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Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood

TIMOTHY S. DOBE
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Note on Diacritical Marks

The first usage of proper Indian names and terms in the following text includes full diacritical marks. Thereafter, most Indian terms are distinguished only by italics. Proper names and Indian words now in common English usage, such as Rama Tirtha and guru, appear without italics or diacritical marks after their initial instance. The exception to these rules occurs for the Indian language terms and names occurring in my own translations of Urdu and Hindi text where I again give full diacritical marks.
Hindu Christian Faqir
I

Introduction

UNSETTLING SAINTS

Sadhu does not mean saint.
SUNDAR SINGH

Freedom means to bow to no saint.
RAMA TIRTHA

I have been long trying to be a fakir and that, naked—a more difficult task. I therefore regard [Churchill’s] expression as a compliment, though unintended.
M. K. GANDHI

Sainthood between Accusation, Self-Assertion, and Apotheosis

In 1917, an Anglican missionary priest accused the Indian Christian convert Sundar Siṅgh (1889–1929), in Pune on his first pan-Indian tour, of claiming to be a “saint.” By allowing devotees to call him a sādhu and to bow before and touch him seeking blessings, he was, in fact, encouraging idolatry. Sundar Singh responded first by pointing out that the term sadhu should not be translated as saint, since it is not an exalted title, but rather indicates an ascetic’s sādhanā. A sadhu is a sadhu because of the “method of prayer and devotion” he practices. Second, he reinterpreted his devotees’ desire to see and touch him, not as idolatry, but as an expression of their “love” for him. Third, he reversed the accusation: by allowing people to call him “Father,” was not the priest taking a name that Christ forbade for all but God?

When the Punjabi mathematics professor Rāma Tīrtha (1873–1906) walked into the principal’s office in Lahore Mission College in 1899, he announced his resignation using idioms common to Hindu holy men
and women (sadhus), the very kind that worried Sundar Singh’s Anglican interlocutor. Sainthood in India, both then and now, has been provocative because Hindu ideas of divine embodiment have offended Christian sensibilities, provided critiques of Christian humility, and challenged scholars of religion to question their own Christian assumptions.\(^1\) As Rama Tirtha put it, he was quitting his teaching job because Principal Ewing could not recognize the very Christ he worshiped standing before him in the form of his Indian employee. This break with emerging forms of Indian middle-class respectability and professionalization was a key moment in the young professor’s turn to asceticism, culminating in his formal initiation as a renouncer early in 1901.\(^2\)

Rather than retire from the world, however, as Indian holy men and women are supposedly wont to do, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh both launched international tours soon after these confrontations. Rama Tirtha followed Swāmī Vivekānanda’s example to become a Hindu missionary, appearing in San Francisco to denounce the slavishness of conventional religion in favor of the divinity of the neo-Vedantin self and to champion Indian religious nationalism. Sundar Singh followed his fellow Indian holy man but went to Europe, America, and beyond to preach the “living Christ” who had appeared to him in a vision but whom the West had forgotten. While abroad, these saffron-robed and turbaned Punjabi holy men were often perceived to be the very Christ that each, in his own way, preached, extending the challenge that such Hindu views of the sadhu posed to notions of sainthood in transnational contexts. They both achieved a level of notoriety surpassed only by other “saintly” figures such as M. K. Gāndhī and, to this day, are venerated as saints in India and abroad, memorialized in numerous institutions, and praised in hundreds of texts describing their teachings and lives.\(^3\) Their images appear alongside the most exalted figures in Hinduism and Christianity: Rama Tirtha is at home garlanded and encircled by Krishna, the Goddess, and holy men in the Swami Rama Tirtha Mission in Delhi (Fig. 1.1). Similarly, several Indian churches are dedicated in the name of Sundar Singh, a status symbolized in the Australian stained glass window where he stands with Hebrew prophets and New Testament apostles (Fig. 1.2).\(^4\)

Sainthood thus appears first as an accusation, one leveled by a Christian against another Christian, or as a Hindu protest against a failure of western spiritual vision. It appears simultaneously as a kind of self-assertion, at play in Sundar Singh’s ready response, reinterpretation, and reversal, in Rama Tirtha’s dramatic resignation and divine claims, and in the apotheosis of
each figure. While their more exalted afterimages and memories may have obscured these earlier, more unsettled moments of sainthood, I argue here that such contestations were crucial to their success as upstart holy men. For the sacred in this colonial moment reflected the dynamics of imperialism, the multi-religious history of Indian sainthood, and a globalizing situation in which Christian sainthood could no longer be conceptually contained in self-referentially singular traditions. Especially as an accusation, the term saint itself requires a complex set of translations, accounts of interpersonal and power relations, plural religious practices, of charges and counter-charges. For Sundar Singh, British Christian understandings of sainthood and suspicions of Indians manifested in a distorted sense of embodied South Asian, Christian, and non-Christian forms of piety, a misapprehension bordering on hypocrisy. For Rama Tirtha, that hypocrisy was most apparent when Christians failed to recognize his growing religious consciousness as akin to their own ideals. As these examples illustrate, the sense of sainthood as an accusation and as a form of self-assertion has little to do with formal canonization, theological concerns about humility, heroic virtue, or confirmable miracles, or with scholarly typologies of the exemplary individual in comparable religions. Rather the saint emerges
as saint within the charged colonial, intercultural encounter in which concepts and practices of religion were being worked out, between British India and metropolitan centers. This book argues that sainthood was one of the foremost, if relatively neglected by scholars, sites for the production of religion.

In pursuing a historicized, comparative analysis of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh as colonial saints, however, I have resisted allowing the individual textures of their particular, and particularly religious, lives to be drowned out by discourse or to be dwarfed by power. Instead, I have
engaged spiritual-nationalist and postcolonial analyses of Indian religion and, simultaneously, have gone beyond them in several ways: (1) Rather than focus on Indian response to western rule and Orientalist discourse, I approach Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh as individuals, describing the particulars of their religious visions, experiences, and biographies and stressing their creative engagement with and partial transcendence of the forces that shaped them. This emphasis is important not only in order to do justice to the depth of their spiritual striving, but also because of the largely overlooked role of the saints themselves in the pursuit and performance of their own sainthood. (2) Unlike most accounts, asceticism plays a more substantive modern role here as constitutive of sainthood for both figures as a local, interreligiously shared idiom of religious perfection and power connected to politically charged discourses of the colonial public sphere. (3) These two dimensions come together through the ascetic capacities individuals use simultaneously to shape and present the self. The clothing of holy men, for example, resists the split of public and private, much as Islamic “veiling” both hides and reveals sociable and critical piety. (4) The concept of an ascetic public simultaneously carves out personal and social spaces, acknowledging the interconnections of individuals, their audience and larger contexts and, at the same time, the undeniable construction and power of inwardness, withdrawal, and isolation in the modern period. Put simply, the book unsettles sainthood by comparing and connecting Hindu and Christian upstart saints, men whose lives link religious subjectivity, ascetic practice and transcendence with the globalizing public sphere.

While the rest of the book explores the broader arcs of, key moments in, and critical questions about Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives in these ways, a minimal sketch of each, as generally understood, will help to put the above details in a wider framework. In their most common accounts, both men can be understood as saints through themes of devotion and standard models available in Hinduism and Christianity, respectively (renunciatory, bhakti, missionary heroism, or imitatio Christi, for example). Yet key points of tension remain unexplored in these dominant narratives, such as each figures’ vernacular ascetic connections, complex identities, and shared disavowal of their own role as objects of devotion. At the same time, the significance of less explored aspects of their lives and sainthood, each important to understanding their negotiation of contested holy man traditions in a colonial situation, can only be understood against the background of more settled stories.
Rama Tirtha was born in 1873 in the town of Muralīwālā, Punjab, now in Pakistan. Despite his humble upbringing in a poor Punjabi Hindu family, his future achievements carried on his family’s elite brahminical heritage and descent from the medieval bhakti saint Tūlsidās (1532–1623). Though he was, like his ancestor, to became famous as a renouncer, religious poet, and guru, his earlier successes in life were mostly more down to earth. After his earliest education in the local mosque and traditional early marriage, he enrolled in missionary high school in Gujranwālā, university at Forman Christian College, and higher mathematics study at Government College in Lahore, the capital of British Punjab. He learned English; excelled as a student despite poverty, ill health, and the demands of family and married life; and eventually taught graduate-level mathematics at premier western institutions in the capital. His early religious propensities, encouraged by his relationship to his guru and father’s friend, Dhannā Rāma, were, however, to become ever more central to his life from about 1894 onward. His own deep devotion to and visions of Krishna, work with Hindu reform organizations, and meeting with the great modern Vedantin ascetic, Swami Vivekananda, led him to public preaching, religious publishing, and, eventually, renouncing householder life altogether in 1901. Leaving wife, children, friends, and students behind, he wandered alone in search of the Advaitin (nondual) realization of divine oneness he now preached and, high in the Himalayas, attained the state of liberation-in-life (jīvanmukti).

From here, his fame and following spread, attracting even political figures such as the Mahārāja of Tehrī, who sponsored him on a worldwide journey to explain and spread Hindu spiritual wisdom, first in Japan and then, between 1902 and 1904, in America. Here, again showing Vivekananda’s influence, he preached a “Practical Vedanta,” demonstrating the relevance of this ancient Hindu philosophy of divine Oneness to everyday life in the modern world. After helping his western devotees realize their own inner divinity, Rama Tirtha returned to his motherland, first promoting Indian nationalism and spirituality, but soon turning away from outward organizational and political work and toward inward realities. He retired again to the Himalayas to pursue his own meditation, deeper study of Sanskrit, and a more systematic exposition of the teachings and poetry that had, until this point, spilled forth from his pen and mouth in inspired fragments. In 1906, these plans were left unfulfilled, as Rama Tirtha drowned in a tributary of the Ganges during his morning bathing. His death is understood by most disciples not as an accident, but as a final, watery liberation (jal samādhi) that confirms their guru’s sainthood. Like the avatāra Krishna he
loved so deeply and stands next to in his shrine in New Delhi, Rama Tirtha had fulfilled his mission of supporting Hindu dharma amid the rising tide of adharma (disorder, irreligion). To be sure, this adharma took the form of historical phenomena such as western materialism, Christian conversion, and Indian alienation from their own traditions, but the saint as saint emerges precisely to transcend and deny these, the embodiment of eternal (sanātana) and unchanging Indian divinity (and divinities).

Just as Rama Tirtha was pursuing his studies in urban Lahore, Sundar Singh was born to a landholding Jāṭ Sikh family in the village of Rampur, Punjab, in 1889. His devout mother taught him the value of love of God above material things by training him in worship (pūjā-pāṭh), arranging for his early religious instruction, and modeling respect for wandering holy men (sadhus). Spiritual turmoil came into Sundar Singh’s life, however, through his encounter with Christianity at the village mission school his parents enrolled him in and, especially, his mother’s death when he was fourteen. As his religious searching, depression, and antagonism to Christianity—he burned the Bible and threw stones at those he considered polluting missionaries—increased, he became so desperate that he vowed suicide on the village railway tracks unless God should appear and save him. Against all his expectations, God did appear, not as Krishna or other deities he was seeking, but as the very Christ of the Christians he so resented. This living, loving, brilliant vision of Jesus gave him the inner peace he sought and led him to Christian conversion. This peace would sustain him through his family’s harsh rejection of his conversion, and in his decision to wander across north India and beyond as a sadhu himself. After his baptism at St. Thomas’ Anglican Church in Shimla in 1905, he began this wandering life in earnest, enduring the hardships of poverty, homelessness, and even persecution for the sake of the Savior (mukti-dātta) he preached to his fellow Indians and, over the Himalayas, into Tibet and Nepal.

After roughly ten years of wandering and preaching in relative obscurity, Sundar Singh gradually emerged as an internationally known “Apostle to India,” as seen in the Australian stained-glass window. Starting in 1916, he was written about in glowing terms by western missionaries, scholars of religion, and Indian Christians. His vision for separating the “Water of Life” given by Christ from the “European cup” missionaries usually offered it in caught the imaginations of many and offered hope that India would, after decades of missionary frustration, both come closer to Christ and develop its own forms of fully Indian Christianity. The excitement led to
Sundar Singh’s two international tours (1918 and 1920), mostly in England, Europe, and America, where he preached a simple message of the universal human need for spiritual satisfaction, which only the Living Christ himself could fulfill, as he had for him. Despite a brewing European controversy over the possibly idolatrous adulation of the crowds for him and the delusional visionary, miracle, and martyrdom stories he sometimes included in his sermons, Sundar Singh went back to India a confirmed saint, a Christian holy man from the land of holy men, a mystic of mystics. Back in India, his increasing ill health often confined him to his recently purchased home in the Himalayan foothills, where he wrote eight short devotional books, one of which described his ecstatic visions of the “spiritual world” where he conversed with saints, beheld Christ in glory, and found a respite from earthly struggle. His insistence on emerging from such visionary seclusion by regularly returning to wander and preach by climbing across the Himalayas and into Tibet, in disregard for his poor health, eventually led to his disappearance on one last journey in 1929. For his devotees and admirers, this was an appropriate ending, for it meant that the Indian sadhu had likely achieved just the kind of martyrdom he so often spoke of and longed for, a self-sacrificial death like his Lord’s.

**Two Colonial Holy Men and (at least) Three Words for Them**

The South Asian term sadhu, often translated with the Christian category saint, is better understood, in English, to mean Hindu renouncer, monk, ascetic, or holy man. Surprisingly, however, one of the world’s most famous sadhus during the colonial period was not a Hindu at all, but, as noted above, the Indian Sikh convert to Christianity, Sundar Singh. Put simply, Sundar Singh’s identity as a holy man was a kind of double-sainthood; he was seen both as a Christian saint and as an Indian sadhu. While such complex doublings might strike us as puzzling, they are of a kind with the “disjunctions and surprising juxtapositions” that typify what Brian Hatcher has described as the oft-noted but seldom-analyzed eclecticism of colonial South Asia. Arguably, too, such stories and lives offer insight into recent postcolonial, comparative, and performative accounts of religion, topics taken up in greater depth in the conclusion.

Like other sadhus, Sundar Singh was a religious specialist who took to wandering, renouncing home, family, sex, and wealth in favor of religious
forms of transcendence long associated with Hindu religious goals, principally mokṣa (liberation). So identified was Sundar Singh with this “Hindu” role that the first book to introduce him to his American audience carried the simple title, The Sadhu, in much the same way as Gandhi “appropriated the title” of Mahātma, another widely used word for South Asian ascetic holy men. The widespread focus on Singh’s ascetic identity was grounded in his life story: days after his Christian baptism at the age of sixteen he not only became a sadhu but, as he put it, “married” himself to the saffron robe in the manner of Hindu renouncers for life. By all accounts, in this and other ways, Sundar Singh remained remarkably “Indian” despite his conversion to what was commonly understood as a western and imperial religion.

Aside from his saffron robe sadhu, however, what did Sundar Singh’s widely agreed on Indianness or even “Hindu” identity mean? The juxtaposition “Christian sadhu” raised myriad questions: if Christianity could be Indian, where was the line between Indian custom and full-fledged Hinduism? Was this a form of syncretism, eclecticism, theological fulfillment, or simple missionary success? Could Protestant Christians proclaim a living individual to be a “saint,” beyond the affirmation of the collective church as the “community of saints”? If so, on what grounds could Sundar Singh be distinguished from the culture of Indian “godmen”? And, as intellectuals such as Ernst Troeltsch and Antonio Gramsci asked: what was the significance of Sundar Singh’s non-European Christianity for the pressing questions of European religion’s “Absoluteness” or the Vatican’s changing attitudes to non-Europeans, respectively, or in more contemporary terms, for global or world Christianity?

The point here is not so much to try to answer these questions as to recall and understand their earlier force. For they represent the issues, interests, categories, and intellectual interventions provoked by the presence and performance of saintliness in the person of Sundar Singh. It is also, however, to call attention to what Jeffrey Cox calls Sundar Singh’s “masterful” ability to draw on a wide range of “orientalist imagery, charismatic Christian tradition, Victorian geo-religious romanticism, and biblical allusion.” Yet, just how did Sundar Singh and other colonial saints achieve their multiple effects? What was the “semantic potential of a name or designation”? Building on such questions, this study asks: what indigenous capacities, aptitudes, and traditions provided context and force to the wide array of South Asian saintly names?
If a Christian convert such as Sundar Singh could be a sadhu, Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh’s near contemporary, fellow Punjabi, and Hindu sadhu, could also be a “saint,” as he was often described. Such English-language use of historically Christian categories, however, was found not only on the lips of westerners as they improvised English for Hinduism, Islam, or Sikhism but was increasingly used by a wide range of Indians active in colonial encounters, including Rama Tirtha himself. Indeed, Rama Tirtha’s Punjabi world was one in which the reforming Hindu monk, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, famously criticized his fellow brahmins by calling them “popes” and accused them of “priestcraft” in Hindi. Rama Tirtha’s own disciple, Pūran Singh, described rigidly orthodox brahmins, without gloss, simply as “Pharisees.” It was in this context of religious reform, encounter, contestation, and mingling, as a lay organizer for the conservative, Hindu Sanātana Dharma movement, that Rama Tirtha met one of colonial India’s most famous modern holy men, Swami Vivekananda, just returned from defending Hinduism abroad. This meeting proved decisive for the young, religiously inclined mathematics professor; he soon became a monk. The specific form of renunciation he took made Rama Tirtha not only a sadhu or saint in the general sense, but a sāṁnyāsī in the tradition of brahminical asceticism of the Dasnāmis, the monastic order traced to the eighth-century guru and philosopher Śaṅkara. As discussed further below, the specificity of Rama Tirtha’s renunciation as a sannyasi reflects not only his family’s brahmin caste (Gosain) and his growing interest in Shankara’s philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, but also his engagement with distinctly modern Orientalist and Hindu nationalist versions of both.

Given the complexity of these dynamic interrelationships, even the culturally specific terms sadhu, saint, and sannyasi, I argue, thus need to be rethought, in short, historicized. That is, it is not enough to attend to cultural and religious contexts that do or do not translate the “saint” more or less well, because what counts as culture and religion remains unstable. In short, if culture “is as culture does,” so with sainthood. The multiplicity, multivocality, and varied translations of terms for holy men need to be examined as they shuttle back and forth within the flows, counter-flows, and “transcreations” of what Mary Louise Pratt has called the colonial contact zone. When Rama Tirtha embraced life as a sannyasi, was he repeating a centuries-old Hindu, brahminical tradition, departing from it for Vivekananda’s neo-Hinduism, or embracing Orientalist disdain for popular Hindu yogīs? By launching international tours and advocating patriotic
exercise programs, had such figures politicized an essentially otherworldly mysticism? Did Indian adoption of the language of “saints” indicate capitulation, resistance, or creativity in relation to colonial discourses?

Similar questions, of course, need to be asked of colonial Christian contexts with reference to modern Hinduism, missions, imperialism, and comparative religion. When Protestant missionaries and western scholars called Sundar Singh not only a sadhu, but a “saint,” as they characteristically did, what exactly did they mean and what did such naming accomplish? Was the term a simple translation of the ritual status of a sadhu, a theological judgment, an endorsement or critique of asceticism, an anti-Catholic polemic, the embrace of an emerging comparative religious category, or a strategic response to the rise of Hindu holy men such as Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha, and, eventually, Gandhi? When Sundar Singh himself explained to his hosts in Europe that his own family’s earlier hostility to him had changed, not because he had become famous but “because I am a saint,” what did he say in Urdu and how was he interpreted? How does this claim relate to his earlier claim that sadhu does not mean “saint,” made in the Indian context? That such claims were charged is evident from his and others’ need to defend uses of “saint” language and from the grand levels to which they would rise: Evelyn Underhill, for example, would soon write of Sundar Singh as the modern culmination of the entire history of Christian mysticism—four years before he died. The debate over Sundar Singh’s sainthood between the scholar of comparative mysticism, Friedrich Heiler, and pastor, psychoanalyst, and friend of Sigmund Freud, Oskar Pfister, is perhaps the best example of the unsettling effects of claiming sainthood within competing academic frames.

Forgotten Faqirs and Their Afterlives

I thus take sainthood’s polyvalence, situatedness, and controversial nature as starting points. In this sense, a saint can be said to offer himself as the site of multiple frictions and synergies, each building up the potential charge of a charismatic presence. Such questions and possibilities are among the many at play in the world in which the would-be holy men examined here attracted and met the gaze of their audiences. What did Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh do with the vast saintly—Indian and western—repertoires available to them? What did they themselves write and say about how they conceived themselves, other holy men and women,
and their religious goals? How do we acknowledge the power of their quest for religious perfection historically?

Adding to the complexity of terms sadhu, sannyasi, and saint is the type of holy man invoked by Gandhi in his response to Winston Churchill, namely, the _faqir_. The term, most often taken to mean a Muslim holy man or Sufi, obviously means something more to both Churchill and Gandhi. At a minimum it simultaneously signals perceptions of the worst (the Anglicized fukeer or fakir) and the best of Indian holy man traditions (_faqir_); the term is unsettled between the sedition of Churchill’s suspicions and the naked striving after religious perfection invoked by his Indian opponent. The term’s close association with the figure of the _yogi_ helps us start to make sense of this duality, making the saint in this sense, simultaneously, a site of the “reviled other and the ideal of embodied power in the world.”

The term and its associations are important here, first, because Gandhi and Churchill’s usage has ample precedent in the Urdu writings of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh themselves. These texts reveal that while both used the terms saint, sadhu, and sannyasi in both English and Urdu, they used the term _faqir_ to refer to themselves and to other ascetics considerably more frequently in Indian contexts. However, unlike both Christian and Hindu terms so far discussed, the figure of the _faqir_ was largely left behind by Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh, and their admirers when translating sainthood into English. Why? This fact is especially puzzling given the prevalence of this very term in English language descriptions of South Asian holy men during and before the nineteenth century and its later international resonance into Gandhi’s own heyday.

Far from semantic hairsplitting, attention to such lexical and translation details are clues to wider historical and religious processes: sites at which social forces and individual creativity take observable shape. It is, moreover, crucial to raising questions about received narratives, for example, the ways in which specifically Islamic traditions and shared Punjabi resonances have largely been written out of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s stories. It also reflects the historical complexity, plurality, and intertwined nature of Indian religious traditions, so often noted in India generally, but which take particular shape in Punjab. Even within so-called singular religious traditions such as Hinduism, for example, in the context of Bengali Shaktism, the terms _sādhaka_ and _bhakta_ map the particularity of holy men and their diverse memories. Jeanne Openshaw points out that the Bengali term “Baul,” as
used by scholars and by indigenous elites, bears little resemblance to the self-understanding and terminology of those wandering, singing renouncers she describes as *bartamāṇ-panthī*, a category closely associated with the term *faqir*. Similarly, Katherine Ewing, William Pinch, Mark Singleton, and David White have examined the ways popular ascetic traditions, closely associated with the terms *faqir* and *yogi*, were the target of centuries-old western and indigenous critiques. In this sense, *yogi-faqirs* were as much “others within” India as they were others for missionaries, Orientalists, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and explorers, figures uniting “respectable Hindus” and colonialists in a mutual distaste. Anglophone translations of yoga such as *hāṭha* and the holy men associated with them are thus integral to understanding modern Hinduism in the colonial encounter.

This background offers at least one partial explanation for Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s strategic decisions to downplay certain terms and traditions in English-language contexts. That both were willing to use the English word saint and the Sanskrit terms sadhu and sannyasi in English but consistently left out the Perso-Arabic term *faqir* is evidence of a complex translation process of sainthood. Much as the body had to be left out of the earliest presentations of transnational Anglophone yoga, so too were the *faqirs*, whose bodies were at the very center of western constructions of India, difficult to translate. But while the body has made its way to the center of transnational yoga as *āsana* in practice and its place debated in scholarship, the *faqir* remains largely forgotten, with some exceptions.

In contrast, the prominence of the term, as seen in their Urdu writings, for both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh is at the heart of this book for several reasons. First, the term highlights the shifting perceptions and powerful processes that have shaped the figure of the “Indian saint,” “Oriental monk,” and “mystic” in western imaginaries, an unstable process well represented by the once-prominent Anglicized term “fakir” or “fukeer” itself. When Churchill called Gandhi “a seditious fakir of a type well-known in the East,” the meaning was as clear for his western audiences as it is obscure to many Americans and Europeans today: it was an insult drawing on the host of negative nineteenth-century (and earlier) imaginings of South Asian ascetics. Gandhi’s response was, of course, to thank Churchill for the “compliment,” indicating, again, the instability, transnational circuits, and contested nature of saint language. Indeed, Gandhi’s counter-quip evoked past traditions and then-current representations of
Indian holy men in ways far more complex than a reverse-Orientalist version of the “otherworldly sannyasi” or “mystic.”

