AUTHORITY IN THE VIRTUAL SANGAT

SIKHISM, RITUAL AND IDENTITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The question of authority within Sikhism has become very real to me personally since I began teaching a course on Sikhism at Renison College, at the University of Waterloo. If we look to the most influential scholars of Sikhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Punjab – their focus, though honing on varied aspects, has primarily been historical.[1] The most recent publications from contemporary scholars of Sikhism in the Diaspora have also, by and large, followed their lead. Indeed, the focus on the historical framework goes beyond the interests of historians of Sikhism, it is also the framework of choice for non-academic works.[2] Thus, where does one direct a student who wishes to find information that can stand up to the at times harsh light of contemporary issues and concerns of young Sikhs in the Diaspora? Let me turn briefly to some of the very poignant, profound and stimulating concerns and questions raised within my Sikhism course.

For instance, the question was raised by students that given that the very *raison d'être* of the creation of the Khalsa was that the brotherhood be constantly armed and ready for battle against unrighteousness, and given that the requirements of Guru Gobind Singh included the weaponry of the day, how are those particular weapons of antiquity, including the *kirpan*, representative of warfare in today's Nuclear Age. Are these symbols, of steel, of a readiness to fight, simply outmoded for this day and age?

This level of inquiry leads simply to more questions regarding the very pertinence of the Khalsa initiation, given that it was situated in a very particular time and that it answered the needs of that very specific time and place. For instance, the addition of the name 'Singh,' the Rajput warrior identity appropriated by Guru Gobind Singh, was initially a central component of the Khalsa initiation ceremony. Today, the appellation is instead given at time of birth. Thus, if one already is a 'Singh' or 'Kaur', if one already wears the 5 Ks, then why be

[1] I am referring to scholars such as Ganda Singh, Fauja Singh, Harbans Singh, J.S. Grewal, W.H. McLeod. Certainly this list is not exhaustive. Each of these scholars operated within the framework of historical research.

[2] See Balbinder Bhogal's overview of the historical approach within Sikh Studies, in: Bhogal 2001, 73.

initiated? What these questions point to is a very distinct re-conceptualization of Sikh identity. Moreover, these questions come from Sikhs themselves, not from outsiders who can easily be accused of meddling in 'other's' sacred affairs.

Further, questions regarding inconsistencies within Sikh ideals and Sikh practices concerning the status of women and prejudice rooted in caste appear to be of the greatest concern for young people. For example, statements upholding gender equality and the elimination of caste within Sikhism were greeted with overt cynicism by students. And, not surprisingly, platitudes blaming both the society and culture surrounding Sikhs in Punjab, namely Hinduism as being responsible for these inconsistencies, no longer appear to convince many young people. Notwithstanding the obvious and apparently common practice of amniocentesis and the abortion of female foetuses that is highest in Punjab in comparison to other Indian states, the awareness also extends to more subtle differences *vis-à-vis expectations* of males and females among Sikh families. Most pointedly, this concerns caste rules with regard to dating and marriage practices, but also appears to be consistent within the wider arena of gurdwara politics. According to one observer the issue rests firmly on what he labels as 'the Punjabi mentality':

> "At this time the Sikh religion is firmly in control of the older generations from Punjab and its religious institutions around the world are run as virtual extensions of Punjab and the Punjabi mentality. Many issues are not dealt with because they never had to be dealt with in the past and it is always easier to maintain the status quo rather than try to find new answers."[3]

But where do students turn who are disaffected by the status quo? Perhaps the most obvious answer would appear to lie within local gurdwaras and their respective leadership. But this only spawns new questions concerning the specific training necessary for *granthis*, many lacking basic English language skills. English is, needless to say, the language of choice and even necessity for many students born and raised in Canada. This is not to belittle the position of *granthis* within the Diaspora. They are the custodians of gurdwaras as well as being responsible for the carrying out of the religious service, one that has as its focus the recitation and singing of hymns from the *Adi Granth.* Yet according to my students, few youths could relate to them.

