here except to note that the uncanny juxtapositions – unlikely approximations, unexpected resemblances – translation allows in this regard fend against commonsensical distinctions. In being at odds oftentimes with conventional historical periodizations, the temporality of Reason comes into partial relief, illuminating new possibilities for the spatial configuration of Negation.

- 3 For a now classical genealogy of the modern concept of religion, see Cantwell Smith (1962), especially chapter two, “Religion” in the West’, 19–49.
- 4 Lorenzen (1972) helps historically contextualize these orders.
- 5 The numismatic background of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century northern Indian economy is discussed in Digby (1981–1983).
- 6 With respect to Sikhism, a major advance along these lines has taken place with the publication of Arvind-pal Mandair’s (2009) *Religion and the Specter of the West*.
- 7 On these questions, see Grewal (2009b).
- 8 For an example of such social contents, one may observe the rather unique take on female melancholia in Singh (2008).
- 9 The *Balakanda* of the *Valmikiramayana* presents the image of the world resting on an elephant at each cardinal point. Lukács confuses the bull and the elephant, for he does not appear to have this image in mind either. See Valmiki (2005).
- 10 The difficulties in assessing the significance of the global sixties become most apparent in Lukács’s inability to bring into his analysis the extra-European energies of the period. See Lukács (1991). A corrective can be found in Connery (2007).
- 11 This is most pronounced in the introduction of Weber (2008).
- 12 The general point here, it must be remembered, is in keeping with Fredric Jameson’s view of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* as an unfinished project. The need to dereify imperialist rationality is at one with the recognition of the more global needs generated by the expansion of capitalist social norms in our times beyond the frameworks of classical bourgeois society. At one, in turn, with this process of dereification is the expansion of the problem of Reason to address postcolonial dilemmas, whereby operative social groups formed through imperial governance do not accord with metropolitan models. Anti-modernism in such locations may today potentiate solutions for the environmental irrationality of capitalist society, for instance, and not merely culturalist reaction. Such a project of dereifying Reason would further the transculturation (or ‘spatialization’) of the dialectic. See Jameson (2009), especially 201–22.

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