Second, the book focuses on the multiple indigenous meanings and dimensions of the term faqir itself, namely, its Islamic sources and its polyvalent possibilities in the pluralistic Punjabi context. I thus call attention to Islam as a “third space” beyond both colonial–Indian and Hindu–Christian scholarly binaries that, much like some Hindu nationalisms, still tend to associate Indian and Hindu problematically. It was in large part through faqir traditions, otherwise known as Sufism, that Islam entered India and became a creative religious presence, adopting local idioms and offering new, widely shared South Asian cultural resources. Thus, contrary to recent views that the indiscriminant colonial use of the term fakir for Hindus and others needs to be exclusively marked as Islamic and reflects western confusion, I point out that, along with other vernacular terms such as pir and yogi (vernacular, jogī), its indigenous usage reflects rich and fluid identities, which cannot be assigned to one religion. These usages are grounded in shared religious practices, symbols, rituals, and terms in precolonial Punjab, sharings that simultaneously enabled novel combinations and claims to authority. Lastly, since the term indicates the practice of poverty as a spiritual discipline—faqir literally means “poor person”—it foregrounds the shaping of religious subjectivities through ethical norms in ascetic traditions. These three dimensions of faqir traditions are, I argue, vital to understanding how Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh made themselves saints:

(i) colonial critique of and fascination with vernacular asceticism;
(ii) specifically Islamic and pluralistic ascetic traditions; and
(iii) continuing, embodied disciplines of ascetic self-fashioning.

The immediate need to allay colonial suspicions of South Asian holy men and women and their this-worldly dimensions was far from an abstract concern in the lives of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh. It can be seen, for example, in an incident recorded in Sundar Singh’s earliest piece of self-published Urdu writing. Merely wandering around north India as a faqir could get even a seminary-educated, Anglican bishop–befriending, Christian convert detained.

On alighting at the [Baroda] station, the police immediately seized me on suspicion of my being a mutineer, or else a robber, or something like that, and took me to the police station. There they made
minute enquiries of me. I thus had an excellent opportunity of preaching the Gospel to the people.\textsuperscript{30}

Such a reaction on the part of rank-and-file police makes it clear that the everyday world of holy men, of saints, on the ground was a long way from the rarified, so-called spirituality of Hinduism or Indian mysticism. This short account also suggests both Sundar Singh’s own firsthand experience with such reactions and his ability to diffuse them. Rama Tirtha too was well acquainted with the intrigue and sedition that formed much of the aura of the spiritual in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.\textsuperscript{31} Puran Singh records the story of two Indian agents of the Criminal Investigation Division (C. I. D.) visiting Rama Tirtha upon his return from America, but ultimately bowing before him.\textsuperscript{32} While we might suspect a hagiographical hand at work in this account, the execution of Rama Tirtha’s devotee and promoter, Amīr Chand, as one of the “conspirators” in the attempted 1912 bombing of Lord Hardinge offers a closely related historical example of spiritual sedition. We can thus begin to understand the reasons that holy men as fakirs have connections with modern monks as “saints,” and thus help us to revision religion, in part, in relation to government regulation, surveillance, and imaginaries.

Skepticism, suspicion, and judgment were not limited to British authorities’ concerns, but also took the form of repeated religious and cultural critiques in Europe and America of both these Indian holy men. During their international tours, both Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha were accused of spreading primitive forms of religion and superstition in an advanced, modern West that had, or at least should have, moved well beyond them. Thus, in order to be recognized as saints successfully, they had to be aware of and make the most of such Euro-American suspicions, negotiating and appropriating the very modern discourses that had marginalized their style of present-day ascetic religious practice. As Sundar Singh preached the Gospel to the imperial police and was widely venerated in Europe and America, so Rama Tirtha made disciples of the very colonial spies who came to investigate him. For both, colonial suspicion and the subduing of those who saw themselves as powerful superiors function as the very stuff of sainthood. Chapters 2 and 3 explore how such modern moments can be understood as new iterations of the longstanding figures of the “saint and the king” of precolonial memory, in which the superior power and authority of the holy man over political leaders is a recurrent theme.\textsuperscript{33}
The Case of the Bhakti Saint

In many ways colonial suspicions of the popular ascetic, the faqir or yogi, have been reinforced by Hindu sainthood studies themselves. For much of the twentieth-century religious studies discussion of Hinduism focused on the “poet-saints” of bhakti traditions, rather than on ascetics. For John Hawley, the widely circulated songs and stories of these saints are fundamental, for “modern Hinduism sings their tune.” In fact, reflecting the thematics of bhakti poetry itself—its emphasis on the inward reality of devotion and its critique of rival religious specialists, especially Nāth yogis—scholars have tended to present bhaktas (devotees) as anything but ascetics and to repeat rather than to complicate bhakti claims to render asceticism optional at best and arrogant at worst. As the fifteenth-century poet-saint Kabir puts it, for example, if salvation came from wandering naked in forests as yogis do, deer would surely be the first to achieve salvation.

Yet, while the broad identification of Hindu sainthood with supposedly non-ascetic bhakti figures might accord well with bhakti rhetoric, it exists in tension with other accounts of Indian holy men, as both earlier and more recent streams of scholarship suggest. The early twentieth-century Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, in an entry on “saints and martyrs,” describes Hindu saints as nearly synonymous with ascetics, and claims that the “chief Hindu saint” is Gorakhnāth, following dominant perceptions of nineteenth-century sainthood. Similarly, for David Gordon White, the ascetic Nāth yogis, not bhakti saints, have “always been the chosen holy men and wonder workers of the Hindu masses.” Such differing accounts of Hindu sainthood—of the centrality of the bhakta, on the one hand, or the (Nāth) yogi, on the other, not to mention the Vedantin gyānī or jīvanmuktā—suggest the need of contextualizing specific terms for holy men and, more importantly, of questioning scholarly models of sainthood itself.

Ironically, bhakti dominance creates problems for the study of bhakti itself. As David Haberman has pointed out, the common definition of bhakti as inward faith, devotion, or love is skewed by the Protestant antiritualist assumptions of early scholars of religion such as Rudolf Otto and Nathan Söderblom. Haberman’s study of bhakti sadhana, the discipline and method of devotion, makes clear that bhakti cultivates and is cultivated by embodied practices and rigorous, bodily discipline—in other words, through asceticism. In this respect, it is significant that Sundar
Singh himself connected the meaning of the term sadhu with just this concept, *sadhana*, a “method of prayer and devotion” and his devotees’ bodily behavior with devotional love, as noted above. Moreover, by defining bhakti as an inward devotion or love and taking bhakti rhetoric at face value, bhakti studies have shown little interest in the actual history of devotional asceticism, although the latter is in fact more the norm than the exception, even in traditions having the best claim to being “non-ascetic” such as Sikhism.\(^3\) Ironically, this very split is in some ways reified by White’s discussion of the “passing” of the yogi due to the mutual reinforcement of the Indian rise of bhakti, middle class and upper caste Bengali (*bhadralok*) innovation, and modern, western faith-based inwardness.\(^3\) Though Hawley, in my view rightly, has pointed out the problem and identified its roots in scholars’ Protestant historiography, it has largely been left to ethnographers to craft portraits of what to many religious studies scholars might seem contradictory—devotional, specifically bhakti and Sufi, artistic asceticisms.\(^4\)

Again, these connections commonly occur in the lives of the figures studied here. When Rama Tirtha stood on the boundary between his previous life as a householder and his new stage of renunciation (sannyasa), it was a verse of the blind, wandering, bhakti bard Surdās that sprang to his lips. Standing before the crowd gathered to bid him farewell, he recited: “The days have been lost in useless pursuit of the worldly temptations and the nights have been wasted in rest and sleep. O Surdas! Why should you worry about the happenings in the world? You should now remember God” (IWGR 5: 359). Similarly, Sundar Singh explained his ascetic refusal of sleep in order to spend the night in prayer with devotional idioms: night was the perfect time to spend enraptured with “my Beloved,” recalling Sufis’ nocturnal, intoxicating supererogatory prayers.\(^4\) Again the Islamic dimension of such devotional idioms deserves special emphasis here, since the particular Sufi presence within and contribution to South Asia bhakti have often been downplayed or neglected, not only due to emergent Hindu spiritual nationalisms, but within religious studies bhakti scholarship. Connections between Nānak and Kabir, for example, have been stressed to the neglect of the importance of Baba Farid, much as the Sufi romances’ usage of central Hindu bhakti idioms have only recently been discussed in the context of bhakti scholarship.\(^4\)

Who then is the Hindu saint—the brahminical sannyasi, the Nāth yogi-faqir, the *saguna bhakta* or *nirguna sant* as poet-saint or *sadhana* practitioner, the Baul or *bartaman panthi*? The āpta, jivanmukta, siddha, avatara, 
mahātma, avadhūta or paramahamsa? Who is the South Asian saint—the householding Sikh Guru, the humble gurmukh, the living Nāmdhārī guru or the ascetic Udāsī, the Muslim wali or faqir, the Jain muni, the Indian Christian convert? What of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Christian faqirs?

Specifying sainthood in local terms and challenging aspects of bhakti sainthood, however, leads to further questions about shared practices and tales: How do we best describe the widespread emphasis on renunciation and spiritual disciplines (sadhana), not to mention the mutually-reverberating stories and styles found throughout South Asian—Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Muslim and Christian holy man and holy woman traditions? How do we account for western and Christian effects on and perceptions of older norms in the modern period? The fact that different scholars, various types of scholarship, and successive periods will yield substantially different answers to these questions is a large part of this book’s point. In addition to studying these two holy men’s performances of a polyvalent holiness, then, I aim at the same time to highlight the shifting positions, meanings, and valences of sainthood as a wider category. Comparison, undertaken in shared contexts and contested times, has the benefit of casting a sustained and searching light on such complexities.

The need for suspicions and specificities does not of course end with the South Asian context. The wider study of sainthood, discussed at greater length in the conclusion, must likewise begin with basic questions: Who gets called a saint, by whom, when, and with what meanings? What other English or non-English terms (e.g., prophet, hero, martyr, apostle, genius) are related to sainthood or help demarcate the category’s bounds? How must someone act and speak to be recognized as religiously powerful or exemplary, for example in terms of celibacy and gender norms? Can saints complicate standard accounts of the religion they represent? Might the categories of religion cause misunderstandings of holy men and women?

If, as Catholic theologian David Tracy suggests, we need to be critically aware of the ways religious institutions in all traditions have named and at times tamed the holy men and women living at their centers or beyond their margins, such questions become doubly pressing. Put differently, since the Buddha has been a mortal man, a Buddhist deity, a medieval Roman Catholic saint, the Hindu god Viṣṇu’s avatara, and Vishnu’s sacred superior, caution about the relationship between holy humans, transcendent beings, and the religions that claim them seems prudent. Since Siddhārtha Gautama has appeared as a “Luther” or a “sweetly reasonable Victorian Gentleman” to religious studies scholars, wariness
toward academic reconstructions is also warranted. The study of religion, after all, is located within societies for which the “Oriental Monk” has been one of the most charged intercultural images of the past one hundred and more years. Hardly exemplars of fixed categories such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity then, holy men and women themselves might have something to say about what religion is or becomes in cultural encounters and in scholarly imaginaries, as a few studies have begun to suggest.

**Shared Idioms, Ascetic Practice, and the Vernacular**

While highlighting aspects of sainthood at times obscured by the broad categories of religion, this study also stresses that, in the north Indian context, the holy man is a strikingly singular, undeniably “magnificent, even theatrical figure.” That is, sadhus, faqirs, sannyasis, yogis, and, to a greater extent than usually recognized, exemplary sants and bhagats, are all figures united not so much by their teachings as by their distinctive forms of ascetic practice and flair. The great variety of types of and terms for Indian holy men and women are unthinkable without attention to ascetic distinctiveness, disciplines, and narrative tropes. Their lives are marked by social rupture—setting forth (parivrajya), renunciation (sannyasa), or the embracing of poverty (faqiri)—and their bodies by forms of dress and adornment that set all of them apart from householders. This is true of such supposedly householding sant figures of bhakti as Guru Nanak or Vaisnava bhagats as it is of any yogi, at least as conceived in the hagiographical tradition. The hagiographical tradition is, of course, far more relevant for understanding the precolonial background of ascetic practice in modern Punjab than historical reconstructions of an “original” Nanak. Indeed, as McLeod has shown, the term sant, so associated with Sikh and other bhakti traditions, and Indian (bhakti) sainthood generally, is largely absent from Sikh tradition before the nineteenth century, and thereafter takes on the sense of popular living holy men whose piety and power can be sought for blessings as well as for intervention in the colonial public sphere. These findings are echoed by Gold’s work on the network of living holy men that constitute santmat throughout north India as much as they are foreshadowed by Dayananda Sarasvati’s more negative usage of the term sant. Put simply, South Asian holy men and women in general,
much like David Gordon White’s yogis, are recognized in the everyday, 
in story or in life, far less for what they believe, their philosophy, or their 
poetry, and far more for what they do, how they attract others through 
the ascetic power (*tapas, baraka*) that they offer. The point here then is to 
expand on White’s “yogi as practitioner” by shifting away from a “history 
of meditation” in the works of “philosophers, commentators and scholars” 
and toward narrative accounts and performance, going well beyond *hatha* 
and *Tantra*. If, in particular, White highlights the power of yogis to create 
and inhabit a wide range of bodies, this study can be seen as exploring the 
way modern monks, as *faqirs*, deployed similar powers of self-fashioning. 

The turn to practice, performance and power, however, is hardly a 
turn away from texts, since to focus on action is one way to “historicize 
texts and textualize history.” Indeed, literary scholars have provided pro-
ductive models to think with and beyond religions to the shared idioms 
of South Asian religion and culture. More than a fixed Hindu epic with 
stable meanings, the *Ramayana*, for example, functions as a shared li-
terary model that offers basic elements—what A. K. Ramanujan calls a 
“pool of signifiers”—from which others may draw for widely disparate 
visions, including Buddhist, Jain, Shākta, Dravidian anti-Brahmin, mod-
ernist Indian Christian, and feminist. Just so, I argue, South Asian holy 
men and women “not only relate to prior [examples] directly, to borrow 
or refute, but they relate to each other through [a] common code or com-
mon pool. Every [new example], if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into 
it and brings out a unique crystallization, . . . with a unique texture and a 
fresh context.” As Farina Mir has shown, much the same can be said of 
Punjab’s poetic *qissa* tradition in which *faqirs* figure prominently and, of 
course, variously. The genre’s sources in Islam and Islamicate traditions 
and their disparate adaptations in much wider circles nicely parallel both 
the heterogeneous approaches to the *faqir* in these texts and the approach 
taken here. In this sense, South Asian holy men and women are not 
unlike these literary formations, made central not by a classical instance 
(an Ur-text model) but through repetitive, unwieldy and contested cultural 
and religious histories. 

The analogy of ascetics and texts of course breaks down: unlike lit-
érature, renouncers are a special class of persons of nearly any religious 
tradition marked as both similar to and different from each other by 
their practices and appearance, not first and foremost by language, liter-
ary styles, or even particular deities. Precisely because of this, however, 
asceticism offers multiple adoptions and iterations. Texts, their retelling
and remixing, are only one element, as it were, in the ascetic repertoire. This virtually unlimited range of reference can incorporate the pluralistic web of figures, things, symbols, and stories, each a potential resource for upstart saints. An author or reciter may retell or rewrite a singular tale in new ways, but, through the ever-expanding network of tales, practices, and material culture of holy persons, each individual can improvise retellings. They can draw on the many genres of stories told by ascetics and in which ascetics appear and improvise on practices shared across religious boundaries. Authority and recognition are available through varied lineages, the achievement of ascetic feats, the performance of miracles, and material objects that enable context-specific spectacles.

How might we best characterize the “pool of signifiers” that adorns the holy man to account for the centrality of practice: in terms of styles, as shared idioms, as common sites of cultural memory, through the patterns of ritual grammar? As the recent emergence of these terms in scholarship suggests, there is no simple consensus for complexifying standard models of classics, canons, and religions, thus keeping scholarly categories open to revision. Seen as a “minimal set of props,” however, new scholarly categories might respond to the dynamic contexts and lives at the heart of this study.

The idioms shared by South Asian holy men help locate them in the spaces betwixt and beyond singular religious traditions. More specifically, the concept moves beyond models of syncretism long applied in discussions of popular religious practice. Instead, shared idioms highlight “everyday cultural and religious conduct,” which exhibits not unconscious mixings of prior “wholes,” but “vital elements of identity formation as an ongoing process and the historical product of creative human interventions.” As Peter Gottschalk and Anna Bigelow have shown, these idioms often cluster around sites of cultural memory such as Hindu and Muslim temples and shrines; often founded on the pasts, presents, and presences of holy men, such sites offer productive places to explore everyday conduct and local narratives. Susan Bayly’s work further shows how shared spiritual landscapes, constructed from Sufi and Śaiva imaginaries, for example, may be the very site in which to situate literary texts. In her words, “[T]he Muslim cult saint has always been a figure who may leap the boundaries between ‘Hindu’ and ‘non-Hindu,’ ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic.’ He is therefore a figure who has moved in a sacred landscape which would be familiar to almost any south Indian.” Rather than take Punjabi “shared piety” primarily in the sense of shrine veneration, then, I focus on the figure of...
the faqir, whose presence, narratives, and memory are at the center of such communities, and consider the role of ascetic practice and values to be central to understanding such relationships.

Perhaps most importantly for the present study, work on the ritual grammar used by South Asian holy figures points us to the living relationship between holy men and women and their followers. By attending to the ritual dimensions of these relationships, Joyce Flueckiger has shown how they are shaped not by religion in the abstract, but by the physical spaces, material and visual texts, colors, rhythms, multivocal lexicon, and public intimacies that embody healing in the vernacular. More than the sannyasi, yogi, bhakta, or even pir, the figure of the bābā, signifying a “supernaturally protective father-figure or ‘patron’”—and, Flueckiger and Meena Khandelwal would add, the amma (mother)—emerges as central in ethnographic studies of holy persons in South Asia attentive to dynamic boundaries and crossings. Ritual grammar helps us articulate the ascetic as a figure of power and intimacy, self-consciously and proudly drawing on multiple religious affiliations and identities even while asserting strong and particular commitments.

Although this book is largely historical and comparative, my own field experiences during research in India pushed me toward these kinds of anthropological insights for understanding holy men in Punjab and South Asia, generally, and in the case of the two saints examined here. After all, these two specific figures and vast company of contemporary Indian ascetics remain alive, powerful, and myriad in India and beyond. Visits to Sundar Singh’s home village and birthplace in Rampur made the limits of theological, textual, and classical sources especially obvious. A cup of tea with a neighbor of Sundar Singh’s family home, now memorial church, for example, brought out this story: a new bride’s struggle with infertility was solved when Korean pilgrims to Sundar Singh’s birthplace prayed for the family, an act of blessing that produced the beautiful young boy who came out into the courtyard, on cue, to pose for a picture. Was it Sundar Singh’s or God’s power that brought the boy, I asked, but had trouble understanding the answer, likely due to both language and theological translation difficulties. At the site of the sadhu’s home itself, I noticed the image of Sundar Singh placed iconically at center of the worship space, met a teenage boy who viewed Sundar Singh as an avatara—just one of the many forms God takes, he said—and spoke with a female member of Sundar Singh’s extended family who had started coming there because of the sadhu’s powerful, persistent and haunting appearance in her dreams.
Perhaps surprisingly, then, it was these field visits to a Christian convert’s birthplace that first impressed on me the idea that the holy man is, above all, a figure of power and blessing, and that saints might mean and do different things in different contexts and for different devotees.

Field visits to the Rama Tirtha Mission in New Delhi, their āśrama in Dehra Dun, and to the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, made it even clearer how misleading Orientalist images of isolated ascetics meditating in jungles or performing contorted “penances” were. Rather, both the memory and living presence of individual and masses of ascetics, it seemed to me, served as nothing less than the glowing center of communities, entangled in and enabling a wide range of range of social relationships, gazes, desires, and intimacies. An afternoon with a poor farming family in a Kumbh Mela tent waiting for a visit from their guru and a night spent in a powerful bhajan session among middle-class householder and sadhu disciples of Rama Tirtha in Dehra Dun impressed on me how attractive, diverse, and personal such relationships could be. At the same time, other experiences provided counter-balance: An encounter with an aggressive nāga bābā (naked holy man) who tried to wrench my shawl away as he gave me darśan of the austerities of his lower extremities, my Indian host’s fear I would be drugged and kidnapped by sannyasis, and the provocative antics of a Hanuman-mimicking bhakta of the Jhūnā Akhāṛa all helped me understand something of the “sinister yogi” well before I read about him.

To approach the South Asian saint as faqir is thus to do more than to explore the specific terms used by Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha, their Islamic and pluralistic resonances, the centrality of ascetic practice or colonial constructions and counter-constructions. It is also to attempt to understand the idioms shared by holy men or women, of a variety of traditions, as forms of the vernacular. Much as the range of discussion and terminology related to shared idioms unpacks the common practices and sites of multiple religious traditions, the idea of the vernacular enables recent studies of South Asian asceticism to extend their reach far beyond brahminical traditions, its ideal types, or Hinduism as such. My use of the term—a category closely related but not equivalent to the popular and the folk—draws together a number of scholarly conversations, one major result of which is to rethink the vernacular, not as the polar or romanticized opposite of the brahminical, but in terms of complex relationships between elite and popular.

In its central linguistic meaning, the vernacular denotes nonelite languages spoken and widely accessible in contrast to registers signifying the
elite, learned, liturgical, and cosmopolitan. While it might be appealing to simply contrast these two registers, Sheldon Pollock’s work has examined the vernacular as a product of the transregional qualities of the Sanskrit cosmopolis that actually created new literary vernaculars.\textsuperscript{63} While scholarship on these and other cosmopolitan texts has increasingly situated them historically and in relationship to practices such as translation and conversion, the language-centered model of the vernacular can be further connected to ritual and performance practices, in some cases, decentering or repositioning written texts and language themselves.\textsuperscript{64} In Punjab, for example, Anshu Malhotra argues that oral forms were integral to the print dissemination of reformist ideology, even as they retained the very vulgarity reformers opposed.\textsuperscript{65}

Attention to literary, performed, and ritual contexts—all dimensions of the vernacular as I use the term—thus highlights and complicates the opposition between the language, religion, and culture of the people and the elite in favor of a variety of intertwined patterns. Malhotra notes that visiting Muslim saint (pir) shrines in Punjab was shared across caste, class, and gender boundaries, reflected gendered relations of dominance, and encouraged women’s embodied rituals and inter-caste mixing.\textsuperscript{66} For Pollock too, practice, in this case of courtly patronage, is important, suggesting that the vernacular is more a product of elite culture than its rebellious opposite. At the same time, if the vernacular is now the elite and literary, the popular may also “invade” elite texts themselves, making miracle tales, perhaps the greatest of all signs of the so-called popular, central to Sanskrit philosophical texts.\textsuperscript{67} Finally, my use of the vernacular highlights the fact that South Asia contains not only complex interrelationships between cosmopolitan and regional, elite and popular, but also varied self-conscious debates about them. From Śrī Vaiṣṇavism’s dual (ubhāya) Veda of devotional poetry and Sanskrit scripture to Kabir’s rejection of Sanskrit as a stale swamp in favor of the living water of bhāṣa, South Asians have long theorized the very themes at play in recent scholarship.\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Colonial Code-Switching, Modern Religion, and Asceticism}

“Code-switching” is a linguistic and cultural phenomenon described in ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies of people’s capacity to switch or mix usage of different languages and cultural frameworks frequently and
fluidly.\textsuperscript{69} It is common in individuals living in multiple ethnic, national, religious, and language contexts. As described by Kirin Narayan in her work on second-generation South Asians in America, changes in language, reference, and style can be handled differently by individuals for varied contextual and individual reasons. Overall, however, attention to “code-switching” has helped scholars develop a sense of South Asian subjects as self-confident individuals who actively negotiate and integrate a diverse range of reference, narrative, and meaning, rather than as the “American-born confused desis” they have often been taken to be. For Narayan, the emphasis on displacement in the model of “diaspora” studies contrasts with the active strategies of “emplacement” her work reveals: people use narrative to make this place their place.\textsuperscript{70}

In my view, colonial South Asian subjects can be seen otherwise than through the lens of imperial dominance as “confused,” displaced individuals ever struggling with change and mimicking modernity. Rather, the concept of code-switching helps us reposition the colonial negotiation of difference, similarity, multiplicity, power, and context within everyday realities. It has the advantage—over concepts such as syncretism—of assuming that individuals are self-conscious and aware of difference, the reality and authority of others, and, at the same time, able to constructively engage others and their own self-understandings. We can look for the ways people creatively shape a compelling sense of self, always with reference to but never reduced to social and discursive contexts. In Bigelow’s study of Punjabi saint shrines, for example, a Hindu devotee of a Muslim pir demonstrates awareness of the differences, similarities, and context-appropriateness of Islamic and Hindu lexicons, as well as politeness to his ethnographic interlocutor, as an organic expression of his own devotion. While we might see this ability simply in terms of traditional, indigenous, pluralistic practice, these idioms of devotion also help construct distinctly modern memories, such as that of Partition.\textsuperscript{71}

The model of code-switching can also help reconceive the figure of the modern monk, presented here in the mode of the \textit{faqir}. Instead of seeing modern monks as imitative of western models of religion or as merely reversing Orientalist tropes of the “spiritual East” for nationalist ends, I argue that they need to be thought about in their own right, that is, as ascetics. An appreciation of vernacular asceticism, in particular, opens up the conversation to the dynamic shifts and self-awareness characteristic of upstart colonial saints, people connected to indigenous traditions and, at the same time, busy “emplacing” those traditions in
the modern, colonial context and the power-inflected everyday. In this sense, modern monks were making Hinduism and Christianity more at home in their particular context as a part of maintaining the same kind of home for themselves. Seeing upstart modern monks through the lens of code-switching offers an important recognition of the intermingling of popular and elite, of colonial critique and assertion, and of religious disciplines of self-transformation that negotiate and complicate the registers of the traditional and the modern. While certain models of code-switching may imply too much separation between distinct discourses rather than fluidity, several studies suggest other alternatives, including an overarching theological rational affirming difference as divinely ordained or a view that assumes differences are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this way, the complexity of modern colonial sainthood calls to mind what Orsi describes as the “braided” realities of modernity.