Further, does one direct students instead to the administrative unit responsible for the affairs of gurdwaras? S. Singh Kalsi notes however that this too is fraught with difficulties. While in theory everyone present in the congregation is empowered to make decisions, all

[3] See Singh Brar 1998a.

gurdwaras in the Diaspora are managed by committees elected annually by the approved membership according to the constitution of the gurdwara:

> "Different factions of Sikhs make every effort to control the gurdwaras through these annual elections. In the case of disagreement, use of physical force is frequently employed; the local police are invited to intervene in the fights and disputes are taken to the courts. Usually, such disputes … take place in the main congregation hall where the Guru Granth Sahib is installed. It may be argued that the real authority lies in the capacity of a faction to muster large number of voters at the annual elections and the backing of a hard core of supporters."[4]

It would also appear that many Sikhs in the Diaspora are disheartened by these disputes.[5] According to a well respected scholar from within the Sikh community, "more than 1 in 5 gurdwaras have been, or currently are, in the throes of litigation or civil war."[6]

Perhaps the responsibility for addressing these concerns lies outside of the Diaspora, specifically with the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* or SGPC as it is known, which is responsible for Gurdwara management in Punjab? Or, is it the Akal Takht, the temporal centre associated with the Golden Temple in Amritsar that is responsible for all affairs of the Sikh community? Or, even the office of *Jathedar*, the chief officials of the various Takhts in Punjab? These may *well be* the traditional institutions and individuals of authority within Sikhism, yet, there is little indication that many concerns that are either specific to Sikhs of the Diaspora or controversial in nature have been addressed in any significant way by these authoritative bodies. According to A. Basarke:

> "... progress brings changes … the questions that were not necessary before, must be answered today. [However], the inability to get consistent answers to [contentious] … questions is a most serious problem. Over the years, I have written to the Akal Takht and the S.G P.C. asking answers. Not only were my questions left unanswered, hut not once did I receive acknowledgement of them having received my letters. Locally, Sikhs have tried to rationalize that my letters were in English, and no one in Punjab could read them. Valid point? I had my questions translated to Punjabi and again sent them to the above stated institutions Again, no answer ... not even an acknowledgement of my existence."[7]

Further, many Sikhs in the Diaspora seem to view both the SGPC and the offices of Jathedars with suspicion, given the scandals that have rocked both institutions in recent

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[4] See Singh Kalsi 1995, 43-58.

[5] On a web site devoted to Indian culture and youth, one anonymous young writer commenting on the infighting taking place in gurdwaras exclaimed: "What ever has been happening in gurudwara is total stupidity! Can't believe people can fight over silly things …",
from: http://indiaculture.net/talk/messages/65/861.html?1010543181.

[6] See Singh 2002.

[7] See Basarke 1999.

years.[8] Moreover, simply in terms of logistics, the authority of the SGPC does not legally extend beyond Punjab.

Further, to what *textual authority* does one turn to when faced with difficult questions, particularly with regard to conflicting views of Sikh identity and practice? The *Adi Granth* as the central and utterly authoritative 'timeless Guru' immediately comes to mind. Notwithstanding the spectacular beauty and timeless truths embodied within these hymns, it is nonetheless difficult to find specific answers to the very difficult questions posed earlier. The Sikh Gurus, or any of the sants of North India[9] were less interested in challenging the mores of the society that surrounded them, than they were in proclaiming the way of liberation, *nam simaran*, to all who they came in contact with.

While many of these great poet-saints indeed criticized many of the evils in society, they did it within the context of religious life. For many of the Sants, caste and gender were simply not factors in determining one's relation to the Divine. These poets were not attempting to reform the social order per se, but had as their focus devotional practices of the day. It was only much later, particularly during the fervour of the nineteenth and twentieth century reform movements, that the medieval poet-saints came to be seen as the *forerunners* of these later movements. Reformers began to criticize social practices that were no longer deemed acceptable, and eventually, the criticisms toward religious institutions of the poet-saints "were extended to the larger social order. Today, most … think of saints like Kabir who challenged traditions, as social reformers."[10] The distinction between the intent of Sants, and the later concerns and designs of the twentieth century reformers must be kept in mind when attempting to find answers to contemporary controversies and questions within the sacred scripture of the Sikhs.

The *Sikh Rehit Maryada*, the Sikh Code of Conduct also comes to mind as a resource for coming to terms with these issues. However, the *Rehit* addresses few of these concerns. It is in and of itself not an exposition of theological questions, but instead focuses on the specifics of Sikh conduct, be that in the context of the Gurdwara, or, the proper maintenance of life cycle rituals. Moreover, given the rapid pace of technological advancement since that point in time, or, feminist concerns that have had a profound influence on society, or the new and pervasive awareness of the ecological crisis facing all manner of species and the earth itself,

[8] The latest SGPC President, Bibi Jagjit Kaur, elected in March, 1999, was recently accused of the murder of her daughter, Harpreet Kaur, who secretly married a man of a lower caste. See, March 20, 2000, *The Tribune*. Further, the Jathedar of the Damdama Sahib Takht, Giani Kewal Singh, has also been accused in the dowry death of his daughter-in-law. *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, Friday, May 10, 2002.

[9] See Schomer & McLeod 1987.

[10] See Shattuck 1999, 94.

the *Sikh Rehit Maryada* formulated in 1951, but based on the concerns and worldview of the 18th and 19th centuries, does not attempt to answer many of the issues and concerns of the twenty first century, particularly those outside of Punjab. Also, the *Maryada* is intricately intertwined with the needs and concerns of the British inspired reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus also infused with the polemics, needs and passionate politics of the day that it too needs to be questioned with respect to its very presuppositions, at least in terms of today's society. According to S. Singh Brar, the creator of a highly sophisticated website on Sikhism, the *Maryada* simply does not represent the concerns and questions of non-Punjabi society:

> "It must be realized that unlike Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Rehit Maryada is a dynamic document of Panthic consensus. As such it must be fully representative of the changes in society and take into account the Sikh Diaspora. The current Rehit Maryada contains such comments as: "A Sikhs daughter must be married to a Sikh," and "A baptized Sikh ought to get his wife baptized." What does this mean? Does this mean that a Sikh's son may freely marry a non-Sikh? Does this mean that a baptized Sikh wife should not encourage her husband to also become a Khalsa?"[11]

The *Maryada* further enjoins with regard to funeral practices:

> "Nor must a lit lamp be placed beside or a cow bestowed in donation …" How realistic is such a scenario ever occurring outside of rural Punjab? Not very likely … [Also, w]hat is the Sikh view on homosexuality? What is the Sikh view of abortion? What is the Sikh view on divorce? What is the Sikh view on euthanasia? What is the Sikh view on contraception and birth control? The current Rehit Maryada does not contain any answers to any of these questions."[12]

These are questions and opinions that are easily accessible on the internet; it is here that they are most thoroughly posed, as well as answered. According to one young Sikh, "I'm trying to find so many answers – and with resources on the internet it is marginally easier …"[13] It is on the web that people from all over the world can meet and can shrink the vastness of physical distances between them simply by the click of a button. I am here writing specifically within the context of the Diaspora, particularly the university setting, where all students by and large have access to computer technologies.[14] Nonetheless, if one peruses the Web under the topic 'Sikhism' it becomes quickly apparent that it is not only Sikhs of the

[11] See Singh Brar 1998a.
[12] See Singh Brar 1998a.
[13] Anonymous, Wednesday, September 13, 2000, *India Talking* discussion site, at http://indiaculture.net/talk/messages/65/864.html?1005850494.
[14] Yet, as B. Basher has reminded readers, computer owners are primarily northern, white, middle-class males. In many parts of the world, particularly the southern hemisphere, the infrastructure simply cannot support computer mediated communication, or CMC. See Basher 1996.

Diaspora who have embraced computer mediated communication, or, CMT.[15] Certainly any search conducted will identified hundreds of thousands of sites devoted to Sikhs and Sikhism.