Thus, it is not only that the sainthood of lesser known figures such as Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh has some important connections to the vernacular dimensions of asceticism, but also that attending to such relatively unexplored dimensions can help us rethink widely studied figures—from Dayananda Sarasvati to M. K. Gandhi—in relationship to the “shared idioms” of South Asian sainthood and the contours of colonial code-switching. This latter ability might also be understood in terms similar to the cosmopolitanism characteristic of the creative speakers of “guru English”, described by Srinivas Aravadamudan. I argue that, like many of the capabilities explored here, from engagement with visual culture to the production of autobiography, modern monks were at the forefront of recognizing and establishing the shared potentials, convergences, and synergies of so-called tradition and modernity, its ideological opposite.

More standard scholarly accounts of the ascetic and saintly turn of the modern Indian public sphere, explored further in Chapters 2 and 3, rely heavily on factors such as nationalism, Orientalism, Christianity, and Weberian modernization theory. These dimensions are certainly key parts of the answer, long neglected in the context of Indian Christianity and modern Hinduism. Yet they are far from complete answers. That is, to leave the question here would be the equivalent not only of continuing to place the West center-stage, in my view, but also of limiting the religious practices, experiences, and commitments of exemplary individuals to a supporting role in what often reduces to a nationalist story, however much under critical scrutiny. The problem then is not so much that all things western are the main point of reference, though this is certainly a problem,
but that this trend keeps the supposedly secular modern state at the center of scholarly narratives. As Brian Pennington puts it, religion can be seen, first, as a genuine and independent cause of social behavior but, second and more importantly, as providing “the context and motivation for transformation of social relations and for the strategic appropriation of dominant signs and models.”

Feminist recuperations of Paṇḍita Rāmabāī, for example, have tended to sideline the ways her critique of dominant Hindu and Christian hierarchies cannot be separated from her spiritual struggle. Since both figures at the heart of this study renounced not only “the world” in the abstract but, specifically, the colonial institution-building, reform movements and formal politics that swirled around them, what we might call the priority of the religious, if not religion, is especially important to bear in mind. Paradoxically, that same priority—the religious over the political—is key to understanding premodern and modern forms of “spiritual sovereignty” within and beyond the explicitly political. Arguably this shift can help us recover the existential dimensions of colonial politics themselves: in Simona Sawhney’s words, “the essential mortality of human life and the question of political community were mutually implicated and gave meaning to one another.”

Thus, even secular forms such as Bhagat Singh’s atheistic anarchism need to be related to religious traditions and institutions.

Rather than stress the imposition of western models, then, I present the ability of upstart colonial holy men to rise to prominent and authoritative positions as the result of self-conscious practices of self-fashioning and representation. In many ways, such moves can be seen as the continuation of longstanding indigenous processes of negotiation and change, in which, for example, many of the “wild” yogis of the Goraknāth tradition fused with the brahminical Dasnami monastic orders, perhaps with the encouragement of the Mughal ruler Akbar. If, in the colonial context, the unwieldy worldliness of vernacular ascetic traditions were, at least in part, cleaned up and represented in terms more palatable to a number of elite discourses—governmental, Protestant missionary, Orientalist romantic, brahminical Hindu, and aspiring middle-class Indian elite, among others—it remains important to consider the ways in which ascetic techniques, practices, and sensibilities remained vital to that very creativity. Without such a consideration, the success of modern monks in resisting the privatization of religion or complete internalization of asceticism goes largely unexamined. Put simply, while the ascetic body largely disappeared from the rhetoric of yoga of modern Hindus such as Vivekananda, the
robbed and naked bodies of modern monks themselves offered a powerful presence.\textsuperscript{79}

For, as noted above, the \textit{faqir} suggests not only the vernacular, Islamic, and plural identities in South Asia, or Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s particular lives, but also poverty and wandering as foundational forms of spiritual practice. The South Asian holy man or woman is not only a powerful source of blessing and healing but is also understood to derive those powers especially from his or her renunciation, ascetic disciplines, and way of life. This fact too is worth thinking about theoretically, in terms of how asceticism might ground analysis in practice and simultaneously offer analytical categories that keep religion central, open to ethical reflection and cross-cultural comparison. Unlike categories such as idiom, identity, memory, ritual grammar, performance, or, as Green suggests, “region, language, kinship, economy or even technology” (though all important), asceticism helpfully complicates modern models of privatized religion and allows us to keep particular religious concerns—namely, self-transformation and religious subjectivity—at the heart of the conversation.\textsuperscript{80} Religion may after all, as Flueckiger suggests, be the \textit{basis} of rather than antagonistic to shared idioms and practices. As such, asceticism might contribute to analyses that move beyond categorizations of Hindu and Muslim communalism, precisely by excavating the way the “religious” remains important “in its own terms” in precolonial and colonial times.\textsuperscript{81} Similarly, in the specifically colonial context, Christianity’s close or fraught relationships to Englishness and asceticism already renders empire and, more importantly, notions of hybridity that depend on pure “cultures” ambivalent.\textsuperscript{82}

Thus, while this study is first and foremost a local, colonially situated, and comparative examination of ascetic sainthood in the lives of two individuals, it also draws on wide-ranging conversations of asceticism as a comparative category not constrained by singular historical contexts. As a growing body of work demonstrates, asceticism, like other widespread phenomena, can be productively compared across Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, and modern and premodern periods.\textsuperscript{83} For Geoffrey Harpham, asceticism is a force at the very root of culture itself, providing motivation, tropes and techniques for the resisting the “is” with the “ought.”\textsuperscript{84} More particularly, as Gavin Flood argues, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist asceticisms shape particular kinds of selves, producing subjectivities that challenge fundamental, common assumptions about the “individual.” For Flood, asceticism’s paradox is that it achieves a fulfilled
self through self-deconstruction, reversing the “flow” of the body and submitting to a textual tradition within a comprehensive, cosmological vision. Here we might remember that while Asad’s genealogy of religion is often invoked by scholars in relation to non-western contexts, his main contrastive examples to modern “religion” are in fact western and Christian. That is, it is his study of medieval Catholic monasticism that not only reveals the latter’s post-Enlightenment character but also offers a deeply “religious” and embodied alternative to modern “religion” as belief. In such premodern and also modern visions, practices such as calligraphy, or the rehearsal of weeping, for example, reshape the self in line with a total order of truth, troubling Enlightenment divisions.

I want to suggest that this perspective opens up productive questions. In the colonial context, we might ask: What are the connections between ascetic wandering and the centrality of transnational experience to Gandhi’s sense of self and religion? Might Narasingha Sil’s account of Vivekananda’s “holy hitchhiking,” which he seems to contrast with premodern asceticism, instead give us insight into both contexts? In a more contemporary context, might attention to asceticism, for example, help us better describe the fundamental shift from earlier forms of disciplinary capitalism to recent neo-liberal consumptive models? Postcolonial calls to retrieve the “anti-imperial universalisms” of figures such as Gandhi would certainly suggest as much. In addition to its importance to South Asian religious traditions and its powerful symbolism in colonial discourse, asceticism offers ways into rethinking both the self and religion, and perhaps much else, the most basic of which is a strong connection between subjectivity, embodied practice, and a sense of the religious everyday that eludes well-worn categories of secular modernization, religious privatization, or purely cognitive models of truth.

It is important to relate the above arguments to a query I have often received as this project has developed: doesn’t turning to the saint’s active role in the pursuit and performance of sainthood and, relatedly, stressing sainthood’s public dimensions, run the risk of ignoring the isolation, solitude and inner experience so important to mystical traditions? It would of course be simply wrong to suggest that no South Asian ascetics live in isolation, that their inner experiences are unimportant, or that norms of ascetic self-denial of the ego and renunciation are simply irrelevant to sainthood imagined as spectacle. I do not intend to and do not actually suggest this, and in fact, argue that it is the power and imagination of such forms of transcendence and ascetic difference that give ascetics much of
their potential and real public power. At the same time, I recognize that my emphasis does run counter to the overwhelming emphasis on the “spiritual” elements that has characterized so much thinking and writing about South Asian holy men and women and that I aim to balance.

Thus, I argue for the inextricable relationship of the inner and the outer, the private and the public, at the very heart of understanding South Asian asceticism as such. To offer a comparative example, this complexity is captured well by Peter Brown’s study of late antique Christian ascetics living in Syrian and Egyptian deserts, who, nevertheless, typically lived on the edges of towns and imperial outposts. Such saints were worth seeing precisely because they were hard, yet not impossible, to see; pilgrimage to such places enabled and was imagined through the “memory of the eyes” and living visions of biblical worlds. Indeed, the very assertion of the existence of isolated ascetics proves the point of a fundamentally sociable sainthood: if ascetics were completely isolated, they would be unknown and incommunicable, a kind of total absence akin to the much discussed “ineffable” that, according to William James, partially constitutes mystical experience. Likewise, the Sufi assertion that “only God” sees the saints (‘awliya) or that true saints are “hidden” hardly contradicts but rather undergirds the many public roles they play theologically, hagiographically, and historically. In Hindu contexts we see similar tensions but also relationships: While some scholars see a contradiction between Shankara’s philosophical renunciation of action (karmasannyāsa) and the hagiographical memory of his founding a monastic order, it is precisely memory’s configurations of such relationships that I want to understand.

The wider, comparative study of asceticism and sainthood can bolster some of the South Asia–specific arguments made here. Just as Peter Brown’s work on the late antique holy man made the social role of Christian ascetic practice and saintly identity a scholarly concern, Foucault’s argument in favor of attending to the Christian hermeneutics of the self and to the classical aesthetics at work in ascetic technologies of the self has helped reconceive the body as a site of social control, resistance, and transformation. Might we similarly speak of South Asian asceticism in terms of a performative ethics of the body? A critical study of sainthood and race, for example, that moves beyond reading the saint as “symptom” in favor of attending to the agency of the saint, is emerging that asks precisely such questions of politics and piety. If so, how might we relate tradition-specific “religious” asceticism to forms of disciplined self-fashioning at work in modernization, which may or may not have
In what ways might we compare the territoriality of Sufi sainthood examined by Vincent Cornell, for example, with the nationalized, “radio transmitter” like “territory of grace” presided over by St. Jude described by Robert Orsi? I suggest that a sense of sainthood as emergent in particular places and persons can help us answer these questions, since it allows us to conceive of sainthood not as a reified quality or sweeping social shift in mentalité, but in terms of negotiation, as a performance only possible with particular and unstable publics. As Aviad Kleinberg puts it of Christian contexts, “The processes that actually established a person as a saint, the specific social transactions that make a saint out of a nonsaint, have been left out of the picture.” For Kleinberg, then, the “unit” of sainthood cannot be arrived at by counting and analyzing canonization data as Weinstein and Bell have done, but only by attending to the “saintly situation—that situation where a person is labeled a saint and his or her behavior interpreted within the parameters of saintly performance.” It may be then that it is not only an “Indianized” Christianity that is at home in the world of South Asian Sufi saint shrines, but also that such contexts can help us better understand Christianity in a wide range of historical (often modern, European) periods and places. Corrine Dempsey’s work, in particular, on Catholic sainthood in south India, suggests that local traditions there are comparable to both Hindu and European examples, including indigenous assertions to understand a classically “British” and white saint, St. George, better than the British or the Vatican. Indeed, the various claimants, critics, and intimates of Sundar Singh, the problematically Protestant “saint,” included not a few Roman Catholics. As the Franciscan sisters who invited him to Rome to meet the Pope put it, the Jesuits who would deny Sundar Singh’s sainthood “do not represent all Roman Catholics.” Such examples call into question the truism of Roman Catholicism’s “fully articulated Christian notion” of sainthood, since this model identifies that notion with an institutional one, rather than call our attention to the ways even among Roman Catholics saints are context-specific, contested, emergent, and never-finally-settled figures—despite and because of Vatican decisions. Put differently, the fluidity of decentralized sainthood in traditions such as Hinduism and Sufism might offer just the models we need to understand Euro-American and broader Christian contexts more dynamically. While the recent move in the emerging field of Indian Christian studies has been to move past missions history, from seeing Christianity “in” India to seeing it “of” India, it may also be that such local forms can yield insight
into obscured western histories. To take just one example: the preeminence of wandering in many Sufi and Hindu holy man traditions, amply reflected in Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s lives, may in fact parallel this long-neglected ascetic mode within Christian studies. Such comparisons in turn may raise questions about the predominance of medieval Roman Catholic sainthood as the “classical” form rather than, for example, late antique traditions, much as the figure of a modern, ascetic Protestant saint does in this study.

Still, while Kleinberg’s model shifts our attention to sainthood in performance, including the saint’s would-be audience—whether clerical, monastic, or lay, and perhaps whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox—it needs to be asked if his focus on the audience of the saint rather than on the would-be saint’s performance, retains some of the “splendid isolation” of Brown’s earlier holy man. That is, as Brown later came to reflect because of reading scholarship on South Asian holy men, it is well worth considering the ways that the holy man himself worked with models and mentors, including “other” Christian fathers and mothers and non-Christian holy men and women, within a broader “spiritual landscape.” As Nile Green puts it, the South Asian holy man is a “changing figure adapting a flexible repertoire to the needs of his audience.” In other words, the South Asian saint is “polyvestiary” or “multiply clothed” not only in terms of how his audiences dress him up, but in terms of how he styles himself. In this sense, too, the “agency of the saint” herself emerges as a comparative thematic with particular resonance in South Asia. Stanley Tambiah’s argument that (Protestant) Weberian models, with their prohibition of inquiring into the sources of “charisma,” fail in the ascetic and material contexts of Hindu and Buddhist sainthood, marked out a similar trajectory some time ago, and suggests that South Asian traditions of holy people may be one of the most productive sites to question some of the limits of ideology critique.

Thus, just as the category of the vernacular in recent discussions complicates previous oppositions between the elite and the popular, so the room for individual agency in performance studies and the emergent concept of publics help us rethink the contours of sainthood as shaped by the relationship of the inner, the isolated, the individual, the social, and the performed. While the entire book explores these relationships, Chapters 2, 3, and the Conclusion, in particular, flesh out the ways notions of the public and performance help mediate these tensions and reimagine oppositions.
In the present Introduction, I have sketched some of the framework for and motivation behind the approach to sainthood developed in the rest of the book while introducing the two holy men at its heart. The lives of Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha, as I read them, suggest that sainthood is in some need of unsettling: both the contestations that the pursuit and performance of saintliness provoke and the way that category itself has tended to function abstractly make this an important point. Simply put, the approach taken here centers on the historicized comparative study of would-be holy men themselves. Stated more fully this means, first, that the place of upstart saints in the pursuit, practice, and presentation of their own sainthood unsettles theological and sociological accounts that favor transcendent claims or the historically shifting perceptions or mentalité of devotees, cults, and hierarchies, respectively. Contextual, humanist, and critical sainthood studies, too, then appear helpful but limited. Second, the relevance of vernacular asceticism to the case of modern monks highlights the controversial discourses of the faqir/fakir, the history these discourses emerged within, and their shared idioms, as well as the fact that these discourses were reinvigorated and redeployed in unsettled imperial times. Third, an appreciation for the role of the holy man or woman and the shared idioms of vernacular sainthood unsettles accounts that focus exclusively on the texts, symbolism, and meaning of the saint’s message, and, instead, reminds us that “culture is as culture does.” That is, we can attempt to understand how upstart modern holy men understood themselves, how they pursued their religious ideals, and how they achieved their smashing public success better if we attend to their creative use of an embodied, heterogeneous, and powerful repertoire made possible and fostered by shared idioms of sainthood.

The rest of the book is divided into three sections, each made up of two chapters that further develop this approach through specific kinds of comparisons. The first section begins with a description of vernacular Punjabi holy man traditions in order to compare what western missionary and Orientalist perceptions of Indian saints, on the one hand, and modern refurbishments of ascetic practice, on the other hand, reveal about modern religion. Chapter 2 contextualizes ascetic sainthood within the specific “shared idioms” of the vernacular Punjab and Protestant perceptions of the otherness of Sufi, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian ascetics as “saints” and “fakirs.” Undercutting
these discursive contrasts, however, a central point that emerges here is to document shared dimensions of the material, this-worldliness of modern missionary Protestantism and the very vernacular asceticism missionaries found so repugnant and, more importantly, attractive. In Chapter 3, I argue that the so-called western model of textual authority of Orientalism and the privatization of religion in the modern concept of “spirituality,” highlighted by postcolonial studies, in fact remained deeply connected to models of personal, masculine, and ascetic authority best captured in the concept of (past) “Great Men.” In contrast, by transforming this kind of abstract Orientalist idea of Indian spirituality through their living presence in the present, modern monks such as Swami Vivekananda and Dayananda Sarasvati highlighted the embodied nature of religious identity, claimed direct religious authority, and constructed new spheres of sovereignty.

The book’s second section, composed of Chapters 4 and 5, compares Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s enactments of this bodily presence, ascetic authority, and sovereignty on their European and American visits. I argue that both men self-consciously helped create a visual image of what Max Müller promoted as the “spiritual race” of India, especially through their own ascetic dress. Both used ascetic dress as a kind of “social skin” that challenged racialized perceptions of the “spiritual” yet “dark” Indian, setting the aptitudes of South Asian shared ascetic idioms to work in a new context. In Chapter 4, I examine the ways Rama Tirtha remapped the South Asian opposition between renouncer and householder onto Orientalist ideas of a spiritual India and a materialist West. In so doing, he transcended standard Orientalist binaries by challenging his American audiences to confront their failure to realize the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy that, he claimed, his saffron robe embodied and western views of race obscured. Chapter 5 describes Sundar Singh’s consistent identification with his saffron robe and simultaneous reticence to discuss Hinduism or the Orient in favor of a thoroughly biblical idiom. In so doing, he fulfilled the desire for the “Oriental Christ” inspired by Orientalism, biblical studies, and popular visual culture. Taken together, Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s English-language speeches, visual image, and press reports demonstrate the importance of dress as a part of the performance of Oriental sainthood for western audiences, highlighting the role of what Charles Hirschkind has called the “substrate of sensory knowledges and embodied aptitudes” in religious formations, public reason, and varied publics.
The final section of the book, Chapters 6 and 7, returns focus to the South Asian context. If the previous chapters work together to undermine the fiction of a textual, individualist and inwardly religious modern West and an embodied, ascetic, and idolatrous East by examining the importance of asceticism, dress and religious vision across such divides, this section examines autobiographical writing, usually taken as a key sign of western modernity, in relation to South Asian literary history, ascetic modes of self-transformation, and forms of religious subjectivity. The chapters compare Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s life stories as they appear in their own largely overlooked self-written accounts. A close reading of these unexamined Urdu autobiographical sources reveals the ways that a supposedly “relational,” other-directed self and its Indo-Persian literary shapes simultaneously work to claim individual authority for the would-be saint, innovating new forms of what I term a distinctive autohagiographical genre.

Chapter 6 focuses on Rama Tirtha’s serialized, journalistic accounts of his summer wanderings and experiments with renunciation to make the case that self-writing in this mode becomes itself a form of ascetic fragmentation and fulfillment of the self. By harnessing the classic tropes and oppositions of renouncer discourse, Rama Tirtha addresses and destabilizes the professionalized, respectable, rationalized utilitarian regimens of colonial life. His serialized texts use citation and storytelling in affect-laden, bhakti modes to vernacularize Vedanta and render his own autobiographical voice porous, allowing the poetic recitation and narratives of bhakti and Sufi exemplars to speak through and, in a sense, become him. Chapter 7 takes up Sundar Singh’s 1915 work A Collection of Incidents, which, unlike the standard account of his conversion by a Pauline vision of Christ, situates his life as a faqir within an elaborate, hidden world of Indian Christian martyrs, an occulted Himalayan rṣi, secretly Christian sadhus, and a geo-religious vision of ascetic India. Overall, I argue that Sundar Singh’s focus on extraordinary (Indian) others in a story about himself is a form of self-denial and self-assertion of a kind with the repeated images of frailty and reversal described in the text. That is, the text uses the ascetic reversal of householder values, Christian martyrdom, and shared Sufi and Hindu idioms of divine embodiment to accomplish the sacred transformation of the marginal, the abased, and the despised into sites of divine privilege.

This section ends with one final comparative example that makes convergence, comparison, and code-switching most visible: the overlapping role of lineage and authority in vernacular asceticism and the emerging
field of comparative religion. Put simply, Rama Tirtha constructs an ahistorical and democratic lineage of saints such as Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, and, importantly, Krishna, at once “emplacing” himself within this lineage and challenging the internal contradictions of the developing field of comparative religion. As recent studies have shown, the field had simultaneously defined religion on the model of an “ethical” Christianity as universal in nature in sharp contrast to Hinduism as an “ethnic” religion, a comparison Rama Tirtha overturns. Likewise, Sundar Singh’s esoteric Indian Christian lineage of sannyasis revealed a secret to be publicly flaunted in the face of Protestant missionaries, figures much more closely connected with the supposedly “non-theological” project of scientific comparison of religions than once acknowledged. Through this tale, he offered not merely an “indigenous” Christianity, but a counter-narrative to that of a universal Christianity through an easily translatable and freely given scripture.

The Conclusion further develops theoretical and methodological perspectives on postcolonialism, comparison, and performance in light of the lives of the two figures at the heart of this book. In this context, the study of South Asian holy men and women suggests important connections with broader conversations in sainthood and religious studies. In particular, I make a final argument for comparison not only as an important method for scholars or because of the historical interrelatedness or shared idioms of certain contexts, but also as a key part of religious life lived on the ground and in relation to cultural, religious, and colonial encounters. The complex awareness, layering, and negotiation of plural religious identities in evidence in Sundar Singh’s and Rama Tirtha’s senses of self and strategies of self-presentation, can be understood as “aptitudes” that not only had local roots but also important uses in engaging the disparate “codes” of colonial South Asian and modern Euro-American contexts. The anthropology of Christianity, for example, is also bringing to light the need to move beyond accounts of a static indigenous culture under a “surface” conversion, on the one hand, and accounts of conversion that risk merely repeating some converts’ condemnation of indigenous religion and culture, on the other.

My concluding argument then is that religious phenomena such as traditional lineage moves and plural identities should be understood as forerunners of conversations that scholars of religion and of global Christianity have only recently pursued in depth. Put differently, the saints beat the scholars to it. The forgotten and unsettled moments of sainthood
explored here are marked by the very capacities, convergences, and counter-narratives that are increasingly important to the study of religion more broadly. My aim in this book is to continue the kind of conversations Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha began with their interlocutors about what being a “saint” or a “Christ” did or didn’t mean. For, as I read them, these began and should continue as conversations, confrontations, and displays in which saints and subalterns speak as subjects rather than only as objects of study.110
Idolatry and Popery are too much alike.
Robert Stewart, Presbyterian missionary in Punjab

How the Pope Came to Punjab
Vernacular Beginnings, Protestant Idols, and Ascetic Publics

Writing in 1871, the American missionary William Butler expressed his hope that western influences in India would lead to the steady decline of what he called the “lazy crew” of Indian ascetics. Butler’s views were typical of mainstream nineteenth-century colonial reactions to living South Asian asceticism, reactions including colonial legislation and British warfare against bands of unruly “fukeers” or “fakirs.” As cultural warriors themselves, Protestant missionaries had launched decades of critique of the prideful pretensions of ascetics, those they not only called “vain idols” in human form, but also, more surprisingly, characteristically represented as “saints” within such negative accounts.