And it is on the WWW that questions of caste, gender, abortion, Sikh ritual identity, premarital sex, homosexuality, to name only a few, can be found almost on a daily basis. The anonymity of the Web is particularly conducive for stances taken on these often controversial issues. I can recall a dialogue taking place on one particular Sikh-based website where a practicing *kes-dhari* Sikh openly admitted his sexual orientation as a gay man.[16] Upon his disclosure, he was subjected to an inordinate amount of malicious response. But the conversation also opened doors to others who were truly interested in discussing the issue of homosexuality within Sikhism. In discussing this scenario with my Sikh students, they insisted that it would be difficult to imagine the same dialogue between a gay and straight Sikhs taking place in the local gurdwara.

The phenomenon of instant access to novel, often radical perspectives that are formed on the web is indicative of a shift in what constitutes truth and how one discovers that truth. This can be contrasted with how information was received even fifty or one hundred years earlier. By and large this took place through one's parents, and from one's immediate community. The only outside frame of reference came from books; those books were provided by parents or by the school community.

> "Parents and adults were respected because they were the ones that controlled access to information about the world. They were in authority because they possessed more knowledge than the child. The child adopted the parents' worldview because it was the only world-view available … [Y]ou accepted the basic assumptions of the community concerning what is true and false."[17]

The breadth of that conduit of information came to be extended through travel, radio and television. This led to what W.T. Anderson characterizes as a series of culture shocks, as humans discovered that there was more than one worldview or perspective on life.[18] The WWW has simply pushed the ability to hear, experience, and understand different perspectives to an almost un-limitless degree. The Web, more than any other tool of

[15] A. McRobbie notes that the political consequences of mass media are immense, especially vis-à-vis the Third World. "This becomes apparent when we look at representations of the Third World. No longer can this be confined to the realist documentary, or the exotic televisual voyage. The Third World refuses now, to 'us', in the West, to be reassuringly out of sight. It is as adept at using the global media as the old colonialist powers." See McRobbie 1989, 169.

[16] Sikhs who observe the Khalsa Rahit (manual of belief and discipline) but who are not initiated into the Khalsa (military order) are known as *Kes-dhari* Sikhs. Those who have undergone initiation into the Khalsa order as commonly known as *Amrit-dhari* Sikhs.

[17] See Miller 1996, 51.

[18] See Anderson 1995, 5.

communication, opens up the possibility of experiencing and living in an 'ocean of truths'. According to L. Swidler, this has naturally led to a process of dialogue *between* truths:

> "Up until almost the present just about *all* were convinced that they alone had the absolute truth. Because all were certain that they had the truth - otherwise they wouldn't have held that position therefore others who thought differently necessarily held falsehood. But with the growing understanding that all perceptions of and statements about reality were – even if true – necessarily limited … the permission, and even the necessity, for dialogue with those who thought differently from us became increasingly apparent."[19]

Thus, while each individual is without doubt still rooted in a localized and particular worldview, individuals with access to the Web can discover, across neighbourhoods, cities and even continents, beyond their own set of 'truth's', the 'truths' of others, each with a myriad of manifestations.[20] According to W.T. Anderson, this notion of swimming in an ocean of truths is perhaps the foremost characteristic of the postmodern condition. The postmodern is utterly aware that different people have different concepts of what the world is like.[21] Moreover, one is often actively engaged with worldviews other than her or his own. And, Anderson notes, coming to an understanding of technological change is central to making sense of the postmodern world.[22]

The sociologist R. Oldenburg has written extensively on the notion of the 'third place'; the first two he defines as home and the workplace.[23] The 'third place' is, I believe, a useful framework to come to an understanding of the proliferation of web-based relationships and virtual dialogue taking place. Oldenburg's 'third place' generally denotes a location where people come together to congregate and socialize, a space where informal interaction can take place regularly. While he is referring to these places in a more traditional sense, cafés in France, piazzas in Italy, teahouses in Japan, local parks, or, one could add, the Sikh Gurdwara as a social centre, the 'third place' can also be *virtualized* to include web spaces on-line. H. Rheingold's ground breaking volume *Virtual Communities. Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* insists that

> "[p]eople in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and

[19] See Swidler 1996.
[20] See Miller 1996, 55.
[21] See Anderson 1990, 7.
[22] See Anderson 1991, 32.
[23] See Oldenburg 1999.

> lose them ... To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive …"[24]

Virtual communities may also fulfill many of the mandates of Oldenburg's 'third places'. These include their accessibility, have as their primary activity the exchanging of ideas and conversation in general, and provide affiliation to a group or organization.[25] For many Sikhs, the proliferation of chat room discussions, opinion lists, and general opportunities for discussions appended to most Sikh websites attest to this sense of 'belonging', especially in light of some of the difficult and honest conversations taking place in these virtual spaces. If 'third places' exist because it is there that honest engagement with peers, particularly over contentious issues take place rather than somewhere else, then it is feasible that the web has indeed become that 'third place' envisioned by Oldenburg, albeit as a virtual manifestation. This is especially significant given that the 'third place' for Sikhs has traditionally been the local gurdwara, not only as a place of worship, but also as a central space for community, especially for elderly Sikhs.

Perhaps most importantly for the purposes at hand, Oldenburg notes that "third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality."[26] It is this characteristic that can perhaps best be explicated within the context of postmodernity. J.F. Lyotard has written extensively about the deep-seated suspicion of postmoderns vis-à-vis what he labels as the meta-narrative. Any claims to universality, according to Lyotard, is a "meta-narrative, referring to anything that represents a final, universal truth."[27] In other words, meta-narratives have long decided who and what constitutes legitimacy, authenticity and power. Postmoderns however, no longer simply legitimate a statement by referring exclusively to one authoritative source. They are instead eclectic 'gatherers' who stand on equal footing and collect their beliefs from a variety of sources. But they are at the same time rooted within the narratives of their own communities. This, notes Anderson, is the "central part of a new global culture which is, in a sense, a culture about cultures … The world around us has become a more human world."[28] Thus, instead of turning immediately to the meta-narrative, or, authority figure to determine what ones view should entail, the postmodern

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[24] See Rheingold 2000.

[25] See Amy Bruckman's site known as the 'Tuesday Café' to observe how Oldenburg's notion of the 'third place' has been adapted to virtual interaction.
At http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/1.2/coverweb/Cogdill/thirdplace.html.

[26] See Oldenburg 1999, 6.

[27] See Lyotard 1992, 19.

[28] See Anderson 1995, 241.

instead actively engages others, his or her equal, to come to her or his own understanding of right and wrong.

For many Sikhs, particularly, young, educated and often disenfranchised Sikh 'gatherers', in other words, postmoderns, it is within these virtual 'third places' on the Web that this essential and utterly valid discourse is taking place. Moreover, it is precisely because of the *need* for active engagement within communities that these places exist. Members of these virtual communities, instead of turning to the meta-narrative, be that the Akal Takht, the SGPC, or gurdwara administrations for validation, are exploring the multitude of truths readily available to them to come to their *own* truths, truths that are nonetheless rooted in their own tradition. This rooted-ness may manifest itself in a deep engagement with Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth.* Yet the traditional biases and assumptions of this sacred text are easily reconstructed according to contemporary needs.

It must be underscored that the lack of claims to universality has not led to a secularization of postmodern society. In fact, one social scientist insists that a significant aspect of the postmodern is the "unsecularization of the world."[29] New religious movements are proliferating and most traditional religions are in a process of revitalization.[30] For many Sikhs, much of this revitalization process is taking place on-line; in essence then, revival and renewal has gone virtual. Moreover, the instigators of this process are not traditional authority figures within Sikhism. Instead, the discourse is taking place between individuals who feel utterly at home within the boundlessness of high tech. Ironically, given the power that comes with technical knowledge, they have in essence become the 'new authorities' within the digital domain.

Another characteristic of the postmodern phenomenon is of particular interest to the academic community, who, along with the religious and political elite in the past, have controlled and disseminated both cultural and religious knowledge. Those responsible for the diffusion of knowledge were necessitated to undergo years of specialized training and education. In essence, knowledge was and is power and it was thus strictly regulated. According to D. Adams, postmodernity brings with it a momentous change in this regard. Cultural and religious knowledge can no longer effectively be controlled by the intellectual and political elite.