Yet Butler’s wishes, like the ill-fated missionary dream of India’s conversion, went unfulfilled. Unfulfilled, moreover, not only with regard to everyday South Asian religious practice, in which ascetic traditions still flourish today, but also especially in terms of the relationship of empire and asceticism itself. For it was, as Churchill declared, a “seditious fakir of the type well-known in the East” that showed that it was actually India’s faqirs who would help end, rather than be eradicated by, Empire. More broadly, the leading figures and movements of much of modern Hinduism, including but also well before Gandhi, had a distinctly ascetic character “which hardly seem[s] to connote ‘modern’ by Western definitions.” Beyond this Bengali-centered Hindu pattern, typified by Swami Vivekananda, the emergence of leading holy men such as Dayananda Sarasvati, Rama
Tirtha, and Swami Shraddhānand among Punjabi Hindus, Attar Singh among Sikhs, and Ghulām Ahmad, Jamā'at ‘Ali, and Baye Miyan among Muslims—played key roles in defining powerful modern forms of their respective traditions. It was a Punjabi ascetic, too, in a startling reversal of Butler’s prediction, who became a hero, even a saint, of the Protestant missionary world in India and beyond—the “humble and despised” (haqir) faqir, Sundar Singh.

The lives of Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha, described briefly in this chapter, are both distinct from and connected with the wider roles played by colonial asceticism at such elite levels. Here I will focus on their distinctness, for, like Punjab itself at the time of their births, their life stories begin on the margins of the expanding colonial order and incipient pan-Indian nationalist trends. Their early lives were spent in rural and small-town worlds where local holy men were key parts of vernacular practice and imagination. To be sure, these realities were in many ways the opposite of the globetrotting fame each would later achieve as saints capable of representing India to the West, yet the fact that both did achieve such a status is all the more remarkable considering their connections to a much-maligned vernacular asceticism. For Protestant missionaries, along with Orientalist scholars and others, were at just this time busy redefining and reshaping Indian religion, not so much through conversion, but through the construction of textual, inward-looking, and philosophical versions of ancient and modern Hinduism, seemingly far removed from the everyday worlds of yogis.

To a greater extent than often recognized, however, what would come to count as authentic religion was, like sainthood, unsettled, in many ways produced through the circulation of ideas and images of its alleged opposites, not only heathen idolatry and Indian effeminacy but also asceticism. Arguably, the ascetic body was India’s most powerful idol, since the confrontation with living holy men, at times perceived as “demons,” carried a more present power than that of the “much maligned monsters” of stone and bronze. More specifically, the faqir as saintly idol functioned variously as a sign of Hindu superstition and contagion, and as a potent Protestant image of degraded Roman Catholic saints at home and abroad. While others have noted such negativity as a part of the critique of “Orientalism,” the specific theological and cultural idioms that Protestant missionaries used in their encounter with faqirs, idioms closely connected to universalizing Enlightenment models of religion, have received little attention. As Robert Yelle points out, of the many reasons for this neglect
among many postcolonial scholars, for example, perhaps the most problematic is the assumed Eurocentric story of the West’s presumed secularity. Unsurprisingly then, scholars have seldom compared these western imaginaries with vernacular asceticism in indigenous contexts or reflected on the wider “sadhuization” of modern Indian religion in relationship to earlier traditions.

A brief word about that wider contemporary context is thus appropriate. The persistence of asceticism in the modern period despite numerous critiques might of course be taken as evidence that asceticism in South Asia is simply as natural and timeless as the Himalayas. Thus, in this view, leaders were naturally ascetics in accordance with ancient patterns of South Asian spirituality. Yet as Patrick Olivelle points out about asceticism’s ancient origins themselves, the need for an historical account applies in the modern period, as well. As we will see in Chapter 3, religious studies scholarship on modern Hinduism has focused on western models of religion, which arrived in India through Orientalist texts to be reappropriated by Hindu gurus and monks who fused the philosophical Vedanta of Shankara with an “ascetic” Indian nationalism.

Yet the limitations of what Yelle calls a “theory of a Great Divide” also apply in these later cases. That is, despite important critiques of homogenized Indian religions, the lives of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh also demonstrate the continuities, complexity, and creativity of newer and older norms. For such innovations opened up possibilities for upstart holy men in a newly available public sphere increasingly peopled by nationalist sannyasis. These innovations not only flummoxed earlier critiques of asceticism but also upset our assumptions about just who might make use of modern Hinduism: an Indian Christian convert or a mathematics professor and ardent Krishna-devotee (bhakta) with little use for the Indian National Congress, the Ārya Samāj or the Ramakrishna Mission. What emerges overall as we examine the lives of Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha in the context of regional, vernacular asceticism, while keeping emerging nationalist, Sanskritized forms on our horizon, are the connections between these two poles rather than their more commonly discussed contrast. Seeing these connections enables us to understand the means, norms, and capacities offered by vernacular forms through which asceticism becomes, not so much a spiritualized, symbolic nationalism, but an embodied counter-sovereignty to colonial rule. But this is an argument for the next chapter, which requires first that we get a better sense of what it meant to be a Punjabi faqir in three specific contexts: Sundar Singh and
Rama Tirtha’s early lives, missionary imaginations, and local vernacular sources. Each of these contexts positions us in ambiguous terrain, between the vaunted “passing of the yogi” and the zenith of the sannyasi nationalist hero.

**Mahatmas and Maulvis: Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh in the Early Modern Vernacular**

The sovereign world of “spirituality” created by Bengali nationalism and described by Partha Chatterjee was as distant from Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s early lives as Bengal was from Punjab. The colonial period of Punjab’s history after all began roughly only twenty years before Rama Tirtha was born, as calls were just emanating from Bengal to join with Punjab, for example, via an appeal to Guru Nanak’s vision of “unity.”

The dynamics of middle-class Anglicization and alienation brought about by British education had, even in urban areas, yet to have the deep effects they had long had in Bengal; nationalism as a dominant cultural force, not to mention a political, representational reality, was only a distant possibility in the Punjab of this period. Indeed, the kinds of rationalizing, westernizing religious reform and cosmopolitan humanism associated with Bengal’s Brahmo Samaj never took deep root here. Instead, those interested in such movements at all more typically attempted to reconcile a greater amount of contemporary Hindu, Sikh, and Islamic practice with the pursuit of new agendas of reform and education. Groups such as the Arya Samaj, Sanatana Dharma, the early Siṅgh Sabhā, Ahmadiyyas, Jamāl Alī’s Naqshbandiyya, Barelwī, and Deobandī movements typified this more accommodating mode in contrast to others perceived as having traveled too far West, such as the Brahmos and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān. Although each contributed to the hardening of religious identities between communities, we cannot overlook the dynamic world of multiple, shifting, and overlapping identities on the ground in such contexts. The difference is well illustrated by the fact that part of the Brahmo Samaj’s rationalist, social-reformer wing, became, in Punjab, the Dev Samaj, a group centered around the worship (pūjā) of a divine guru seen as a “degrading act of human worship” by modernizing Punjabis. Such local particularities, too, can help us trace the surprising allegiances that complicate accepted narratives of communalism and religious conflict, such as the alliance of many Muslims with the Sanatana Dharma Sabha against the perceived
similarities of radical reformers in both traditions, Arya Samajis and the “Naturiyya” followers of Sir Sayyid.\textsuperscript{15}

In the kind of smaller cities and villages where Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha grew up, these organized engagements with Christian mission, British rule, and religious controversy were only incipient. Their early upbringing reflected a Punjabi world of overlapping religious boundaries and shared rituals, suggesting Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha had much in common. As scholars of the region suggest, the lived realities of “Punjabiness” (\textit{punjābiyat}) cross many religious, linguistic, and cultural lines, but have suffered from the “elision if not erasure of Punjabi identity from academic writing,” obscuring the “elusive” and “varied” yet powerful meanings of the term.\textsuperscript{16} In this sense, Punjabiness is enmeshed in the local religious practice that Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha encountered as young boys. Sundar Singh’s family, for example, like many Sikh families, lived a blend of Hindu, Sikh, and Islamic piety that resisted categorization. Rama Tirtha, a Vaishnava Hindu, studied at the local Islamic school, where a maulvi taught him the Persian Sufi poetry he recited all his life, perhaps reflecting the longer life of Indo-Islamic culture in Punjab than in Bengal.\textsuperscript{17}

In particular, ascetics and gurus played significant roles in both their lives, introducing them to lived traditions of vernacular religion. Indeed, the prevalence of the term \textit{faqir} in their vocabulary reflects this local sense of the holy man as basic to the sacred landscape of Punjab. The \textit{faqir}’s ubiquity is clearly seen in the Punjabi \textit{qissa} tradition, vernacular epic love stories, best-known and loved through the often-retold poem \textit{Hīr Rānjhā}.\textsuperscript{18} Though not eradicating them, shared dimensions of popular religious practice mitigate the differences between Sundar Singh’s Jat Sikh and Rama Tirtha’s Brahmin families, as well as their respective conversions to Christianity and neo-Vedanta. Indeed, the minority status of Punjabi Brahmins, the dynamic and varied religious, economic and caste identities of Jats, and egalitarian themes in Sikh, Sufi and regional bhakti traditions all might be seen as helping lay the groundwork for each man’s openness to vernacular asceticism and their later religious critiques of untouchability. That both lost their mothers early on suggests even broader patterns, in which family deaths structure the lives of many renouncers.\textsuperscript{19} I turn now to the details of this formative period for both.

Rama Tirtha was born in October 22, 1873 to a Gosvāmin (Gosain) Brahmin family in the village of Muraliwala, Punjab, roughly sixty miles north of Lahore, in what is today Pakistan.\textsuperscript{20} His father, Hīrānanda, was a priest who traveled wherever his services were needed. Though this
was a difficult life, and signals the relatively low, minority social status of Brahmans in Sikh- and Muslim-dominated Punjab, the family traced itself to an illustrious ancestor, Tulsidas, the composer of the best known vernacular Ramayana. Born during Diwali, Rama Tirtha entered a world celebrating the victory of God’s descents (avatars) that had inspired his sannyasi ancestor’s devotion. Rama Tirtha would later take up such traditions as symbolic of this Rama’s, that is, his own, rule as a victorious, spiritual sovereign.

Rama Tirtha’s descriptions of sovereignty in Mughal—he would typically call himself Rām bādshāh—rather than Hindu (rāja) idioms, however, can be traced to his school (maktab) days in the local mosque. He was a talented student, memorizing countless Urdu verses and reading classic Persian texts such as the Gulistān and Bustān of Sa’di. The early education of this Punjabi speaker reflects the historical Islamic presence in the region and the overlap between indigenous elite and colonial policy against “barbaric” Punjabi.

It addition to mystical verses (ghazals) marked by Sufi imaginaries, Rama was attracted to the stories of the Hindu gods (kathā) on his visits to local temples. Coming back home, he would display his skill in performing Puranic tales before captivated relatives. We might assume that such religious proclivities foreshadowed his early renunciation of family, but instead, in accordance with householding Brahmin values, his father took them as compatible with conventional life: the ten-year-old boy was married, though he and his wife would not live together for some time.

Rama Tirtha’s father was not fully content with the meager living his priestly work had brought his family, however. Aware of the value of English education under colonial rule, he enrolled his son in a missionary school. This was a choice that was not only widely shared among certain, often Brahmin, groups across north India at this time, but that, as Hatcher points out, also generated an outpouring of autobiographies sparked by such moments of colonial “conversion.” In a twist suggestive of the complicated relation between the modern and the traditional, Hirananda’s decision in favor of modernity plunged the boy into the world of popular ascetic religion. Rama went to live with his father’s close friend, Dhanna Rama, in Gujranwala where Mission High School was located. The match between Dhanna Rama’s eccentric asceticism and the boy’s religious sensibilities soon produced an intense guru-disciple relationship, even as Rama discovered his aptitude for mathematics and science in missionary classrooms.
Dhanna Rama was well known as a devotee (bhagat) of Krishna, often given the title Bhagat or simply “God” (rabb). Though devout and with ascetic leanings, Dhanna Rama also ran his own shop, where he made copper and iron goods. Additionally, since childhood he had been an avid amateur wrestler and maintained celibacy (brahmacarya). Though a saintly reputation, celibacy, and wrestling may seem an incongruous mix, a cultural logic connects them. According to Rama Tirtha’s own disciple Nārayāṇa Swāmī, Dhanna Rama attributed his wrestling victories over opponents of much greater size and strength to faith (pūṇa viśvās).

Throughout his life, ascetic practices, aimed at strengthening both body and spirit, made Dhanna Rama a theatrical figure: he would, for example, wear a heavy coat in the hot season, go nearly naked in the cold and alter his consciousness through states of silence or laughter that would last for days (RP: viii).

Dhanna Rama’s asceticism also linked him with professional sadhus. By accompanying a local “mahatma” for solitary ascetic “exercise” (ḥūb ekānt abhyās karnā) in the jungle, he attained yogic powers (siddhīs) that made him famous and fascinated the young Rama Tirtha (RP: ix–x). Dhanna also trained him in physical culture, supported his education, and inculcated some of the “nine practices” of bhakti in him. The guru, like his disciple, was attracted to kathā performance, weeping at the grace of Krishna to Sudāmā in the rāsmaṇḍala (RP: viii). It was also during this time that Rama Tirtha read the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the principal text of Krishna devotion in nineteenth-century north India.

Many of the features of these formative contexts—from the siddhis of wandering yogis and the practices of bhakti to the eroticism of the Puranic Krishna—were to be given negative valences in colonial critiques of Hindu practice, relegated to the degraded realm of the vernacular, much as was Rama Tirtha’s own mother-tongue. This cleavage was perhaps nowhere as intense as with Rama Tirtha’s submission to his own guru, itself central to the bhakti practices described in the Bhagavata. Indeed, Rama Tirtha regarded Dhanna Rama as his guru and more, as fully God (āp bīk kul paramēśvar haiñ), a relationship detailed in the hundreds of letters he would write his guru from Lahore (RP: 32). He saw himself as the slave (gulām) of his guru and God, whose “grace-filled glance” he asked for on the mundane and sacred details of daily life.

However, many of Rama Tirtha’s own disciples would later sharply criticize Dhanna Rama. The critiques stem from the fact that their guru’s guru was far too close to the vernacular ascetic practice spurned by
both colonial and much modern Indian discourse. Such traditions were increasingly unacceptable, not only to missionaries, but especially in the reformist atmosphere of 1890s Lahore and beyond. The Arya Samaj, for example, the region’s most influential Hindu reform organization, was, like their founder, Dayananda Sarasvati, dismissive of popular gurus (siddhas, sants, bairagis) who emphasized miraculous powers to deceive the credulous masses. His Satyarth Prakash characteristically accuses both Brahmins and sadhus of being corrupt “popes”: though they make a show of Sanskritic knowledge in garbled mantras, contemporary holy men mocked the classical ideals of brahminical asceticism (sannyasa) instituted by the rishis (Vedic seers). Here the western Protestant critique of Catholicism that Dayananda learned from missionary friends intersected with wider Indian historical precedents, colonial religious reform, and the polemical construction of authority.

Rama Tirtha’s own attitude toward Dhanna Rama and the vernacular culture of mahatmas he embodied would develop in complex ways, but it never led him to the sharp judgments given by some of his followers. His own attraction to Advaita Vedanta, itself begun under Dhanna Rama’s direction, would lead Rama Tirtha to define himself more independently, as having transcended the role of disciple, and thus his dependence on his guru. While this move toward Advaitin renunciation has important links to the spread of the new, heroic sannyasi ideal in Punjab, Rama Tirtha would continue to meditate on the figure of the vernacular faqir, telling his own disciples stories of love and devotion (prem va bhakti) for his beloved childhood guru (RP: 240) and writing of the power of the “true sadhu-faqir” to bless and to curse kings. These were just the kind of stories that Sundar Singh was likely to have heard told by and about the local faqirs he, like Rama Tirtha, knew well in his childhood.

Sundar Singh was born on September 15, 1889, in the small village of Rampur in the princely state of Patiala, some fifty miles from Ludhiana, to a landholding Jat Sikh family. He was a devotionally inclined boy and required by his mother to perform morning worship (puja-path) daily before eating. She also frequently brought him on trips to local temples and to see sadhus. While these and other popular practices were soon to be gradually redefined as unacceptably Hindu by some Sikh reformers, they were very much a part of the vernacular Sikh religion of Sundar Singh’s upbringing. In fact, while “Vedanta” would come to signify a purified, pan-Indian nationalist Hindu spirituality, it has a vernacular, Punjabi manifestation in Sundar Singh’s early training under a “Sikh sadhu,” likely
an ochre-clad Nirmala ascetic and “strongly Vedantin.” Though there is no figure in Sundar Singh’s life quite comparable to Dhanna Rama, he would write of his boyhood guru (mahatma) affectionately as a generous man of “good and exalted ideas” (nek o ‘alai khayālāt) over twenty years later. Noting her young son’s religious affinity, his mother suggested he would one day join the faqirs. As Sundar Singh once put it: the Holy Spirit made him a Christian, his mother made him a monk.

The Holy Spirit also had his agents at work in the world of Sikh village religion, of course. For, in accordance with wider missionary strategies, female missionaries to women in the home (zenānā) developed a relationship with Sundar Singh’s mother, visiting her with education, hygiene, and the Bible. It appears that these visits caused no serious upset, and Sundar Singh was enrolled in the nearby Christian mission school. Here he was introduced to the Bible through regular instruction. There is, however, a fair amount of unclarity about his own reaction to missionaries, the Bible, and Christianity in general. Many of Sundar Singh’s own descriptions portray his antagonism for all three: he became a leader of a ring of troublemakers who disrupted Bible class, washed himself after being polluted by the shadow of a missionary, and publicly burned the Bible as an act of protest against this “foreign religion.” Other accounts suggest that far from being a raucous ringleader, Sundar Singh was a quiet, shy boy whose only noteworthy relationship with the Bible was voluntarily attending late night classes with the mission school headmaster. In all accounts, however, his early attraction to asceticism remains a constant: one childhood friend remembered that Singh always intended on becoming a sadhu, before anyone could imagine he would become a Christian. It is this vernacular attraction that I want to emphasize here.

Despite such continuities, these were unsettled times individually, domestically, and socially. The mission school was shut down over the conversion of a Sikh boy there, reflecting emerging anxieties among Sikh leaders responding to similar conversions. At home, the death of Sundar Singh’s mother and one of his brothers profoundly affected him. As Singh describes this period, his unrest drove him to scriptural study and meditation. He writes of his father saying to him, “There is plenty of time to think of these things later in life. I suppose you must have got this madness from your mother and the Sadhu.”

This “madness” would lead Sundar Singh to vow suicide on the village train tracks unless he had a vision of “Krishna or Buddha” in the year 1904. The unexpected vision of Christ that came to him instead echoed
precedents of Hindu holy men such as Nāmdev and Rāmakṛṣṇa who, as it were, forced God to appear through the threat of suicide, even as it simultaneously replayed Pauline, biblical patterns. While these resonances would appeal to later Indian and non-Indian audiences, the experience led directly to his alienation from his family: he soon left home for the Christian High School at Ludhiana and was baptized immediately after he reached sixteen, the legal age for conversion. Given Christianity’s association with colonial rule and with recent mass conversions of “untouchables” in the region, his family’s opposition to this transformation was largely understandable, if extreme. Additionally, the idea of his becoming a sadhu meant his father would lose another son, this time to a religious vocation rather than illness. In similar cases, Hindu and Jain parents have often opposed children’s ascetic aspirations because early renunciation undermines householder life patterns.33

The opposition only pushed Sundar Singh further toward the life of a faqir. During his next ten years as a homeless, wandering, preaching Christian ascetic, he remained an obscure figure, far from the missionary hero and celebrated saint of Indianized Christianity he would one day become. The reasons for that initial obscurity have much to do with the disconnect between the vernacular religion informing Sundar Singh’s Christianity and what was coming to count as true religion in modern India, whether Christian or otherwise. For the dominant forces of Protestant missions, empire, and Indian reform, many indigenous traditions were far too close to Rome, even in rural north India.

**Invasion as Mission and the Shape of Religion**

The substantial shifts of perception that enabled both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s rise to recognition, coming as they did at the very end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, stand in stark contrast to the dominant negativity about contemporary South Asian religious practice in western discourse of earlier decades. The first missionary statement of a less starkly polemical (at least by contemporary standards) approach to Hinduism, J. N. Farquhar’s *Christ the Crown of Hinduism*, for example, was published only in 1913, while the first major study of living ascetic traditions just preceded it, J. C. Oman’s work of 1903.34 Earlier attitudes of civilizational, religious, and racial superiority conditioned colonial perceptions, especially of living ascetic practice.
In Punjab, such attitudes, reaching their height in the aftermath of the “Mutiny” of 1857, coincided with an unusually ambitious, active, and anxious colonial project of transformation. Rather than simply dismissing these as “Orientalist” or “Western” views, however, what Edward Said calls a full “inventory of effects” requires that we see Orientalism itself as varied and dynamic. Protestant missionaries, for example, operated with distinctive and influential logics, models of religion, scriptural sources, and religious experiences, seldom examined by religious studies scholars, an oversight that a few historians of empire have begun to acknowledge.35

The British mission in Punjab officially commenced with the annexation of the region in 1849, thus completing the map of British India. From the invitation issued by the British Officer at Lahore to the first missionary in Punjab in 1834, to the prayers and funding of Major Martin, an officer of the East India Company, missionaries were courted by officials to help transform the region through conversion, but also by other means.36 Long discouraged by the reluctance of the “Christian Government” in other regions, missionaries now felt “a mighty impulse” from an encouraging administration for what Cox calls an “ecclesiastical invasion.”37 Robert Clark, the leading missionary of the Church Missionary Society, looked back on this period as that of the “Christian heroes in the Punjab,”38 when “both the Bible and the Prayer Book were believed in . . . [and m]any [officials were] the founders of our Punjab Missions.”39 Administrators’ sense of Christian mission was characteristic of the distinctive colonial experience in Punjab, where the rulers arrived as conquerors “possessed of a mature imperial consciousness and lifestyle,” ready to radically transform Punjabi society.40 Thus, despite real differences between missionary and imperial orders, the local perception that the government favored missionaries while undermining non-Christian traditions was not far from the truth. Within thirty years of annexation, a network of missions’ institutions covered the area, census conversion numbers alarmed local religious leaders, and governors of Punjab continued their “warm interest” in missionary work.41

Despite common images of missionaries as pith-helmeted itinerants, these imperial connections meant they were more typically the “institution builders” of churches, schools, and hospitals.42 The dominant powers in such projects were institutions themselves: the Church Missionary Society (C. M. S.), based in the evangelical wing of the Church of England (and thus rivaled by the “high Church” S. P. G.) and the American Presbyterian
Mission, likewise evangelical.43 While nearly all mission societies undertook evangelization by bazaar preaching, itinerancy, Bible translation, and distribution of tracts, many other institutional techniques were developed. For example, the 1860s saw the C. M. S. open medical, *zenana*, and women’s educational missions and establish a canal colony for outcaste (*chuhrā*) converts. The Presbyterians brought the first printing press to the region in 1834, churning out secular and religious texts in support of Alexander Duff’s model of education as mission in Bengal. Additionally, the presence of more than thirty separate missionary groups by the turn of the century and rising conversion statistics of the “mass movements” of the 1870s and 1880s helped make late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Punjab the high-water mark of foreign missions. It was of course no coincidence that this zenith coincided with the period that historians regard as that of “high imperialism.”

How then did missionaries perceive the living ascetics they encountered and imagined? Overall, it was the combination of religious and secular roles, in many ways mirroring the government-missionary connection just described, that made the holy man an especially troublesome figure. That is, the many this-worldly roles of ascetics in indigenous military, political, and social contexts resulted in colonial authorities subduing Sikh fighting ascetics, punishing *faqirs* involved in the 1857 Rebellion, and attempting to control Sufi shrine culture. As Oberoi puts it, “Men of great piety, who had once been at the top of the social apex under the Sikh Raj, were now easily dispensed with.”44 These conflicts mirrored the clash of religious specialists, where missionaries critiqued ascetic culture: the worship given to gurus, ascetic techniques, the pluralism of holy man traditions, and the social presence of lineages formed a kind of inverse image of Protestantism as they understood it. For missionaries, such elements seemed far too similar to the hierarchy, “works”-based righteousness, thinly veiled pagan superstition, and political entrenchment of the Roman Catholicism that the Reformation rejected.