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[29] G. Weigel as quoted by S.P. Huntington, "Civilization to Become Major Cause of Future Conflicts," *Korea Herald*, 18 June, 1993.

[30] Adams 1997. Interestingly, a recent CNN poll suggests that religion has trumped porn sites in terms of their popularity. Jacobson 1999.

> "The so-called information superhighway is changing the way knowledge and value are diffused throughout society … Through the Internet and other computer networks one can access virtually every possible form of knowledge and value that is available … one does not have to be a member of the intellectual and political elite."[31]

In short notes E. Noam, "in the past people came to the information, which was stored at the university … In the future, the information will come to the people, wherever they are."[32] And certainly if one peruses the most popular sites on Sikhism in particular, one realizes that they are not the handiwork of academics within Sikh Studies, the traditional intermediaries of knowledge transmission. Nor are they associated with the traditional loci of religious authority among the Sikhs. While there are indeed official sites of the SGPC, the Golden Temple, the Akal Takht, and varied gurdwara managements around the world, it becomes quickly evident that many of these sites lack the sophistication, reliability, and ease of interchange of those constructed by deeply engaged Sikhs *outside* the bounds of traditional authority. Indeed, a fascinating on-line 'Authority Home Page' maintains that traditional structures are simply

> "not able to fully take hold on the Web. Authors who could never be published in the restrictive print publishing world are published on the Web. And the success of a Web page is largely determined not by elitist literary standards, but by popularity, as determined by web counters."[33]

One could say that by the very act of publishing, whether that be written text or on-line, authority is created.[34] The Authority Home Page asserts that "the monument of the text and the authority that [is] extended to the author rests in the technology."[35] The more sophisticated and appealing the web site, the more 'authority' is accrued. Thus, "the real question is not, What can electronics do? But rather, Who will control the keys? Who (or what) will capture the all-important role of trusted intermediary in the digital domains? How transparent will their mediation be?"[36] Sikh technocrats, computer engineers and specialists within technical fields, in aptly taking up the challenge to present and define Sikhism on-line, have, by virtue

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[31] Adams 1997.
[32] Bereano 1995.
[33] Christianna I. White, "The Web Upholds Authority," Authority Web Homepage, http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ciwhite/authority/homepage.html.
[34] "Works of literature are monuments, and the author who creates monuments is, as the etymology suggests, an authority ... it is important to remember that the values of stability, monumentality, and authority have always been interpreted in terms of the contemporary technology of handwriting or printing." See Bolter 1991, 147-148.
[35] Christianna I. White, "The Monument of the Text" Authority Web Homepage, http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ciwhite/authority/homepage.html.
[36] See Brown 1998, 14.

of their technical knowledge and profound interest in their tradition, become the new digital intermediaries.[37]

A recent web posting attests to the growing movement towards cyberspace organizations among the Sikhs.

> "In recent years…there has been a flurry of Sikh organization popping up all over the U.S. Organizations like Sikh Coalition, Sikh Communications, Sikh American Association, SMART, SikhWomen.com, Sikh Heritage Foundation and so on. Students, young professionals and technocrats started many of these organizations, separate from the Gurdwaras. Again, understandably so. The political problems at many of our Gurdwaras have put a stranglehold on our young people, a valuable resource of our community. Gurdwara officials are not prepared to initiate these kinds of activities either, because they just don't think about issues beyond Gurdwara affairs. Perhaps, that is all a Gurdwara can be expected to do given the limited qualifications of most Gurdwara officials."[38]

Many of these organizations are either partially or entirely web based. Given their accessibility to the public at large, one must consider the consequences of the dissemination of particular belief systems, in this case Sikhism, by non-specialists who have by virtue of their technical abilities become the 'new authorities' within their tradition. I believe they are far-reaching.

This question has become very significant to me personally through a recent web-based course that I teach on World Religions. Among countless other examples that could be listed, one of my students writing about the Sikh tradition noted that Sikh women are unequivocally equal to men, particularly since the Gurus sent women onto the battlefields of the day. Her source? The most popular internet resource on the Sikh religion called 'The Sikhism Home Page'. She based her observations on this statement:

> "In such a climate Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism shocked the entire society by preaching that women were worthy of praise and equal to men. Five hundred years later, the rest of mankind is only now waking up to this fundamental truth. The Gurus actively encouraged the participation of women as equals in worship, in society, and on the battlefield. They encouraged freedom of speech and women were allowed to

[37] I am aware and agreeable to the notion that the boundaries between the author and reader are blurred within the realm of hypertext. See especially G. Landow who argues the fluidity and multicentredness of hypertext. For Landow, it is impossible to be a passive reader of hypertext.
See Landow 1992, 52, 207, 184, 178-179.
Yet, hypertext is still determined by the author; it is the author who chooses the links, lexias (the short story lines within a hypertext), and where those choices lead. Thus, despite Landow's understanding of the reader's collaboration with the author, I present the creator of a specific web-site, here on the subject of Sikhism, as a 'new authority'.

[38] See Kaur 2002. Sikhe.com is a web site devoted to Sikhism. Anju Kaur has a regular column there entitled 'Kaur Values'.

> participate in any and all religious activities including reading of the Guru Granth Sahib."[39]

Did Guru Nanak insist that women were unequivocally equal to men? Did the Gurus actively encourage women as equals in worship? In society? On the battlefield? Did they encourage free speech? As an historian who specializes on gender issues in Sikhism, these statements are highly problematic. Yet they stand as authoritative simply because they stem from a highly innovative and widely touted web site devoted to the dissemination of Sikhism. Needless to say, the critical analysis that is indicative of academic writing is largely non-existent on many of these web sites. And, while apologetics are of course not unique to the WWW, the *accessibility* of these web sites is of immense consequence. Scholarly analysis still tends to be limited to the 'hallowed halls' of university libraries. By and large, most academics are reticent to post their own scholarly analysis within their respective areas of specialization, on-line. Or, if their scholarly contributions are on the Web, they are often within restricted academic journals. Yet, particularly in the realm of the undergraduate, students are much more inclined to spend hours perusing the web than spending the same amount of time pouring over tomes that are found in university libraries. Given the pervasiveness of the internet and its usefulness as a research tool, the answer cannot simply lie in disallowing students to make use of the web. How one teaches students to critically evaluate web sites, and, question the source of a particular site is of central importance. However, this too is fraught with difficulties. For, many of these 'new authorities' do not identify themselves as non-specialists. Moreover, one can spend hours scrutinizing a particular web site without ever knowing even the identity of its source.

Needless to say, this paper begs more questions than it answers. While touching on varied aspects of virtual reality, postmodernity, the Web as 'third place' among the Sikhs, and most particularly, the phenomenon of new authorities on-line, it is not of the scope to decide or even begin to discuss the merits or detrimental out-workings thereof. But suffice it to say, in an effort to return to the active process of dialogue and discussion that is taking part with in the "age of virtual *sangats*," postmodernism offers a useful framework for understanding *how and why* it is that many issues that have hitherto remained censured and even off limits within the specific religio-cultural meta-narrative that is the Sikh tradition, have within the virtual milieu instead become important exchanges.[40] It also sheds light onto the proliferation of what I have called the 'new authorities' among the Sikhs. This is of course not to say that the

[39] See Singh Brar 1998b.
[40] Singh Mandair 2001, 69.

traditional seats of authority, the aforementioned Akal Takht, SGPC, or gurdwara managements have been replaced. Yet, while they exist, it is my contention that there is a significant shift away from these traditional sites of authority toward the 'new authorities', the intermediaries of cyberspace. It is perhaps this aspect of the Sikh experience that brings with it the most profound challenges and, most importantly, a need to *bridge* the postmodern individual, 'Sikh tradition' intertwined and legitimated by the meta-narrative, and the proliferation of new authorities who have become intermediaries of Sikhism on-line, by virtue of their expertise within the digital domain.

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