In addition to literal conflict, then, the colonial encounter with Indian asceticism was shaped by specifically Protestant and related Enlightenment notions of religion. If, speaking broadly, religion for those entering South Asia was understood as a voluntaristic matter of individual faith, reason, or conscience and limited to the private sphere but with universal scope, where could *faqirs* fit? Ultimately, as Pinch suggests in the context of imperial power, “The Company needed a modern *sādhu*: a priestly monk unconcerned with worldly power and given over completely to religious
contemplation and prayer.” Missionaries judged ascetics wanting similarly, since true religion, for Protestant evangelicals, was said to depend on faith and grace rather than works or “exercises.” Similarly, the textual authority of the Bible, or of the Veda retrieved by Orientalists, was in tension with the authority of living gurus and pandits. In all these senses, upon arrival in India, colonizers encountered not the otherworldly and world-fleeing asceticism (re)constructed by affirmative Orientalism, but the concrete ascetic practices, monastic institutions, living authorities and shrine culture of Punjab. Indian saints were, in short, far too “worldly” for either imperial goals or definitions of religion.

Protestant missionaries were not the first westerners to encounter South Asian ascetics, of course, but had a rich repertoire of representation at their disposal from previous travelers, explorers and, to a lesser extent, Orientalists and Catholic predecessors. Exotic images of Indian holy men in fantastical postures were a key element of the earliest western representations of Indian religion, a trend amplified with the coming of mass reproduced images, photography, and magic lantern shows (Fig. 2.1). More threatening still were north India’s militant ascetic orders (ākhāras), powerful groups that shaped early western perceptions not only

**FIGURE 2.1** “Hindu Ascetics” from J. C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903. Illustration based on “Of the Faquirs . . . and of their Pennances” from Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s *Six Voyages*, 1676.
of Indian religion but, more specifically, of Indian saints. For example, James Forbes, an eighteenth-century Company merchant, describes them:

These gymnosophists [ascetics] often unite in large armed bodies and perform pilgrimages to the sacred rivers and celebrated temples; but they are more like an army marching through a province than an assembly of saints in procession to a temple, and often they lay the country through which they pass under contribution.\(^{47}\)

It is significant that Forbes uses the term saints to describe what appears to him to be a confusing mixing of sacred and secular roles; functions of the state such as tax collection and soldiering should not be the concern of holy men. Such conceptual conflicts had on-the-ground counterparts as Company officials and soldiers clashed with militant ascetics. Most famous of such encounters was the Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion of late eighteenth-century Bengal, a conflict over revenue collection involving both Hindu sannyasis and Muslim faqirs lasting roughly fifteen years. In Punjab, the Khālsa’s fighting, ascetic Nihangs, popular resistance of Sikh holy men (bhais) and Sufi pirs, and tales of the warrior ascetic (bairagi) and disciple of Gobind Singh, Banda Bahādur, formed the final frontiers of the Company’s defeat of ascetic arms.\(^{48}\)

The wounds received at the hands of Indian ascetics contributed to a long-standing suspicion of yogis, sadhus, and fakirs in British imaginations. The wandering tendencies of ascetics, for example, made it difficult for officials worried about the possibility of Indian revolt to tell monks from spies, a role fakirs were said to have played during the 1857 uprising. A missionary account, for example, tells of a fakir being stopped by British soldiers during the conflict who, finding instructions for the revolt on him, promptly executed him. The missionary had been given the fakir’s prayer beads by one of Havelock’s soldiers and kept them, a kind of talismanic display, for decades.\(^{49}\) Such incidents not only justified the need for British rule, but also underscored the need to reshape the “alternate local authority” of ascetics, in part through the circulation of the material objects of Indian religion that missionaries trafficked in.\(^{50}\) Government suspicion and legislation continued to focus on the sedition of ascetics, just the kind of trouble colonial police suspected of Sundar Singh, the C. I. D. of Rama Tirtha, and Churchill of Gandhi, well into the twentieth century.

The emergence of yogis and warrior ascetics in recent scholarship thus offers a striking picture of a far-from-world-fleeing asceticism and
examples deeply connected to the colonial perception of “saints.” They offer instances of indigenous religious figures resistant to both imperial rule and categories of religion, while arguably remaining recognizably religious, if in other ways. In the work of David White, for example, Hindu holy men emerge not as solitary, meditative wanderers or even as warriors but as “the chosen. . . wonder workers of the Hindu masses.”

Related to tantric traditions outside the brahminical mainstream and connected to Nath tradition, the yogi typically protected from natural disaster and illness, helped barren women conceive, defended the downtrodden, and accomplished kingly power reversals—all feats achieved “through the power of his yoga.” White’s wonder-working, often sinister yogis and Pinch’s Mughal warrior ascetics also bring us full circle to the vernacular in terms of language and literature. Such figures inhabit a world of practice, ritual, and story that finds its clearest voice in vernacular languages and oral, performance-centered forms, in Hindi and Rajasthani, in literary forms such as the Persianate Urdu ghazal and Punjabi qissa.

Anthropological work on asceticism has expanded our understanding of the ways in which South Asian ascetics, whether Brahmin or otherwise, are as fundamentally social as otherworldly beings. Ascetics generally, more like the yogis than their textual ideals would admit, are enmeshed in a host of social relationships, occupy a dizzying range of social positions, craft different messages for different audiences, and negotiate shifting, multiple institutional and religious networks. To say this is to say more than the now more commonly recognized fact that ascetics have played social and political roles; rather, it is to undermine the idea that the religious and the political are ever easily distinguishable and to connect renunciation historically with social critique.

In Peter van der Veer’s apt phrasing, ascetics are “gods on earth,” as much the site of divine vision (darshan) as the statues of gods whose shrines and temples they inhabit, not uncommonly managing extensive religious institutions and acting as power players. Even in more “private” roles as gurus, male and female sadhus may be enmeshed in a far greater variety of roles and relationships across caste, class and gender lines than married men or women. Given both the accessibility of this power and its continued difference from householders, the ascetic holds a paradoxical authority that can either undergird or undermine a variety of social norms. The holy men who lived by and invoked such norms were common figures of the Punjab in which Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh were born and made themselves saints, figures Protestant missionaries often
encountered, interpreted, represented and, ultimately, competed with. It is this on-the-ground need to respond to and characterize living holy men that sets missionaries apart from Orientalist scholars and gives us a more immediate sense of the function of “religion” as a category: put simply, though missionaries were often more negative about asceticism and Hinduism more generally than affirmative Orientalist scholars, their accounts are deeply marked by the realities and ambiguities of everyday encounters and contests on the frontier of religion. At the same time, by exploring the explicitly Protestant framework of missionary lives and views, we may simultaneously highlight the culturally and theologically specific roots of supposedly secular governmental and scholarly discourses.

**The Pope’s Own Fakirs**

The ambiguity in Forbes’s description of militant “saints” was mostly resolved by British might and legal right. Other elements of the shared idioms of *faqirs* remained harder to fix. The multiple social roles, plural identities, miraculous power, and claims to sovereignty described above fit neither into the model of the warrior ascetic nor into the vision of the pious monk’s private devotions. If ascetics would no longer fight, collect taxes, or ground whole communities, what other roles they had long played and, more importantly, what roles they might take on remained an open question.

These ambiguities resulted in a series of tensions and oppositions that structured the perception of fakirs in colonial imaginaries. On the positive side of such binaries, that is on the side of European self, were the centrality of the Book, individual freedom and equality, inward faith and rational belief, a singular religious identity, and a model of a pristine and accessible origins. On the negative side, the worldly elements of asceticism appeared in the colonial imagination through the fakir’s role as a worshiped idol, haughtily lording his authority over craven, often female, disciples, naked and twisted into horrible forms of penance. Often ignorant of the basic tenets of his own religion, the fakir embodied India’s spiritual degradation. Table 2.1 puts these binaries in the simplest terms.

As a heuristic device, such contrasts can open up more nuanced discussion of missionary and Orientalist discourse, which drew on Protestant theology and history as well as Enlightenment, utilitarian, and romantic strains of European thought. For example, as Homi Bhabha points out,
“the Book” could signify the Bible, its more secular variant, English literature, or both, and have near-talismanic functions. The prevalence of missionary discourse in the Punjab and the strongly evangelical administration makes an understanding of particularly Protestant grounding of these tensions especially important, however. Webb Keane’s study of missionary semiotic ideology suggests many Protestants viewed words as signs of thought, and consequently tried to strip away the ritual, repetitive, metaphorical, and magically efficacious elements of heathen religious language, in favor of referentiality, transparency, and sincerity. Yelle’s work builds on and confirms such insights in the South Asian context and demonstrates in great detail the mutual entanglement of religious, here Protestant literalism, and scientific attacks on heathen (and premodern English) language as idolatrous.

Philosophy of language, as everything else, existed in own social and material contexts. The Reformers’ attack on linguistic idolatry was of a piece with its rejection of the cult of saints and monasticism, deeply shaping modern times. In other words, in this view, words should not be mistaken for things, especially because things had a particular propensity (such as people’s bodies or statues) for being confused with or arrogating the powers proper to God alone. The continued anti-Catholicism of the Victorians was, as Gauri Viswanathan has shown of British literature and religious conversion, linked to the changing shape of religion and the emergent nation-state in the metropole and colony. The legal emancipation of Jews, Catholics, and Dissenters and the Oxford movement, for example, are two key events in the early nineteenth century exhibiting the charged nature of Catholicism in relation to ideas of Britishness, nationalism, and masculinity. Against this background, the term “Popery” became current in British imperial, missionary and Indian discourse as a critique of current Hindu religion, especially the “priestcraft” of the

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<th>Fakirism</th>
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<td>the Idol</td>
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<td>submission to hierarchical authority</td>
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Brahmins. As Robert Stewart, American Presbyterian missionary in the Punjab put it, Catholic missions failed in India because “[Hindu] Idolatry and Popery are too much alike.”

The specter of Catholicism led to the centrality of the term “saint” to mark the fakir. According to Stewart, the Hindu fakir takes vows of “celibacy, poverty and perhaps obedience,” lives within a network of “saints and shrines and pilgrimages,” and is like the “Romanist friars”—stock phrases indicating medieval Catholicism. As such, the fakir often appears as “saint” from the seventeenth and, increasingly, into the nineteenth century, simultaneously a Catholic and Hindu other. This usage had, in fact, long appeared in other contexts, such as sixteenth-century Protestant travel accounts of Persian Sufis. It is especially important to point this out since, as discussed above, the term saint has attained a semi-canonical status in South Asian and religious studies for exemplary religious figures, perhaps most often of bhakti traditions. In many of its early instances, however, the term was not a translation for its false Sanskrit cognate sant or particularly associated with bhakti traditions, but instead was based on the perceived similarities of living asceticism with the Protestant imagination of the priests, friars, and saints of the “Dark Ages.”

Thus the American Methodist missionary William Butler uses the term saint throughout his description of north Indian ascetic culture, even though he consistently refers to these same figures as “Fakirs” (and “Yogees”) and nowhere discusses the terms sant or bhakta. It is the particularly “Roman Catholic” aspects of asceticism that disturb him. As Butler describes an Indian woman’s relaxed relations with fakirs in her private quarters, for example: “[I]n their intercourse with . . . Fakirs all restriction is usually laid aside. They are as absolutely in their power as the female penitents of the Romish Church are in that of the priesthood.” Butler’s account offers as a succinct summary of the problematically this-worldly features of fakirism in broader missionary discourse, each of which has its inverse in Protestantism.

The specifically religious elements of this typical critique are as follows. First, the great power exercised by the fakir depends on his supposedly divine status. In the words of the poet quoted by Butler, the fakir is a “vain idol of modern creation.” In other missionary publications as well the link between idolatry, fakirism, and “modern” (that is, recent) degradation is made explicit. Worse than the unfeeling stone of Hindu idols, however, the fakir is made of flesh: that is, he can be, and in fact most often is, personally motivated by the worship
given him by the ignorant masses, out of his own pride, greed, or licentiousness. Saints act “from a motive of vain-glory, to be honored and worshipped by their deluded followers.” Supported by superstitions about their miraculous powers, it is no wonder that ascetics “hold the general mind of India” in “craven fear.” Butler is particularly appalled that this divine status means that even political authorities reverence such saints: “[T]he courtly Rajah . . . will often rise from his seat and salaam one of these wretches as he goes by.” Indeed, a meditating yogi might ignore “even the Governor-General of India.” Such forms of counter-sovereignty had particular consequences in the context of the Mutiny, since the Sepoys—“their minds totally under the influence of the Fakirs”—believed whatever they were told, based only on their divine status and its resultant unquestioned authority.

In addition to the idolatry of fakirs and their alternative sovereignty, Butler describes the “whimsical” methods of “reaching the ‘higher life,’” by which Fakirs aim to earn a “stock of merit” and “hasten their absorption into Brahm.” In this way, complex ascetic practices were caricatured by Protestants who imagined self-flagellating Catholic monks and spread images of the ascetic body. In Butler’s account, this is first apparent in his focus on ascetic nakedness, a feature as ancient, he tells us, as Alexander’s encounter with India’s “naked philosophers” (gymnosophists). Yet nakedness for Butler is not a mark of wisdom, but of savagery, even demonic infestation. The self-assertion and alternate authority of the ascetic also manifests in nakedness, itself a defiance of the Raj:

I have myself seen one of them in the streets of Benares, in the middle of the day, when they were crowded with men and women—a man evidently forty years of age—as naked as he was born, walking through the throng with the most complete shamelessness and unconcern! And if it were not for the terror of the English magistrate’s order and whip, instead of once in a while, hundreds of these “naked philosophers” would scandalize those streets every day in the year, and “glory in their shame.”

The ascetic body remains central as Butler describes (and illustrates) the “penances” through which fakirs earn their salvation and, more importantly, attract attention to themselves. Through an array of visual images of fakirs lying on a bed of nails, arms suspended until withered or standing on one leg, the fakir appears as the quintessential “Self-torturer” (Fig. 2.2).
The religious logic of such ascetic images and comparisons is further elaborated in Robert Stewart’s comparison of Indian fakirism to Catholic monasticism, where the tendency toward “ostentatious and pretentious sanctity” and the “outward” in religion go hand in hand: “[Monasticism] measured virtue by the quantity of outward exercises, instead of the quality of the inward disposition, and disseminated self-righteousness and an anxious, legal and mechanical religion.” Naturally, then, monasticism itself is not Occidental, but Oriental in essence, historically derived from: “[t]he Oriental belief that matter is essentially evil . . . , and the non-Christian idea that penance is meritorious.” Incredibly enough, Europe’s past Dark Ages thus are not only a parallel to, but can ultimately be blamed on, the fakirs. Islamic asceticism, like its Christian counterpart, was seen as foreign to the religion as such, for missionaries such as Stewart saw Indian Muslims as “insincere and half-assimilated converts.” Thus even those that began in India with the “fiery zeal” of their “invading ancestors” have “becom[e] greatly Hinduized,” especially through holy man culture: “All [Indian Muslims] reverence tombs, saints and shrines and places of pilgrimage.” According to Butler, as well, though the third
and fourth stages (āśramas) are prescribed by Manu for Brahmins, the absence of such “self-denying recluses” in Hinduism proves asceticism “could only be embraced by some fanatic of a Fakir, who would voluntarily assume such a condition for self-righteous and self-glorifying ends.” The ancient learning of Brahmins, no matter how admirable, today is overrun by “beastly idolatry, filthy fakirs, shrines of vileness.” The degradation of Islam and classical Hinduism by vernacular holy men mirrors the degradation of Christianity in Roman Catholicism.

Such views were far from limited to missionaries, but also found expression in administrative anthropology and more scholarly works. Colonial authors of the District Gazetteers, for example, puzzled over how Hindus, as members of another religion, could reverence a “muhammadan Saint.” One answer to such questions was again supplied by the view that what we might call Abrahamic asceticism comes from an illegitimate syncretism: J. C. Oman’s rather more sympathetic study of Indian asceticism repeats this idea with specific reference to Muslim fakirs, obviously infected with the Hindu “contagion” of “sadhuism, indigenous to the soil.” Closer to our own period and to the field of comparative religion, a landmark study of mysticism by R. C. Zaehner proposed an explanation of Sufism as foreign to Islam and ultimately historically traceable to Indian ascetic and mystical traditions, echoing Oman’s and other work. Such examples, only relatively recently discredited, again suggest the overlap of Christian theology and more secular varieties of religion discourse.

**Princetonian Punjab: Rational Theology and the Centrality of the Book**

In stark contrast to this superstitious world as Butler sees it is religion as understood among Protestant missionaries. At every turn, the degraded fakirs meet their opposite in Christian mission. Since the Presbyterian presence in Punjab meant that the theology developed at Princeton Seminary was dominant in missionary preaching and writing in Punjab, my account makes special reference to its central tenets in order to suggest generally shared evangelical Protestant commitments. The intimate fifty-year relationship of the American Presbyterians with the C. M. S., its British counterpart and partner, is indicative of the substantial similarities stemming from their common roots in Puritanism and, to a less extent, emergent Anglo-American forms of Pietism.
For the Princeton Theology, the Bible is the most fundamental source of religion in every sense. It is an inerrant scripture “exempt from error, both in regards to the ideas and words.” Regarded as supernatural revelation, scripture describes proper worship and God’s plan of salvation. Thus revelation as scriptural truth is not based on human experience or reason. Within the realm of human psychology, however, and the type of evangelical appeal made on behalf of the Bible, reason reigns supreme. It is reason that convinces of the truth of scripture’s message based on its “evidences.” Even Butler’s experientialist Methodist commitments did not shake his firm faith in the centrality of the Book and knowledge of its truths: “Christians of the Book (that is, Protestants) . . . admit no proselytes, and baptize none except those who fully understand and believe in the tenets therein inculcated.” While it might be thought that this affirmation of the Bible avoided a full disenchanted through the presence of miracles in the New Testament, the Princeton Theology further rationalized scriptures by arguing for the cessation of miracles after the early apostolic period, adding yet another contrast to the world of blessing and power of South Asian holy men and women.

This widely shared commitment to the Bible was grounded in Martin Luther’s principle of sola scriptura and, as such, tied to the rejection of the hierarchical privilege of priests and monastics. It was thus an affirmation of the rights of the individual Christian and his equality with all of the other “saints” of the Church, namely in the Pauline sense of all true believers, again a conscious rejection of Catholic meanings. In terms of Hinduism, this meant also a rejection of the hierarchies that undergirded the status of both Brahmins and fakirs. It was precisely this sense of “popery” that migrated into the writings of the Hindu reformer and sometime “Luther of India,” Dayananda Sarasvati. In contrast to the manipulative authority and pride of Indian religious specialists, missionaries emphasized the egalitarian spirit of Protestant Christianity. Rather than lording power over others and seeking their worship, claimed Butler, “republican Christianity . . . [and] Gospel equality . . . announce that saints ‘are one in Christ Jesus,’ and that, having ‘all one Father,’ ‘all we are brethren’ in a blessed communion, where no lofty pretensions or imprescriptable rights are allowed to any.” We have here then not a simple rejection of deluded South Asian saints as fakirs, but a rival claim to sainthood itself.

Ultimately, the unity and equality to be found in “republican Christianity”—and thus, inclusion among the saints—comes through means of salvation described by the Bible, that is, through faith in Christ’s atonement. In terms of the Princeton Theology, this meant justification by
grace through faith in Christ alone, whose death was a substitutionary atonement for sinners. More specifically, this included the belief that all people are sinners who cannot satisfy God’s just demands and so will be punished. Out of God’s free grace, however, the Father sent the Son to take on the sin of human beings, who can be saved by believing in Christ’s death. The proper response to God’s grace is one of repentance, faith, thanksgiving, and holiness. As Samuel A. Kellogg, a student at Princeton and missionary to north India, argued, the Gospel message of justification by faith reveals its antagonism to Hinduism especially at this point, since, in his view, the latter preaches salvation by works (karma) and the Vedantic pantheism that undergirds it. It need hardly be said that Vedanta’s renunciation of works (karmasannyasa) received little attention in such apologetic accounts.

Other Presbyterians such as Stewart would relate this contrast specifically to the religious principles at the heart of fakirism. As noted, he develops his views of Indian traditions via a specific contrast between Catholic monasticism and Protestant salvation: “The basis of salvation, as offered in the gospel, is not self-inflicted torture but Christ’s righteousness. Holiness is to be sought, not through ‘bodily exercises,’ but through faith, love and new obedience” (my emphasis). In these ways, the Princeton Theology positioned the Bible as the antithesis of indigenous asceticism; missionaries, like their administrative counterparts, were “possessed of a mature imperial consciousness and lifestyle” and confident of their role as teachers. Conversion, the saving knowledge of Christ, was mediated through the Book, the word, and reason. Religion, as such, found its center in the individual “conviction of truth” rather than on the level of embodied religious practice. As Joanne Waghorne has pointed out, however, this world of inner faith existed in an uneasy, seldom acknowledged tension with the “iconic” realms of Victorian religion in which “surface display, photos, paintings, books, and even persons were concretized into icons, into valued things.” We thus need to explore more fully how this “new age of ‘idolatry’” and its “multitude of new icons, holy persons, and sacred things” manifested in specific worlds in some ways shared by missionaries and fakirs.

Missionary Fakirs

It is especially significant that Stewart’s arguments about the non-Protestant nature of fakirism occur in the context of a debate about missionary practices that differed substantially from rationalist biblical
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theology: the question of missionaries themselves becoming “missionary fakirs.” There were thus not only, as Cox has shown, fascinating examples of self-styled Euro-American fakirs, but a wider debate among missionaries about the appropriateness, varieties, implications, and effectiveness of such composite practices. As we will see, the question of asceticism was, for reasons elucidated below, becoming a more pressing issue in the Punjab of 1890s and early 1900s. Yet the relation of Christianity to South Asian asceticism had been, and continued to be, a contentious issue since the missionary influx began.

Protestant missionaries in Punjab experimented with things “Indian” far more than commonly thought. Missionary commitment to Bible translation was closely linked to significant enthusiasm for a culturally, philosophically, and institutionally Indian form of Christianity. Not only did missionary presses produce an impressive corpus of vernacular scriptural translations and other works—a trend begun with the south Indian Tranquebar mission, continued in Bengal with William Carey’s Serampore “Bible factory,” and expanded in Punjab—but especially in Punjab, they advocated a culturally Indian form of Christianity from early on, including at times the use of traditional Indian dress, architectural styles, and music.93 Pioneering Presbyterian missionaries of the 1830s linked texts, literacy, and Indianization of missions, stating their three primary goals as preparing books, especially translation the Scriptures, establishing and managing of schools, and raising up a “race of native preachers.”94 Later missionaries in Punjab such as B. F. Westcott, founder of the Cambridge Mission to Delhi, came closer to linking Indianization to Indian religious traditions by arguing that western Christianity now needed the Hindu philosophy of Benares just as Jerusalem had once needed Athens. Such commitments built on the widely shared view of mission theorist Henry Venn, whose “Three Self” philosophy aimed at establishing self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing churches that would remain beyond, as one missionary in the region put it, “the revolutions of empire.”95 The success of all of these translation projects—linguistic, cultural, and institutional—would demonstrate Christianity’s ability to transcend its historical and political particularities, that is, would be a proof of Christianity’s claim to be a, or perhaps better, the, “uniquely universal” religion.96

Such experiments also included engagements with local fakir traditions and idioms. For example, the C. M. S missionary Rowland Bateman had adopted a version of Indian dress, mounted a camel, and conducted
village itineration, calling himself a “fakir.” Even his rather mild, if somewhat curious, combination of evangelical cricket with ascetic styles and the stellar reputation of men like the “born fakir” and imperial warrior George Gordon, however, failed to redeem these forms of Indianization among most missionaries. The model of the married male missionary and the Victorian cult of domesticity settled in as norms. The charged atmosphere around such methods can be seen best in examples of women missionaries who tended toward fakir-like lifestyles, occasionally confirming suspicions of their madness by literally embracing and running off with Indian faqirs themselves. The more radical and innovative among the missionary organizations, notably the Salvation Army, made Indianization their official policy from the start, including the adoption of fakir-like styles, most notably those of “Fakir Singh,” otherwise known as General Booth-Tucker. These were, again, viewed with suspicion by fellow missionaries and especially by colonial administrators, leading, for example, to imprisonment and general disreputability for early Salvation Army leaders.

When efforts to indigenize on the part of missionaries were so controversial, it is little surprise then that innovations of local Indian Christian faqirs proved unacceptable to most. One of these early figures, Hakim Singh, resided in the very village Sundar Singh was soon to be born in. The description of the missionaries’ visit to this local holy man highlights the ascetic body, notably recounting the saint’s display of “strange” entrail exercises and unintelligible utterances, once again linking Protestant anti-Catholic “saint” discourse, the spectacular features of vernacular “yogi-fakir” culture and tension around the power of nonrational language. This local guru, according to missionaries, preached Jesus in terms of the Dasam Granth’s “spotless avatāra” (niṣkalank avatāra) and represented himself as Christ come again. Significantly, Sundar Singh too was to speak of Christ using this same term and raise suspicions among missionaries of taking on divine airs. Likewise, from the proclamation of “glory to Christ” by one faqir who took the name Christdās, south of Ludhiana in 1853, to the group of disciples gathered around Chet Rāma in Lahore, missionaries tended to see such leaders as repeating the same errors of fakirism in general. In the case of Chet Rāma, for example, he, like many faqirs, smoked intoxicants (charas), refused baptism, and encouraged his followers to see him as Christ, at least according to missionaries.

Perhaps the nearest thing to a meeting between Punjabi faqir traditions and institutional missions in this early period came with an experiment encouraged by K. C. Chatterjee, a Bengali convert brought to the region
to aid the “native” church. Chatterjee baptized two followers of the *faqir* Golāh Shāh. Refusing to settle down, the men insisted preaching as “Isā faqīrs” and eventually brought Chatterjee himself to their *murshid* so that their guru could be instructed and baptized as well in 1897. Though initially positive, Chatterjee became disillusioned with the experiment, noting several intractable features of fakir traditions: the “looseness of life and doctrine” encouraged by begging and wandering, connecting other religious teachers to Christ, pantheism and guru-worship. Even here then, under the supervision of an Indian Christian sympathetic to Indian Christian forms, fakirs remain problematic. Stewart’s categorical assertion that fakirism was basically “non-Protestant” turns out then to be confirmed, in principle, even by Indian converts, even as the need to make such judgments is itself evidence for their contradiction in practice. This ambivalence continues in recent Hindi retellings of Sundar Singh’s life, which stress that his early contact with sadhus was not with the “dirty” and “mutilated” vernacular types, but with clean, devotionally-inclined ones.

It should also be noted, however, that this, the closest rapprochement of Indian Christianity and Punjab’s vernacular asceticism, came from a Bengali convert, for these were the same years in which the Bengali monks, Brahmabandhab Upadhyāya and Swami Vivekananda, were preaching the gospel of Vedanta and asceticism in and beyond their shared homeland, in both Catholic Christian and Hindu forms, respectively.

Thus, notwithstanding the overall nineteenth-century rejection of fakirism by missionary and mainstream Indian converts alike, the above discussion simultaneously provides evidence of significant overlaps between them. Evidently, there were elements of vernacular asceticism that proved attractive to both missionaries and converts—an attraction perhaps motivated by something more than, if also by, what Parama Roy calls the pleasures and costs of “going native.” Could it be that Protestant Christianity and the Punjab’s ascetic idioms were not, in fact, so far apart as to be irreconcilable, in practice if not in precept? Golak Nath, the early Punjabi Christian convert, had certainly thought so, as far back as the 1860s, recommending to a major missionary conference at Lahore that non-Indian Christians should live like *faqirs* with their disciples in order to foster better relationships with converts. Likewise, Protestant missionaries such as Samuel Stokes, Sundar Singh’s friend and fellow wandering sadhu, found substantial compelling resonances, even as his low church missionary sponsors insisted he not sound so worryingly “medieval” by using the term “friar” in honor of St. Francis. Thus, while missionaries and
converts lived out the possibilities and ambiguities generated by the contest of religious specialists in everyday colonial encounters, even as they ostensibly rejected them, it would take a combination of Orientalist scholarship and, more importantly, Indian innovation and refurbishment, to supply the necessary rhetorical, textual, and practical possibilities of such alliances. True, missionary theology insisted that, as the Comaroffs argue, “speech acts [alone]” conjure God; yet they would also acknowledge that religion concerns the “brain and the heart” and, in practice, worked in and on the religious body. These complexities help with placing missionaries within an imperial and religious history that eludes the well-worn paths of Saidian and church history master narratives, for example through its institutionality. Much as Eliza Kent’s work has shown that conversion involved “breast cloths” as much as inward transformation, we need to see Protestant disembodied religion as itself part of a practical contest of religious specialists enacted through its materiality.

Punjabi Performances and Ascetic Publics

Protestant critique of and fascination with Indian ascetics reveals some of the materiality of missions themselves, and thus, ironically, makes missionaries a good deal more at home among the faqirs. We can get a better sense of the world of vernacular asceticism itself, of course, not through missionary texts, but through Punjabi sources, such as local Sufi traditions, Sikh janamsākhīs (hagiographies), folk romances (qissas), and Ganeśa Dās Vadhera’s local history, Chār Bāgh-i Punjāb. Taken together, these sources show the everyday worldliness of vernacular asceticism in terms of pluralistic networks of holy men, whose wide-ranging repertoire is replayed across religiously dynamic audiences. Thus, warrior ascetics and sinister yogis, however spectacular, for example, can be seen within a wider range of ascetic idioms and public performances, as clues to wider, if somewhat quieter social worlds. In contemporary Hindu contexts, for example, the legal authority of the jagadguru of Śrīnerī Dasnami monas-tery offers a compelling alternative to state-mediated justice.

Ganesh Das’s history foregrounds the term faqir itself, reflecting the importance of specifically Islamic regional traditions. More substantially, however, the faqir emerges here as a figure blending self-proclaimed mystical knowledge, ascetic self-denial, miraculous power, multiple religious identities, and a territorialized, genealogical sanctity in complex
The worldliness of shared ascetic idioms can be seen first through the way holy men are mapped onto the landscape of the region: they are mentioned in conjunction with particular towns, cities, and physical memorials marking their graves and miracles. For Ganesh Das, Sialkot, for example, is noted in particular for having a great number of hospices (khānqāh) and graves (mazār) of the “holy men of Islam.” While Ganesh Das’s complex vocabulary for holy men is worthy of study in its own right, we can note here that he uses faqir as his most common term for ascetics, distinguishing where necessary their sectarian affiliations, as in “Hindu,” “Udasi,” or “Bairagi faqir.” More generally, holy men form a key part of the wider social network of the notables of each area: “There were many other faqīrs, men of medicine, umarā, ‘ulamā and eminent persons, each of whom was very competent in his own field.” Faqīrs are thus seen as a kind of professional class comparable to doctors, scholars, and nobles, that is, as clearly public figures. It is thus not surprising to find holy men sponsoring projects such as bridge building and land cultivation for open kitchens (langar).

Such open kitchens were often connected with Sufi shrines and hospices, key physical sites of saint culture in South Asia and elsewhere, especially prevalent in Punjab. The shrine of the thirteenth-century Sufi saint (wali), Bābā Farīd, at Pākpattan, is one of the most important, connecting the territoriality of sainthood with intercessory power (baraka), especially through the distribution of amulets (ta’wīz). Due to such powers, sites associated with holy men (pir) became complex institutions fulfilling social, economic, and political—as well as spiritual—functions. Like a political sovereign, the pir was typically succeeded by his sons at the place of the shrine; he also transferred his spiritual authority to select disciples through the handing on of physical symbols, such as his ascetic’s robe (khīrqa) and turban (dastār). The understanding of the saint as an intimate in God’s divine court (darbār) and thus intercessor often led both to a mirroring of the Delhi Sultans’ courtly ritual, on the one hand, and courtly appeals to saintly favor and prestige, on the other. As early as 1349, a Sufi
This type of panegyric was based on the Sufi view that the saints of many lands constituted a kind of hidden “spiritual government,” regionally based but extending to the global or universal level of the “super saint” or “pole” (qutb). Conversely, genealogical claims made by royal lineages to incorporate holy men’s blessings on heirs mirrored the importance of Sufi lineages listed at the beginning of hagiographies. As A. Azfar Moin has shown, the very idioms of political sovereignty would, among the Mughals, come to be refashioned on the model of Sufi saints. Broadening our view beyond these rather rarified and elite realms, Richard Eaton and David Gilmartin have documented the social, geographical, and agricultural transformations that have been shaped by the presence, perception, and memory of “frontier” Sufis in Bengal and Punjab, respectively.

Sikh hagiographies, or janamsākhīs, assume the regional familiarity of Sufi, as well as Buddhist and Hindu, holy man tropes and adapt them for their own purpose, namely, demonstrating the power of Sikhism’s founder, Guru Nanak. Accounts of Nanak’s authority over the first Mughal emperor, Bābur (d.1531), for example, recast the histories of spiritual sovereignty so prevalent in Sufism. The meeting of the holy man with the sovereign is also, more generally, a pattern with a wide range of parallels throughout north Indian hagiographies. In this case, the emperor falls at Nanak’s feet and acknowledges that his own victory in India, and thus, the Mughal Empire, depends on Nanak’s blessing. The moment, at least in one version, also absorbs the glory of Krishna’s revelation of his “cosmic form” (viśvarūpa) in the Bhagavad Gita—“there blazed forth a radiance as if a thousand suns had risen”—into the penumbra of Nanak.

The radiance of the Guru further manifests through contests of miraculous power during Nanak’s encounters with the diverse host of Punjab’s Islamic and Hindu religious specialists, especially yogis and faqirs. These, too, are most often associated with territory and the collective memory of place. One tale in Ganesh Das’s history marks the place a Muslim faqir hurled a stone at Nanak, which he catches and, comically, turns into a soft
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pillow. More irenic, a tale of Sikh Guru Hargobind describes the mutual recognition of sanctity with the Sufi Shāh Daulah, though the story also characterizes the locals as uncouth. Such tales are widely shared, and mirror well-known contest tales between Sufi faqirs and Hindu yogis. ❏

Overall, these stories highlight the compatibility of shared saintly idioms with a variety of possible functions, such as boundary-crossing affinities, claims to distinctive identities, even rivalries. That is, far from exhibiting an undifferentiated premodern “syncretism,” the precolonial hagiographical imagination suggests that shared idioms enable a sophisticated appeal to religiously familiar models, particularly ascetic ones, for different ends. McLeod, for example, describes the shared sense of terms for holy men in Sikh hagiography in just this way: “In referring to [Nanak] as a faqīr they were not implying that he was to be regarded as a Sūfī.” Miraculous power, however, which Nanak unquestioningly has in abundance, shows he “was a bada bhagat and a bhallā faqīr, and he was also much more.” ❏ This sense remains today in the common Punjabi saying, “Baba Nanak is the King of the Faqirs / He’s the Hindus’ guru and the Muslims’ pir (Bābā Nānak Shāh faqīr/ Hindu dā guru/ Mussulmān dā pir).” ❏ Paradoxically it seems, then, the this-worldliness of the political, social, and sectarian roles of faqirs leads to a greater understanding of their supernatural power and their pronounced difference from domestic, conventionally religious, and royal worlds. What unites faqirs as a kind of professional class of course is precisely this difference, perhaps best exemplified in their ascetic feats of self-denial. Holy men are those who “had attained spiritual wisdom and freedom from worldly desires.” ❏ In the janamsakhis, for example, Nanak emerges naked from his commission in the divine court (darbar), goes to live “among the faqirs” dressed in hybrid ascetic clothing, wanders spreading the divine name on trips, eats almost nothing, and excels at ascetic feats (tapasya). Likewise, even for Ganesh Das, interested as he is in social roles, faqirs remain much more than famous, devout people. Sakhī Sarwār, one of Punjab’s most popular Islamic holy men, is said to have undergone “severe penance to control low passions” before becoming a wish-granting friend to his devotees. Ascetic space, while binding holy men to urban and rural landscapes, simultaneously marks them as outside the home. As Pūran Bhagat puts it in the folk tale briefly cited by Ganesh Das, “It is not the custom of fakīrs to enter houses.” ❏ Thus, key religious establishments, not only Sufi shrines, but also especially the Nath yogi center, Tilla-i Jogian, visited by the hero in the best-known Punjabi qissa, Hir-Ranjha, map a landscape of ascetic
difference, which, again paradoxically, simultaneously creates the possibility of romantic intrigue through Ranjha’s jogi disguise. More radically, the unconventional behavior of ascetics is peppered throughout Ganesh Das’s text: a vegetarian Muslim faqir lived “like the bairāgis”; Hindu faqirs ignore caste and “regard everyone as their own”; a Rāmdāsī “free man” (azād mard) transcends all social conventions; even the antinomian tāntrikas receive quick, if disapproving, mention.

The unconventional spaces defined by holy men, marked by their ascetic practices, ultimately manifest their mystical knowledge and states, and likewise transcend and reframe Hindu-Muslim and Sikh difference. Indeed, the second most common word for holy man for Ganesh Das is ‘ārif, a Sufi term that here describes “knowers” of mystical truth transcending sectarian identities. In Sikh hagiography, Nanak’s saying, “There is no Hindu or Muslim” often, if not always, is taken in this sense. For Ganesh Das, the mystical, spatial, and ritual converge, encapsulating the central features of the faqir described here:

“There is no God but I.” Having said this [Shaikh Hasan Lahauri] breathed his last. . . . There have been many Gnostics (‘arif) in the world among both Hindus and Muslims. Some of them have left a name behind but many of them remained anonymous. A bhagat named Chajjū, for instance, has been a person of divine knowledge among the people of Hind. He possessed the powers of miracle. His place . . . is an edifying place of pilgrimage. Men and women hold a fair here on Mondays.125

Mystical union with God serves as the social link between Hindus and Muslims, exemplified by a Sufi’s divine claim and with the example of a Hindu bhagat whose “place” is marked by miracles, pilgrimage, and regular fairs. It appears in fact that Rama Tirtha made a special trip to this very saint’s shrine, which he mentions to his own guru in a letter of 1890. Of special note in the text is the ease with which Ganesh Das moves from the “elite” pole of Sufi “mysticism” to the supposedly “popular” realm of miracles, pilgrimage, and everyday fairs, a link that has often eluded scholars of Sufism.126 Ganesh Das balances these concrete examples with the anonymous host of holy men that are their background. Thus, even in this most social of writings, the faqir’s essential hiddenness, the idea of his isolation and anonymity, remains powerfully present. The sense in which the renouncer is outside of South Asian society then is, at least in part,
dependent on his varied afterlives within it, as memory, as territory, as narrative, as absence.

The Punjabi Veda

Both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh emerged from early childhood to be confronted with the region’s colonial order, particularly through the typical alliance of Christian missions and colonial education. Enrolled early in missionary schools, they would now learn in English and the government-sponsored, officially “literary” language of Urdu, rather than their vernacular Punjabi or the Persian of the local schools. They would be introduced to science, the Bible, and indeed, even in some ways to Hinduism and Sikhism, their own religious traditions, through these languages. Much as vernacular languages such as Punjabi were marginalized from this new world, so too were the blurred lines of local religious traditions and the heterogeneous traditions and types of people that shaped it. When Sundar Singh converted to Christianity or when Rama Tirtha delved deeper into Hinduism through English translations of Sanskrit texts, each was simultaneously becoming modern through emergent forms of language and religion.

In keeping with this trajectory, each pursued graduate education in the urban center of Lahore in order to prepare for new forms of professional life in emerging colonial institutions: seminary training for Anglican ordination for Sundar Singh and a Master’s in mathematics and professorship in Government College for Rama Tirtha. Yet in both cases asceticism, already a force in their lives, decisively interrupted these trajectories. Sundar Singh and Rama Tirtha renounced middle-class respectability to permanently embrace the celibate, wandering, and impoverished life of a monk. It was precisely this seeming embrace of Indian tradition over against more thoroughly Anglicized identities that turned them into global figures. In both cases, the decision to renounce represents a complex mix of local and pan-Indian, traditional and modern factors.

We can understand that mix overall by attending to the marked shift in both cases from vernacular forms of asceticism to that of upper-caste, brahminical ones, evermore associated with emergent nationalist sannyasi religious leaders, such as Swami Vivekananda. These trends also intersect, as noted, with later criticism of Dhanna Rama by Rama Tirtha’s disciples, and with the radical change in the relationship
of Dhanna Rama and Rama Tirtha themselves. For just during the height of the period and in the urban center of “reform,” the disciple came to regard himself as having spiritually surpassed his guru. These wider political and religious trends break into Rama Tirtha’s copious and generally inward-looking letters to his guru, suggesting the social sea-changes that conditioned his individual religious development. For example, while a student in Lahore he mentions visiting Congress politicians, the leaders of the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha. Most significantly, he describes the visit of the western theosophical leaders Colonel Olcott and Annie Besant to Lahore in 1894, noting “[They] are real (pakke) Sanātan Dharmīs and are very certain of Vedanta (vedānt meñ barā niścay rakhte haiñ)” (RP: 118–119).

As Richard King’s work highlights, it is no coincidence that Vedanta is specifically mentioned in this urban, reformist, and revivalist context. Like perhaps no other Indian word in this period, Vedanta carried the prestige of high-caste, brahminical tradition, claiming an original “Golden Age” purity, often bolstered with Orientalist affirmations. It was precisely Vedanta that enabled Hindus responding to outside critiques of figures and practices embodied by the likes of Dhanna Rama, to craft a “higher” version of Hinduism and so distance themselves from popular “superstition.” Indeed, Vedanta would radically transform Rama Tirtha’s life as the key religious philosophy during the period in which he felt he had transcended his vernacular guru, took up renunciation, and crafted a popular message tailored for his global and pan-Indian phases.

Yet we should not read the supposed end of an essentialized Hinduism back into its beginning. For the 1890s was a period in which the meaning of reform, revival, and even “Vedanta” or the “Golden Age,” was far from settled. Indeed, the association of the conservative Sanatana Dharma movement with Vedanta (rather than the popular, Vaishnava devotionalism it vigorously defended) in Rama Tirtha’s letter is symptomatic of a time when lines were more in flux than fixed. Individuals in the midst of this maelstrom of “reform” and “revival” in Punjab “changed the religions and reform organizations they supported frequently enough to render meaningless the idea of loyalty to any given identity.” Thus Cassie Adcock’s exploration of the “accumulation of multiple identities” in this context might also push us toward tracing the shared idioms that inform and blur precolonial and colonial lives and contexts. In what ways do these shared forms and shifting sectarian and organizational identities form the dynamic, performative setting in which individuals reinvent themselves and holy men work out their sainthood?
In addition to the teaching duties he came to take on as a mathematics professor in Lahore, Rama Tirtha himself was at that time a rising leader of the Sanatana Dharma movement. In meetings, he powerfully evoked popular Krishna devotion in both public and private life and the multiple layers that enrich colonial religious identities (RP: 72). He described the feeling he got from his public work with religious language: he felt, he wrote, an intoxication (mast) whether he was weeping for Krishna’s grace or speaking on patriotism before a “compound . . . full of men, even Deputy Collectors and other big officials” (RP: 75). Yet this work itself led, as his disciple put it, to the flaming forth of the fire of Vedantin realization (gyān), sparked by his meeting with Swami Vivekananda in Lahore, and the cooling of his intimate, visionary devotion (bhakti) for Krishna.

In addition to an increased identification with a newly prestigious philosophy, Rama Tirtha’s conversion simultaneously reveals the complexity of the category “Vedanta” itself. For, as we have seen, it was not Olcott and Besant, or Vivekananda, that first introduced him to Vedanta, but his childhood, village guru, Dhanna Ram. At his suggestion, Rama had already been reading an Urdu translation of the popular Vedanta text, Yoga Vasiṣṭha, likely based on the Persian translation commissioned by the Mughal Sufi, Dārā Shikoh. He also read Vedanta texts in Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi, especially the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Advaita works of local, living faqirs (IWGR 1: 250). These details suggest a vernacular Vedanta propagated by unlikely figures, from Mughal Sufis to village-based wrestler mahatmas. Other Vedantin dimensions of the Punjab of this period are the “Vedantic monism” of the uniquely Punjabi sect the Gulābdāsīs and the Vedantin orientation of the Sikh Nirmala orders, all of whom Rama Tirtha would likely have been aware. Yet another Vedantin dimension came in Rama Tirtha’s meeting with and eventual initiation under the authority of the monastic head (jagadguru) of the Dasnami Dwārka monastery (maṭh). As the leader of one of the four centers of the brahminical ascetic tradition described above, the jagadguru’s tour was itself a part of the reenactment of Shankara’s “conquest of the quarters” (digvijāya).

These sources fed into Rama Tirtha’s dual trajectory toward renunciation and modern versions of Vedanta. By 1897 he was reading the Gita with Shankara’s commentary and using it to argue for the necessity of renouncing action (karma) for the sake of mystical knowledge (jñāna). At just this time, too, Rama Tirtha’s meeting with Vivekananda occurred during the latter’s tour on his widely hailed return from the West, also by way of his organizing activities for the Sanatana Dharmis. This meeting further
confirmed his Vedantin leanings and gave him, through Vivekananda’s language of “practical Vedanta,” a way of relating Vedanta philosophy to pressing contemporary questions. In his disciple Puran Singh’s words, “He had found an exemplar and an interpreter of the comprehensive kind of Advaita Vedanta that he was already evolving within himself.”

Taken together, these complex meanings of Vedanta, local and pan-Indian, popular and elite, Indian and non-Indian contributed to a shift in Rama Tirtha’s religious life and his eventual initiation as a sannyasi in 1901. While his development from boy-disciple of a vernacular guru to reformer and Vedantin monk is certainly a sign of the rise of an Orientalizing, upstart Hinduism, we might alternately understand Vedanta here as a category legitimizing more local vernacular roots or even as a modern extension of monastic authority.

When compared with the varied dimensions of Rama Tirtha’s asceticism, Sundar Singh’s early life seems equally complex but also exhibits similar overarching trajectories. In addition to the general similarities of two relatively privileged rural boys and modern men of Punjab noted above, their early encounters with vernacular asceticism, with local sadhus and faqirs, shifted toward Sanskritic, brahminical forms of ascetic identity. Indeed, Sundar Singh’s identification with the elite tradition was so effective that a recent writer has dismissed him as a part of the high-caste “Sanskritic captivity” of Indian Christianity, constrained by the need to respond to Hindu nationalism and its “renaissance.” In contrast and closer to the view taken here, Avril Powell represents Sundar Singh as the “outstanding example” of a figure who drew “not from Sanskrit and Brahmanical sources and models but from . . . paths of devotionism.”

As with Rama Tirtha, the complexity of their lives, however, requires linking rather than opposing the two categories: under pressure to legitimate ascetic practice, both men embraced traditions that refined their ascetic pedigree and, when necessary, allowed them critical distance from nineteenth-century views of popular holy men as trickster saints, thus downplaying much of their own backgrounds. In so doing, I argue, both were giving just the kind of performance for which faqirs and sadhus were well known, reviled, and loved.

In addition to Sundar Singh’s own role in this transformation, several events and trends bear mentioning here. First, as described above, dominant missionary suspicion of Indian sadhus, Christian or otherwise, was counterbalanced by a minority who advocated fakirism as a missionary strategy itself. One of these, the Philadelphia Quaker Samuel Stokes, had left his work in the mission to lepers in Subathu to blend Franciscan
ideals with vernacular asceticism. Between 1906 and 1908, he traveled with Sundar Singh as a hybrid friar-\textit{faqir}, afterward attempting to form a Franciscan Brotherhood of the Imitation in India, but soon marrying an Indian Christian woman and ultimately converting to Arya Samaji Hinduism. Stokes represents the subdued but real missionary attraction to \textit{faqir} traditions, parallel western Christian asceticism and related tensions, and the importance of Sundar Singh’s relationship with non-Indians in his emergence as a public figure and saint. As Cox points out, one need not look to distant examples such as medieval Catholicism to locate Christian convergences with \textit{faqir} traditions; missionary fakirs were in many ways exemplary Protestants even as they became more “Indian”: “The heroic itinerant evangelist with charismatic spiritual authority, persecuted by the authorities and hostile crowds, might have been Wesley or Whitefield. The impulse to both to ‘go native’ and ‘get in touch with the people’ was endemic in mission circles.” Viewed within the long arc of Christian history then, the similarity of iconic British Protestants and missionary fakirs can be seen as a part of the problematic of Protestant sainthood more generally, a category far more complicated than the idea that every member of the church was a “saint.” It was, for example, the quite literal “visibility of the saints”—their publicly demonstrable standing amongst the “elect”—that conferred on certain Protestants and excluded others from the ritual status required for administering and receiving the Lord’s Supper. Similarly, the example of such pious Puritans in Protestant life and hagiography functioned as nothing less than “repositories of the holy spirit, active in the world, almost holy objects themselves.” In the more local context of missionary and colonial desires, the overlap between Protestant and Hindu piety could enable imperial authors to represent India’s essence to their audience at home: the travel writer and journalist, Harold Begbie, for example, claims his local guide, the British Salvation Army officer Fakir Singh, as his only “credential,” since “no one has ever penetrated further into the holy of holies of [India’s] immemorial solitude and seclusion.”

Second, apparently as a result of association with missionary figures such as Stokes, Sundar Singh came to the attention of the Anglican bishop of Lahore, George Lefroy, who became something of a patron, encouraging him to attend Lahore Divinity School. This school in particular represents the growing trend within Christian missions toward indigenization, if still unlike Stokes’s “fakirism,” which remained marginal, then through fulfillment theology and the study of “Comparative Religion.” In fact one of the presidents of the school, earlier bishop of Lahore, and pioneer
promoters of Indianization, Thomas Valpy French, had asked his Indian convert friend, Imād ud dīn, to personally work out a model of the Christian yogi. Interestingly, although or perhaps because he was himself a former Sufi, he refused the request.\(^{136}\) French’s own comments about fakirs in his letters simultaneously criticize them for their haughtiness and idolatrous worship of “masters” and claimed missionaries were as qualified for the title as any Indian, revealing the appropriation and rejection that made missionary attitudes so confounding and complicated.\(^{137}\) Though Sundar Singh was ill-at-ease during his time in seminary, refused Anglican ordination, and returned to ascetic wandering, his studies complicate the picture of his Indianness as pure, romantic resistance and help us understand how he became a missionary sensation after a long obscurity. Was Sundar Singh the Indian Christian who finally answered missionary hopes for an “authentic” Indian convert, complete with saffron robes, at just the right time?\(^{138}\)

Third, as we have seen in Rama Tirtha’s case, this was precisely the period in which brahminical forms of asceticism, associated in various ways with Dasnami, Orientalist, and modern Hindu appeals to Vedanta, took on ever greater nationalist resonance in reforming, revivalist, and resistant Punjab. Sundar Singh’s rise to pan-Indian, missionary, and international recognition coincides with his telling of a story of secret Christian “sannyasis,” emphatically contrasted with fakirs and yogis of a lower sort. According to the stories that appeared in the Urdu language missionary journal Nūr-i Afshan beginning in 1916, this group externally appeared as Hindu ascetics, but secretly proclaimed the true “Vedanta” of Christ and used only a Sanskrit Bible or “Veda.” They were made up mainly of Brahmin leaders and worked only with Indian upper castes. They were in fact none other than Shankara’s Dasnamis, the story claimed, on the one hand, and, bore close ties with Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission and Dayananda Sarasvati’s Arya Samaj, on the other. I argue that this story, along with the confluence of other factors, was indispensable to Sundar Singh’s rise to sainthood. In order to be recognized as the faqir he had been for a decade and more, he, like Rama Tirtha, had to appear more like the sannyasis coming out of Bengal.

**Conclusion**

Much as the hosts of unnamed faqirs and famous holy men of the past enlivened Ganesh Das’s and the wider Punjabi imagination, so too did they inhabit the colonial encounter, if sometimes appearing in unexpected
manifestations. As is clear in Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives, the presence of vernacular asceticism of the kinds described in indigenous texts remained a real force, a living set of religious traditions, even as the power of colonial legal, cultural, and religious transformations made themselves felt. The Pope and his host of saints came to the Punjab in the anti-Catholic imaginations of Protestant missionaries, appearing, avatara-like, in the bodies of South Asian ascetics that so fascinated their imperial and global audiences. At nearly every point, the worldliness and embodied religiosity of ascetic traditions were perceived as curiously unreligious, the very antithesis of textual, rational, singular, and universalizing models that informed both Protestant and emerging modern and comparative models of religion.

Yet missionaries’ own experiments with fakirism suggest the ambivalence of and surprising reversals at work in this seemingly intractable conflict, as does the prevalence of specifically ascetic leaders in self-consciously modern, reforming forms of Hindu, Sikh, and Islamic traditions. The shift to emerging nationalist models of the brahminical and Neo-Vedantin sannyasi in both Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives reveals some of the mechanics of adaptation made necessary by a host of critiques. More importantly, an understanding of vernacular ascetic idioms begins to suggest the ways modern monks became a vital colonial presence, despite and because of those critiques, keeping themselves in the public eye, much in keeping with precolonial Punjabi traditions and forms of religion. In an essay written on the last day of his life, in passages praising the figure of the sadhu-faqir, Rama Tirtha tells how Punjab’s ruler Mahārāja Ranjīt Singh was both blinded in one eye and granted a son by a powerful faqir, evoking just the kind of sovereignty long claimed by Punjab’s holy men over and against that of emperors. Such tales, of course, are usually understood as myth; in the next chapter, examining the rise of ascetic holy men in the period of high imperialism, I argue that they are, in fact, much closer to colonial history.
Resurrecting the Saints

The Rise of the High Imperial Holy Man

When the emperor Bābur met Gurū Nānak, “there blazed forth a radiance as if a thousand suns had risen,” causing the emperor to fall at his feet asking for mercy.

This chapter explores the Orientalist and Indian dimensions of the sadhuization of modern Hinduism. The term “saint” itself—typically colored (darkly) by its earlier anti-Catholic usage and Indian suspicions of ascetics—was resignified by modern Hindu leaders. Set against this background, the international and specifically Punjabi connections of Swami Vivekananda’s, Keshub Chandra Sen’s, and Dayananda Sarasvati’s saintly careers can be seen as part of an historic shift in the development of modern Hinduism, destabilizing teleological notions of modernity. That is, the importance of modern monks runs counter to the widespread expectation that modernity as such requires the decline of religion and helps make clear the contested nature of claims of disenchantment. More importantly, they can help us see how the very shape of religion is constitutive of modernities as such.¹ Specifically, in taking a decidedly ascetic turn, modern Hindu leaders reworked the performative registers and expanded the audiences of precolonial, vernacular holy men, explored in the last chapter, within the modern public sphere, a move that the common scholarly invocation of the Protestant, Weberian model of an innerworldly asceticism distracts us from. I argue instead that colonial ascetic leaders are better seen as yogi-faqirs, not in the sense of taking up or championing postural practice, which they did not, but because they themselves assumed new bodies, just as vernacular holy men are known to do.² Perhaps the most dazzling of those bodies was that of the spiritual Eastern sage, adapted from affirmative Orientalism and, more importantly, embodied in their own startling,
often saffron presence. Yogic bodies are never singular, however, but demonstrate their power through multiplication. From the dramatic lecturing body of Keshub Chandra Sen and the “flowing robes” of the Asian yogi Christ to Carlyle’s “Great Men” and the circulating photographic bodies of Hindu counter-missionaries, the modern monk can be seen as the “media form par excellence” of the so-called Hindu Renaissance.  

Jürgen Habermas’s narrative of the secular public sphere as a form of “communicative reason” enacted through the press is unsettled here not so much by religion in the abstract as by ascetics, their distinctive rhetorics, images, and publics. The secularizing narrative of colonial state power, reason, and print gives way to the “return” of certain indigenous Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian practices, memories and sensibilities in the empire. Specific rethinkings of the “public” in premodern and modern religious contexts can help us make sense of this complex set of relationships, for example, in the Rudolphs’ comparison of Gandhi’s ascetic āśrama communities to Habermas’s coffee house. Christian Novetzke’s study of premodern bhakti publics and performance traditions, in particular, helpfully offers a third way beyond well-worn accounts of Hindu devotionalism according to the binaries of a social movement, on the one hand, and the faith of the individual, on the other. I have applied this insight here to resist similar bifurcations, not only in standard readings of the relation of premodern and modern asceticism (from individual to social, or from spiritual to political), but of that between the individual and society as such, in order to emphasize asceticism’s capacity for critique and to highlight the public elements asceticism shares with bhakti. Much as in Ganesh Das’s history, these include: (1) a network of individual, audience, and memory; (2) forms of sociability, public ethics, and embodied signs; and (3) a location decidedly outside the domestic sphere of “house.” The elements of sovereignty, territoriality, and the alternative practices of asceticism and saint culture also call to mind the fusion of “language and power” at work in the notion of a “counterpublic” described by Hirschkind.  

**Orientalist Golden Ages, Monumental Men, and Sages**  
By gathering, translating, and analyzing the ancient texts of India, Orientalist scholars believed they had discovered forms of religion radically different from the present practices of Indians. As Max Müller, the great Indologist, put it in his argument for a new discipline, the “science
of religion” (*Religionswissenschaft*): texts should be the basis of this new science since they contain the “doctrine of the [religion’s] founders and their immediate disciples.” For Müller texts were significant specifically insofar as they contrast with present practices, which are likely the “corruptions of later ages.” As the excrescences of contemporary Hinduism were stripped away from the purity of the Vedas and Upanishads, Orientalists revealed an original religion of the Aryans that was significantly more admirable. As David Kopf describes the sources, conclusions, and results of Orientalism’s textual project:

The Jones-Colebrooke portrayal of the Vedic age to which Müller would add the finishing touches, and which today is widely accepted, depicted a people believed to have behaved very differently from present-day Hindus. . . . *Instead of being introspective and other-worldly, the Aryans were thought to have been outgoing and non-mystical.* They were pictured as a robust, beef-eating, socially egalitarian society. Instead of oriental despotism, scholars discerned tribal republics. There were apparently no laws or customs to compel a widow to commit *sati*. There were no temples, and there was not the slightest evidence to suggest that Aryans concretized idolatrous images of their gods. And to round out the picture, also absent were the fertility goddesses, the evil personification of Kali and the rites and rituals of later Tantrism.⁹ (my emphasis)

Thus, even in its inward-looking variety as “philosophy” or spirituality, the mystical was classed with features of popular Hinduism that would be seen as the very worst symptoms of decline: despotism, *sati*, idols, Kali, and Tantra. Of course, the idea that this view of an Aryan Golden Age is “widely accepted” reflects the date of Kopf’s work. Still, the fact that very few have called attention to the early Orientalist grouping of mysticism and *sati* as later degradations, for example, is evidence of just how thoroughly Romanticism altered Orientalist and popular perceptions and has continued to shape them.

The methods and vision produced by the Orientalists were deeply enmeshed in their own European, and more specifically German and English, roots. The central features of this construction, for example, its clear monotheism and anti-idolatry, begin to suggest Orientalism’s affinity with Protestantism: the historical-critical analysis of original sacred texts enabled access to a purer form of religion, just as Luther championed (Greek
and Hebrew) biblical origins over against idolatrous Rome. Furthermore, the historical narrative of western civilization, of which the Reformation was a key part—that is, a “Golden Age” of Greco-Roman and/or biblical origins, an ensuing Dark Ages, Reformation, and Enlightenment—had, or so it seemed, some striking parallels in the history of South Asia. As told by Orientalists and missionaries, India too had had and could again have its “Luthers”—from the Buddha and Guru Nanak to Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati.

Beyond the Reformation roots of western religious and scholarly assumptions, why was the figure of Luther himself so important in scholarly narratives, at least as important as “the Bible” he (re)discovered? I would suggest that although the textual center of philology and historiography remains a part of our “cultural furniture,” Victorian ideals of the Great Man have faded to such an extent that we now largely ignore them even in our analysis of the period. That is, to better understand Orientalism itself, we must recapture the complex ways in which its textual projects were connected to the nineteenth-century understanding of history not only through scriptures but also especially through the “biographies” of exemplars. As Peter Brown notes, the classical “civilization of paideia,” in which classic texts exist in order to “turn [persons] into classics,” dominated education even in modern Britain. In this sense, the personal dimension of missionary discourse on sainthood can be seen to undergird and to often overlap with imperial discourse on “heroes” and a scholarly sense of civilizational history, not one simply littered with doctrinal texts, but with the more lively personalities of prophets, geniuses, and kings.

If personal models were central to education and literature, they were also at the center of history. While at a great distance from the “cautious empiricism and persistent gradualism” of early British historiography, Thomas Carlyle’s popular history had a powerful affinity with the still-dominant model of knowledge. Carlyle’s version of the origins of modern Europe, after all, centers not so much on the rediscovery of the Bible or classical texts, but on Luther himself. Luther’s declaration, “I can do no other” at the Diet of Worms is, Carlyle says in Heroes and Hero-worship, the “greatest scene in Modern European History; the point, indeed, from which the whole subsequent history of civilization takes its rise.” Luther was thus an example of a larger type, that of the Great Man. For Carlyle, “History is the essence of innumerable biographies. . . . [The Great Men] were . . . the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators,
of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do as to attain.”13 With Carlyle we are close to the world of Orientalism: Max Müller was his great admirer and friend, calling him the “greatest and truest man I have ever known”—no small compliment to pay the historian of Great Men.14 Nor, in fact, was Carlyle far from the colonial periphery: Rama Tirtha’s notebooks contain many references to him, and Sundar Singh was considered by at least one British scholar as a potential “Great Man in the sense used by history.”15 During his trip to Japan, Rama Tirtha was introduced to a well-known professor who had a reputation as the “Carlyle of Japan.”16 Carlyle had, as it were, become the language of translation.

The role of exemplars in Victorian society and thought, however, extends well beyond educational models or Carlyle’s history. They can be seen to shape masculine British subjectivity itself, to which Carlyle is of course also an important contributor. Though the clearly religious “saint” fell out of usage in favor of Carlylean prophets and poets, it continued in other realms, such as the hagiography of British heroes, in fact, warrior saints such as Havelock in India’s “Mutiny” and the “Christ-like man” Charles Gordon, killed by the forces of Sudan’s Mahdi.17 As James Adams has argued, a wide range of nineteenth-century English writers imagine what it means to be authentically masculine through a small number of models of masculine identity: the gentleman, the prophet, the dandy, the priest, and the soldier. Each of these models is typically understood as the incarnation of an ascetic regimen, an elaborately articulated program of self-discipline. As such, they lay claim to the capacity for self-discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute and in their different ways embody masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism.18

More than a sense of much-discussed Victorian self-discipline and sexual continence, Adams sees gender as linked to asceticism in their mutual link between self and a public. In his words, gender and asceticism “are multifaceted constructions of identity and social authority that inevitably situate the private self in relation to an imagined audience.” The deep tension in Victorian subjectivities, represented by the “desert saint” and the “dandy” of Adams’s title, defines the masculine, autonomous individual who ignores the expectations of others (the saint isolated in the desert) in contrast to the inauthenticity of the need for their gaze (the dandy). The masculinity at issue in these tropes, Adams argues, was a self-legitimating
response to the allegedly feminine character of male writers and intellectuals in Victorian circles, figures, for some, of the fading age of the effete aristocracy challenged by the harder, liberal age of democracy and capitalism.

This Foucauldian approach to asceticism as an “elaboration and stylization of an activity” is helpful, first, for situating asceticism as a productive part of rather than the antithesis of modernity. As such modernity’s supposedly ascetic “others” in Indian traditions and the European past actually appear as part and parcel of its own imaginaries, forms, and techniques. As Peter van der Veer points out, the figure of the Catholic priest plays a widely shared role in such strategies of “identifying one’s modernity,” including famously in less personal, utilitarian histories such as James Mill’s History of British India. 19 Second, Adams’s analysis shows how modern, secularizing subjectivities are, at least in this context, characteristically figured and contested through personal—often religious—models: Carlyle’s poet is the new “priest,” his Luther, like his “Mahomet,” is the hero as “prophet”; Kingsley’s off-hand description of Newman as a “Romish priest” occasioned no less a response than Apologia Pro Vita Sua. Even Peter Brown’s late antique holy men, such as Simeon the Stylite, provided sites of meditation on the Victorian self for Tennyson.

What I want to suggest here in addition is that the figure of the Indian ascetic is also already present in these self-fashionings, though overlooked by Adams. William Blake’s justification of his and his wife’s backyard nudity by way of the “Gymnosophists of India, the ancient Britons, and others of whom History tells, who went naked” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s reputation as the “fakir of Highgate” are just two of the more interesting examples. 20 Carlyle himself could describe ancient Irish Catholic hermits as “fakirs.” 21 Furthermore, the personal models prevalent in Britain, from Carlyle’s prophets to Charles Kingsley’s “muscular Christian,” were ever more mixed in with existing Indian repertoires at play in encounters in India itself. The description of a “Nikalsaini” sect of fakirs formed around the colonial official, soldier and “hero,” Brigadier-General John Nicholson, for example, reflects colonial claims to outdo local religion in authenticity, theories of religion as hero worship, and habits of rhetorical and embodied imperial violence against fakirs themselves, akin to the ambivalent missionary interest in methods of fakirism described in the preceding chapter. 22

What we if rethink Orientalism and colonial knowledge then in terms not only of textuality but also through the kinds of persons that texts were
meant to model and produce? One of the central proof-texts of the relationship between colonial rule and its knowledges, Macaulay’s *Minute*, after all, takes just such a stance, arguing that English literature will produce a new type of inwardly English, outwardly Indian *man* through which colonial rule would flourish.²³ On the other side of the debate, the Orientalists tended to presume the same kind of relation between texts and the production of moral, national subjects. Put simply, exemplarity was a key part of the discourse of textuality that reflected and created nationalisms.

If Victorian authors approached English masculinity and Englishness itself through ascetic idioms, we can now raise further questions: how did such western discussions contribute to Orientalism through its personal models, how were these received, remixed, and resisted by Indians, and how did South Asian models play their own distinctive roles? Ascetics—and the related range of terms, from saints and prophets and poets and geniuses—become important in colonial Indian religion, not simply because of tradition, but in convergence with their contemporary role in western discourse and subjectivity. This continuity, once again, however, should not be seen in terms of Indian response: rather, in tracing the connections between modern Victorian asceticism and South Asian forms, I suggest that asceticism, much like idolatry, reveals similarities of center and periphery that colonial discourse worked to obscure through representations of essential difference.

In terms of personal models, the earlier, hardier version of the Golden Age resonated well with several categories that had come to prominence with a Carlylean imaginary. The language of “heroes,” “reformers,” and “prophets” simultaneously had the ability to evoke biblical, reformation, and modernizing rationalist models of social criticism dominant in this period. They likewise appealed to the ascetic self described by Adams, who spurns the expectations of others in favor of an inward looking, masculine authenticity. In this way, Luther—the archetypal hero as reformer and prophet—was Carlyle’s founder of modern, western civilization itself and one among the many models through which one might imagine oneself or others.

But there were soon to be other models available for Great Men, especially as the nineteenth century brought earlier English and German Romantic trends to fruition. The figure of the “poet”—another Carlylean hero—took on ever more centrality in the work of Max Müller, whose German training came though Schopenhauer and the comparative mythology of Schelling, key figures of what Schwab has termed the “Oriental Renaissance.”²⁴
Earlier than all of these, on the English side of Orientalism, William Jones laid the groundwork for the Romantic tendency to recast the ancient Aryan past in terms of its “wisdom” and specifically and positively otherworldly philosophies rather than beef-eating, tribal republics. For Jones the “Aryan genius” lay not in the robust character of the Aryans at all, but in the more philosophical, introspective wisdom of the Upanishads, texts which revealed, he argued, that “Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India.”

Müller took up and developed these themes, finding in the ancient Vedic rishi (seers) “poets” and in the Vedanta “lessons quite as instructive as the systems of Plato and Spinoza.” For Müller the Vedanta typified the “wisdom” of the “passive, meditative and reflective” nature of the Aryan “gymnosophists.” Indeed, though he described Indians as “naturally deficient in the fighting virtues,” Müller saw something appealing in what he took to be the “distinguishing feature of the Indian character,” namely its “transcendent” orientation. Indeed, Müller justified these ancient Aryans, “mere dreamers,” for their interest in the “Beyond” by citing Wordsworth’s “questioning / of sense and outward things.” Following this line of work, German scholars of Buddhism turned to the figure of the Buddha to counter the materialistic worldview of science, interpreting Buddhist asceticism within the individualist salvation of their often Protestant frameworks and reflecting growing worries about true religion’s decline in modernity, often mingled with anti-Semitism.

In this way, the ancient ascetic had been refigured as a sage, a literary figure of poetic inspiration and philosophical wisdom. Though he appeared as an asocial figure, his creation was a clear response to current social anxieties and projects. The alliances forged throughout the nineteenth century between the author and the ascetic explored by Adams also were thus imagined with reference to both St. Simeon and the Veda. In turn, recent Indian authors see medieval Sufi counsels on renunciation, not in terms of embodied ethical discipline, but as echoing Wordsworth. In some cases, asceticism itself could also be subtly excised from the Golden Age of the rishi. The imagined ancient sage of many Orientalists and Indian Vedic scholars, for example, was preeminently understood not as an ascetic but as “childlike, following Max Müller; as intuitively metaphorical, following Abel Bergaigne; or barbarian, following Hermann Oldenberg.” The forceful separation of religion from the world and ascetics from their bodies had both material and intellectual dimensions.
The Limits of Affirmative Orientalism: Making Graves for the Saints

What did the inclusion of India’s otherworldly abstraction in Orientalist imaginaries mean for contemporary brahminical and vernacular asceticism in India? As Katherine Ewing has persuasively argued, affirmative Orientalist discourse mined the texts of the mystical poets, inspired seers, and intoxicated sages of the past, who, since they were safely dead, were therefore appropriable within western agendas. As such, it remained focused on philosophical themes in line with the idealist temper of the period. The ancient Indians were for Romantics and Transcendentalists primarily “sages” and “mystics,” but not ascetics in the sense of practicing embodied disciplines, that is, not celibates, beggars, wanderers, or postural practitioners. Indeed, Orientalist rehabilitations of India’s sages stood in stark contrast to the contemporary Indians who most claimed that heritage through their territories, miracles, lineages, and shrines. Put differently, Orientalist imaginations sealed off the past of living mysticism of sagely sainthood from the moribund present, whose very religious deadness was symbolized by its superstitious fixation on graves.

In this sense, the mystic, whether ancient Sufi or rehabilitated yogi, remained a metaphorical figure. William Jones’s preference for the antinomian “sophistic” wisdom of the poems of Hāfiz was matched by his disapproval of contemporary Indian ascetics and the Sufi orders, a narrative of decline echoed as recently as Trimmingham’s sociological account. In the American context of Emerson and Thoreau’s Transcendentalism, we find a similar disjunction:

A distinction was drawn between the yogī—one engaged in transmuting himself to achieve union with the highest reality as described in the Bhagavad Gītā—and the sādhu or fakīr as practitioner of the penances popularized from other quarters. If the self-torturing holy man was denigrated in his embodiedness, the yogī was a disembodied textual ideal.

German Orientalism, though deeply engaged with the Indian ascetic past, also remained determinedly uninterested in its “practical” aspects. Friedrich Schelling, for example, criticized the Upanishads as too “practical” and thus lacking a “positive explanation of the supreme unity.” For Hegel, Upanishadic wisdom at its best ignored bodily disciplines and
“nature” itself, through a highly interiorized definition of yoga: “the main thing is the concentrating of soul within itself, its rising into freedom, thinking, which constitutes itself as itself. . . . not the unity of spirit and nature, but just its opposite.” It is, above all, an “escape.”

It is Arthur Schopenhauer, however, who offers the best example of deep appreciation of Indian asceticism and, of course, its limits. Schopenhauer could suggest that the New Testament, in stark contrast to the view of the German Lutheran mainstream, not to mention India’s evangelical missionaries, not only was ascetic but, moreover, derived its asceticism from India. Christianity has “Indian blood” in its veins. The emphasis for Schopenhauer, however, remained on “teachings”: “The Indian, Christian and Mohammedan mystics, the quietists and ascetics are heterogenous to each other in everything, except in their inner meaning and spirit of their teachings.”

Crucially, there is nothing to be learned from contemporary Indian ascetic culture, which has “degenerated” (largely due to Islamic rule) into a world where “fakirs” appear alongside the usual evidence of decline—“devotees crushed under the wheels of Jagannath, the murderous Thugs, the burning of widows.” Most tellingly, Schopenhauer claimed that ascetic wisdom did not require practice, a view based on his idea of the body as a “phenomenal manifestation of the will.” As van Glassenup notes, in this, Schopenhauer contradicts Indian traditions, in which “thinking and living presents one single unity.”

From Rammohun Roy’s Reason to Keshub
Chandra Sen’s Saints: Resurrecting Living Holy Men from their Graves

The language of reform, philosophy, and inspiration introduced by Orientalism offered a variety of models through which Indians could imagine and represent exemplary persons. Protestant and Romantic discourses could, on the one hand, add their tropes to India’s own past and continuing history of anti-brahminical (i.e., priestly) and anti-ascetic rhetorics, as with Rammohun Roy’s rationalized Brahmoism. Alternatively, those very discourses could, on the other hand, be redeployed, becoming a new avatar of longstanding vernacular ideals and offering a reimagined “saint,” as in Keshub Chandra Sen’s “saintly turn” and the new trajectories it enabled.
In Rammohun Roy’s modern Hinduism, oriented toward a Golden Age of monotheism, we see a critique of idolatrous ritual and priestly privilege similar to Protestantism. Indeed, evoking the Great Man of the Reformation himself, Roy could present his goals as a part of the tradition in which “Martin Luther and others” lay the “first stone.” This self-representation was, moreover, quite effective: Roy was widely seen as a “Reformer,” for example, in J. N. Farquhar’s well-known _Modern Religious Movements in India_, and also in the local Indian press. In 1907, nearly a hundred years after the founding of Roy’s pioneering organization, the Brahmo Samaj, an article in _The Hindustan Review_ entitled, “Hindu Protestantism” advocates for reform based on Roy’s own invocations of the Reformation as a model for Hinduism.

Although Roy mainly turned to the Upanishads to ground his reforms of popular idolatry and priestcraft, it would be a mistake to see this move in yogic terms, even in Müller’s sense of the sage. Rather, Rammohun’s religion, though appealing to the Upanishads, was a rational theism having more in common with the level-headed likes of Deists and Unitarians than with Müller’s romanticism or the ascetic leanings of later leaders of modern Hinduism. As he says in his translation of the Upanishads: “the real spirit of the Hindoo scriptures . . . is but the declaration of the unity of God.” His redacted Gospels of Jesus’s moral teachings further converge with an Enlightenment temper; the shared inheritance of Deism also yielded a vision of the ethical Jesus for Thomas Jefferson at roughly the same time, right down to the parallel rationalist, “razor”-edited Gospels both produced. More specifically, Roy had little use for sannyasis, asserting that the pretensions of priestly and monkish classes had for too long suggested that householders could not be religious leaders. The reformist _Mahānirvāna Tantra_, promoted and possibly penned by Roy himself, for example, re-affirms the Brahmin-only right to sannyasa, so severely restricting it as to remove its viability in contemporary practice. As noted above, critique of a wide range of ascetic traditions is par for the course in South Asian history, even and especially in ascetic texts. Roy, however, was among the first reforming Hindus to draw on the Gita’s ideal of _nīskāma karma_ in order to stress that renunciation, rather than as an outward or embodied discipline, should be thought of as an inward attitude and practiced within the world of householders, that is, not by monks. Above all, Roy’s leadership style, like the organization he founded, was that of the humanist, the moralist, and the scholar, not that of a charismatic holy man. Anthony Copley rather
tendentiously puts it thus: “Certainly he was an acarya or teacher, but no guru. Throughout his life Roy displayed a measured intelligence, a reliance on reason, a humanitarianism which makes him an altogether attractive personality.”

Rather than simply repeat rationalized Protestantism, however, Roy turned Protestants’ own anti-Catholic (and often anti-Semitic) rhetoric against them, demonstrating an early Indian awareness of intra-Christian difference and the importance of Roman Catholic practice and history. Although Protestants accuse Catholics of worshipping the Eucharist as a “bread God,” Roy would write, is not the divine man Jesus a similarly “fleshly God, or a Jew God”? The miracles, Trinity, and atonement of Protestant churches are no different than the things they condemn, whether in Hinduism or in Catholic, Greek, or Armenian Christianity: “idols, crucifixes, Saints, miracles, pecuniary tabulations from sins, trinity, transubstantiation, relics, holy water and other idolatrous machinery.” Roy could criticize the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, alleging that England, though in other respects an advanced nation, had “neglected their religious faith so much as to allow it still to stand upon the monstrously absurd basis of popery.” Christian or Hindu, the “machinery” of “Saints” and “idols” remain nothing but superstition because of its “fleshly” materiality, unworthy of a rational, immaterial Deity. This self-conscious shift in the use of varied Christian codes has parallels in Roy’s Bengali writings appealing more directly to specific and nuanced Hindu models, much as Hatcher points out that Roy’s ethical Gospel sayings in the Precepts were seen by at least one Bengali as akin to moral compendiums such as Chāṇakya’s rāja-nīti.

There were thus multiple “golden ages” of India as there were of England, and multiple uses for them as they passed back and forth between metropole and periphery. In both cases, attention to the figure of the ascetic allows us to trace the contours and shifts of these complexities. As Anshu Malhotra notes, “[F]ew have examined the range of attitudes that surfaced in the process of reimagining the past. It was not as if people merely discovered an Aryan golden age . . . in need of re-adoption.” The special role of Roman Catholicism, for example, as a shared British and reforming Hindu “other” but with varied rhetorical possibilities, points again to the anti-Catholicism that infused western and Indian thinking and to the problem of the living ascetic or “saint” in the period of high imperialism. In the context of Punjab, for example, Malhotra’s work demonstrates the tight connection between imagining the past, gender,
sexuality, and ascetic figures such as the Sufi pir in vernacular, reformist pamphlets, and novels.56

Disdain for Indian leaders who appear too much like vernacular pirs or gurus continues even in recent academic descriptions of Bengali leaders of Hinduism. Copley’s description of Rammohan Roy’s later successor, Keshub Chandra Sen, for example, speaks dismissively of his “histrionics” in contrast with Roy’s “altogether appealing” rational leadership, making Sen all the more interesting than Roy for our purposes.57 For missing in bhadralok retrievals of the Indian golden age by figures such as Roy, that is, before Keshub, was any connection to India’s religious present, its living ascetics, sadhus, sannyasis, and faqirs and to the embodied kind of religious practice they represented. So, it is not surprising that for J. N. Farquhar, Keshub’s turn illustrated just those kinds of anxieties, specifically of the “extreme dangers of guruism.”58 What actually begins with Keshub Chandra Sen in the late 1860s and early 1870s, is, in my view, the creative use of Orientalist and modernizing Indian English rhetorics as a means of legitimating and appropriating certain contemporary vernacular devotional (bhakti) and ascetic practices.

This shift can be demonstrated in Keshub’s own writings, as he moves from the negative Orientalist and Protestant associations of the term “saint” with the moribund world of tradition and Popery (as in his 1866 speech, “Great Men”) to the public revelation of the contemporary guru Ramakrishna as a “Hindu saint,” which he initiated in 1875. It is, I argue, no coincidence that it is this English-language term in particular that emerges from this period and gradually dominates its English language rivals (prophet, hero, reformer, great man, poet, sage, genius), first of all, in Indian English-language discourse. The difference here—the shift from the saint as marker of a moribund tradition towards a link between past and present Hindu power—I argue, comes in Keshub’s reevaluation of contemporary Hindu, especially ascetic, practice. The kind of cosmopolitanism and universalism that this turn opened up, noted by van der Veer and Aravadamudan, needs also to be seen in connection to Keshub’s newly positive knowledge of and appeals to “other,” especially Catholic, forms of Christianity.

It is not only what Keshub says in his public lectures but also how he says it, as Copley’s accusation of “histrionics” suggests, that is of special importance here. By calling attention to the techniques through which Keshub and other Hindu leaders presented their ideas, we move more clearly into understanding the personal models discussed above—the Great
Men, poets, reformers, fakirs, and saints—as *media* rather than simply as ideas, texts, symbols, or imaginaries. That is, colonial encounter—even and including its texts and symbols—happened in and through a world awash in actual images, public performances, sartorial shifts, and visual styles, all evocative of affects and mythological resonance. It is thus worth noting that the transformation of the saint occurs through a live rhetorical performance form—the public lecture—as much and perhaps more than through the press. Transcripts of Sen’s speeches reveal the almost riotous nature of his lectures, his words continuously interrupted by the frequent eruption of “applause,” “laughter,” and “loud cheering.” Keshub’s “histrionics” then indicate how dramatic performance works in tandem with the flood of print pouring forth from Bengal’s presses. The need to correct overemphasis on a rather univocal vision of doctrinaire textualism in this period is also evident in Cassie Adcock’s observation that, far from a dour antagonism, the controversialist approach of groups such as the Arya Samaj and others “was an exciting form of entertainment that showcased orators’ skills in argument, language play and mocking humour.”

That so much of textual production itself, in Bengal and in Punjab, consisted of biographies, polemical dialogues and vernacular poetry rather than only scriptures gives a further and largely neglected dimension to the centrality of the personal, and indeed, entertainment, to imagining a “moral history” in this period.

Thus, of special interest here is the way in which Keshub does and does not use the term saint and the particular men he discusses in his earlier speech on Great Men. In obvious debt to Carlyle, his rhetoric is filled with prophets, reformers, and sages—the term saint appearing only once in the entire lecture. Not surprisingly, as I have argued above, this is in a negative light: “All the nobler instincts and aspirations are smothered by the ignorable worship of custom and tradition. The orthodox fondly look through the vista of bygone ages to a romantic past, peopled with saints…” Here the “saint” encodes the moribund world of “customs and traditions” in so far as they ground contemporary ritualistic orthodoxy. Again, as with Carlyle, it is Martin Luther who provides the paradigm of a more lively and forward-looking hero: “The mighty Luther shook Europe to its foundations by his vigorous and fearless protests against the errors of Popery. … Wherever there are Protestant nations or individuals, there [Luther’s] spirit is manifest in glory.” Given the Protestant sensibility and modernist sense of progress invoked here, it comes as no surprise that the figures through whom “God reveals Himself to us in history” include many
types—“Representative Men, Geniuses, Heroes, Prophets, Reformers and Redeemers”—but not the saint, the monk, or the ascetic.

Some criticized Keshub for using this speech to make himself out to be a Great Man—and of course this is far from wrong. However, from my perspective, rather than a criticism, this reading leads us to a positive appreciation of such performances. To be sure, Sen’s framework of an otherworldly East against a scientific West echoed romantic Orientalism even as it presaged, if more gently, Vivekananda’s later “one-upmanship,” recommending that “ancient India teach [the West] sweet poetry and sentiment.” Yet even within his speech on Great Men, Keshub’s willingness to include sixteenth-century holy man Caitanya and give this ecstatic Bengali bhakta and sannyasi an equal place among the world’s great, inspired “prophet-reformers” was a clue to his coming turn to the emotional bhakti of neo-Vaishnavism, including the ecstatic practice of *saṃkīrtan*. This phase would include a more general turn to religion as embodied practice: the veneration of gurus such as Ramakrishna, personal asceticism, and assertion of his own charismatic authority. Ultimately, what Copley terms Keshub’s “saintly” turn provoked conflict with rationalist, Brahmo bhadralok and the liberal missionaries who were his earlier audience and compatriots, thus signaling a new trajectory for streams of modern Hinduism. In this new vision, rather than place India in the shadow of the Reformation and Europe’s Great Men, Luther would fade from Keshub’s view, and he would shift to an Asian-centrism, a vision that reimagined the world re-centered on India as the premier “birth-place of prophets and saints.”

This rhetorical shift needs to be seen within the wider historical context and Keshub’s own personal development. As Hatcher has suggested, a century of Christian missions, the 1857 insurgency, and increased racism help explain why later Hindu leaders abandoned Roy’s earlier “democratic” eclecticism for the more “aristocratic” approach of modern neo-Vedantin inclusivism. At the personal level, Keshub’s development increasingly included experiments with saintly, ascetic culture, no doubt influenced by his 1875 meeting with the sannyasi and priest of Kālī at Dakṣineśvar, Ramakrishna. Importantly, through his promotion of his new acquaintance, Keshub encouraged Bengal’s and thus the world’s discovery of Ramakrishna, the “most famous and most important modern guru.” In one of Keshub’s early reports of this meeting, he links Ramakrishna with his other recently “discovered” exemplary Hindu, Dayananda Sarasvati (though he had known Dayananda since 1871). It is especially significant that the title of his English-language article was, “A Hindu Saint.”
We met one (a sincere Hindu devotee) not long ago, and were charmed with the depth and penetration and simplicity of his spirit. The never ceasing metaphors and analogies in which he indulged are, most of them, apt and beautiful. The characteristics of his mind are the very opposite of those of Pandit Dayanand Saraswati, the former being so gentle, tender and contemplative as the latter is sturdy, masculine and polemical. Hinduism must have in it a deep source of beauty, truth and goodness to inspire such men as these.  

The logic of Rammohun Roy and earlier Orientalists is now reversed: rather than argue that the past glory of the Vedas can reveal the gold beneath the dross of present Hinduism, Keshub argues that living saintly Hindus now prove that Hinduism itself—past and present—is rooted in “beauty, truth and goodness.” Keshub finds the “golden age” in the hearts and minds of contemporary figures—whether the gentle devotee of Kali or the masculine polemical debater, both sannyasis. Indeed, Keshub was echoing language that was beginning to appear in the press; in 1870 the Hindu Patriot says of Dayananda Sarasvati: “we have come to believe that the golden age of India has not completely come to an end.”  

It is only fitting that such a reversal should be accomplished under the reappropriated sign of Europe’s dark Catholic past and Hinduism’s dark present, the saint.  

The encounter with living ascetics who powerfully affected Keshub seems to have provoked not only alienation from some Brahmos and outside supporters, but also a period of spiritual and emotional struggle. During this time he fought his way to the light through prayer and consecration, by institution of a regimen of asceticism.... While it was not in his nature or scheme of religion to renounce the world, Keshub regarded asceticism as a remedy, an antidote for too much worldliness [and as] a necessary prelude to any change and development in the religious life.  

Keshub’s inward-looking, ascetic, and “emotional” spirituality lead his longtime friend, the American Unitarian missionary C. H. A. Dall, to be fiercely critical. Eventually, the progressive, activist wing of the reformers, claiming Roy’s earlier rational ethics, renamed itself the Sādhārāṇ or “simple” Brahmo Samaj, whereas Keshub, now free to pursue his own
agenda, renamed his wing of the Brahmos the Nava Vidhān in 1880, the Church of the New Dispensation.

During the short period Keshub led this institution, he attempted to develop a new form of religious community and practice, complete with elaborate, composite forms of ritual. Importantly, for all his continued eloquence, with its modern and Romantic rhetoric, Keshub and his movement were criticized for precisely the elements of vernacular ascetic culture identified above as being in opposition to modern forms of religion, including “man-worship” of himself as the guru, the embodied practice of “yoga,” and the improper mixing of religious traditions. Such criticisms, I argue, are evidence of the ways in which Keshub differed from affirmative Orientalism, simultaneously achieving heresy in the eyes of Christians, Hindus, and liberal scholars. For such critics, Keshub, unlike the poor uneducated masses of India, should have been above the unthinking syncretism connecting popular holy men with exalted figures such as Christ.

Keshub’s Christ, however, was neither the missionaries’ divine incarnation nor Rammohun’s rationalized Jesus of the Precepts, but Christ reinterpreted through Hindu traditions, Roman Catholicism, and world religions discourse. He argued that Christ was an “Asiatic,” not a “European,” and consequently was better understood in Asiatic terms. Specifically, Keshub’s Christ fulfills South Asian ascetic ideals: “He comes to you after all as a Yogi, full of Hindu devotion and communion . . . The devout Christ, like your Yogis and Rishis, lived a life of sweet-devotion . . . In accepting him, therefore, you accept the spirit of a devout Yogi, and a loving Bhakta,—the fulfillment of your national scriptures and prophets.” In this passage, the established English lexicon of prophet, reformer, genius, hero, and sage gives way to Indian terms for exemplary figures—the yogi, the rishi, the bhakta. By connecting this language with Christ, Keshub in fact is treading on risky rhetorical ground. Even though terms such as rishi invoke the aura of India’s golden age, they also suggest he might be endorsing India’s contemporary ascetic culture. The term yogi, for example, ambiguously invoked both the classical and the vernacular, but is explicitly connected here with what Keshub positively calls “asceticism.” To be sure, he sounds the well-worn note of many an affirmative Orientalist: he does not mean “that horrid form of asceticism, which prevails in this country” and consists only in “self-mortification.” Yet this brief caveat is itself evidence of important ambiguities: “asceticism” is an English-language
category typically on the “other” side of Christianizing and modernizing modes of emergent Indian identities, but here becomes less fixed. By invoking specific Indian-language terms associated with ascetic culture, Keshub begins to blur that line, attempting to work out an acceptable model of a modern Indian ascetic. That this is a significantly new turn is clear from the fact that Keshub addresses this point to a specific audience: “Young men of India, who are so zealous in the cause of reformation and enlightenment, turn your attention to this point. Believe and remember what Christ has said, and be ready to receive him. . . . He will come to you as self-surrender, as asceticism, as Yoga, as the life of God in man, as obedient and humble sonship.”

It was of course the affirmative Orientalist retrieval of the yogis, rishis, and Indian sages of India’s various golden ages that allowed Keshub to make such moves in the first place. For without that scholarship, the lexicon of Indian asceticism would not have resonated in the minds of his bhadralok audience, but would be either unintelligible or tend to signify present decline. In a significant sense, affirmative Orientalists made the rishi-like haloes of modern Indian “saints” possible. Moreover, Keshub remains a modern figure, marked with the language of prayer, piety, and moralism drawn from his deep encounter with Protestant categories and values. Indeed, he came to describe the new breed of ascetics as “apostolic missionaries.”

Yet Keshub’s personal transformation and complex rhetoric should not be simplified into the story of a westernized Indian imitating the fantasies of westerners. It is rather the new things Keshub does with the terms that were available, and the ways he complicated the nineteenth-century marginalization of asceticism, that call for more sustained attention. He transforms the perception of Christ not only into an Oriental, but also into an Asian Yogi, and encourages his audience of “reformers” to become a new kind of ascetic by invoking narratives of the ideal past. This dimension of Keshub’s difference from dominant colonial modes can be seen in his appropriation of specifically Catholic resources in his reclamation of Christ.

In particular, Keshub’s reworked Asian Christ drew on the early (ante-Nicene) church fathers. Themselves drawing on neo-Platonic and Stoic concepts, early Christian philosophers Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria conceived of Christ as the universal Logos, the order, proportion, or rational principle present throughout nature and true philosophy. As Keshub asks, “Do [the Fathers] not hear unequivocal testimony
to Christ in Socrates? . . . I deny and repudiate the little Christ of popular theology, and stand up for a greater Christ, a fuller Christ, a more eternal Logos of the Fathers, and I challenge the world’s assent.” Based then on early Christian sources associated with Catholicism and Orthodoxy, Keshub argued that this universal Christ was already present in Hinduism and in all great “prophets and saints.”

Keshub’s exposure to these alternate Christianities undoubtedly came, at least in part, through his encounter with Nehemiah Goreh (1825–1895), the Hindu convert to Anglo-Catholicism. Goreh was charged by his mentors among the High Church Calcutta Tractarians of Bishop’s College with a “mission” to the Brahmos and Keshub, in particular, to present a fuller Christianity than that of the Serampore Baptists or C. M. S. Low Church Anglicans. This included the “Divine Mysteries of our Holy Religion,” such as, much like Hinduism, renunciation and likely, given the major influence of E. B. Pusey on Goreh, early Christian Logos theology. Keshub’s friendship with Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (d. 1907), the Roman Catholic convert, also likely contributed to this awareness, as did chance and mutually instructive encounters between Ramakrishna’s followers and local sadhus claiming Christ as their chosen yogic ideal (*iṣṭadevata*). Again, renunciation played a key role here: Upadhyaya himself innovated a Christianized form of Catholic asceticism as sannyasa at this time, critiqued both British rule and Protestant theology, and was eventually tried as a seditious nationalist. For him, though a Catholic Christian, the Indian nation and the saints formed a potentially seamless whole: European mission could be demonstrably shown as a failure, not because of meager conversions, but because “not a single flower of a saint has blossomed in India to adorn the altar of God,” whereas Keshub existed among non-Christians. Similarly, the Maharastrian Hindu Christian convert Narayan V. Tilak would speak soon thereafter of the vital need for a powerful individual, a “Christian Personality” to emerge. In this sense, the saints served as a widely shared medium of innovation, inspiration, and critique in Bengal and beyond in religious nationalist circles, both in terms of ethical and religious life and their increasing symbolic capital. Gandhi would pick up on just such idioms, claiming in 1921 that modern reformers such as Rammohun Roy and B. G. Tilak, cut off from common Indians by their western education, would appear as mere “dwarfs” when compared to great medieval saints such as Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, and Shankara. The specific link between Roman Catholicism and Hindu traditions of
renunciation (sannyasa), in fact, continue in powerful ways to this day among the Khrist bhaktas of Varanasi studied by Kerry San Chirico.\(^8^5\)

Historical links with Anglo- and Roman Catholicism fostered a critical Indian awareness of the European past and present, in particular, tensions between Protestant and Catholic, and a reevaluation of asceticism and sainthood in the modern world. The marginal space occupied by Catholicism as the other within the self of England had the potential to foster critical consciousness and to generate narratives oppositional to established British self-presentations. This important historicization of consciousness is at work in Keshub’s critical dismissal of “English Christianity” as a provincial form of “muscular Christianity” and helps contextualize his appropriation of the “saint”: as a Roman Catholic term par excellence, the “saint” was a destabilizing sign of the other within the self of the Raj’s English Christianity and an ironic reversal of judgment on contemporary holy men such as Ramakrishna.\(^8^6\) That this reevaluation of asceticism was taken up by missionaries in Sundar Singh’s case is evidence that, as Ewing points out, “[colonizers] were themselves caught in conflict, with . . . dramatically differing visions of colonialism. . . . They also had inconsistent notions of the holy man, some of which they absorbed from their colonized subjects, and some of which they struggled to impose on them.”\(^8^7\) The hybridity within European Christianity could then be connected to other hybridities: Keshub could rethink and reimagine Christ in terms of Hindu ascetic models and as the ascetic that western Protestants had largely forgotten. In the Christian appropriation of Stoic ideas of the Logos to interpret Christ, Keshub challenged the “silence of the oracles” by which some early and modern Christians attempted to disenchant the world of ritual, magic, and poetry.\(^8^8\) Assuming the high ground of his own comprehensive pluralism, Keshub highlighted the fragmentary nature of the “West” and urged Protestant and Roman Catholic reconciliation.\(^8^9\)

The self-awareness and multivalence of such retrievals is well worth exploring. Indeed, Rammohun Roy, when approached through his Bengali writings, is more complex than the monotheist, rationalist reformer he often presented himself to be, an image reflected in all but the most recent scholarship.\(^9^0\) Thus the question of which models of ascetic exemplarity—sannyasi, sadhu, yogi, bhakta, jivanmukta, rishi, guru, avatara, and more—was being asked and answered differently in a variety of contexts. Yet the tide was clearly turning. By the 1870s, just as Butler was writing of his desire that the “lazy crew” of fakirs might disappear, the bhaktas, yogis, rishis, avatars, and “Great Men” of old had returned to
Bengal—if not quite as faqirs, then at least as ascetics. They still, however, had to make their way to Punjab.

**The Saints Come to Punjab: From Dayananda Sarasvati to the Delhi Durbar**

In 1875, Keshub publicly recognized Dayananda Sarasvati, the visiting Gujarati sannyasi, along with Ramakrishna, as a living Hindu saint. This recognition depended in part on the fact that Dayananda himself had already learned much of the style of his refurbished Hinduism from the Brahmos, in fact from Keshub himself. Before his Calcutta visit, Dayananda was actually too much a representative of the contemporary Sanskritic, brahminical tradition to be an effective leader for many modernizing, middle-class Indians. For roughly ten years before, Dayananda wandered north India, pursuing yoga and Sanskrit disputation (śāstrārtha) with Brahmin pandits over his view that the Vedas rejected idol worship. Though this technique had occasionally drawn large crowds, his interlocutors were largely unimpressed, and he remained an obscure figure. The reformer’s rise to wider influence in the 1870s was in large part a result of changes of style he made under the direct influence of the Brahmos in Calcutta. As many have pointed out, this transformation modernized Dayananda in a number of ways and was crucial to the success of the Arya Samaj in Punjab, which began to flourish at precisely this time. Indeed, one of the most concrete symbols of this transformation is the juxtaposition of two photographs of Dayananda in J. N. Farquhar’s study (Fig. 3.1). Here we see, first, the vernacular sannyasi or faqir transformed by the new “fashion” of the Brahmo “missionaries.” Put differently, we witness the merging of the ascetic public with the modern public sphere.

Dayananda’s new “composite” style, neither quite Indian nor quite English, influenced by Keshub’s “apostolic missionary” yogi, is a concise image of the multidimensional negotiations of colonial encounter. However, the image of the swami clothed should not simply replace earlier images. That is, while in many ways a more modern identity enabled his later success, it hardly completely redefined him—he never adopted the “intuitionist” hermeneutic of Debendranāth Tagore or Keshub, for example. Rather, he retained his distinct identity, goals, and critiques of the Brahmos themselves. More importantly, these images illustrate the dependence of modernizing shifts on styles as much as on ideas—through
media such as language, dress, forms of debate, photography, and institution-building—and demonstrate the ways that the overlapping material and religious modes of modernization, much like those of Indian monastic traditions and Protestant missions, were central to their power and appeal.

Still, in keeping with the Luther image so often used to describe Dayananda, the scriptural basis of the Arya Samaj in the Vedas has often been seen as a rejection of the personal authority of the guru. Such a clear contrast between the textualized modern authority and the “guruism” and “man-worship” is overly simplified, however. During Dayananda’s own time, Arya Samajis were often called “Dayanandis,” indicating that they were viewed as disciples of Dayananda, their guru. A significant portion of Punjabi Aryas themselves viewed Dayananda as not only a guru, but even as rishi, the Vedic seer who transmits the Veda. For this so-called “Mahātma” party, Dayananda was nothing short of a “mystic” and “saint,” worthy of the production of hagiography. Though most scholars have seen this as a projection of followers stuck in premodern modes, a few have suggested that the issue might not be so clear: “it seems fair to look on Dayānanda” not simply as a reformer but “as a self-conscious guru.”

A close reading of his *Satyartha Prakasha* suggests that even as a “reformer” Dayananda drew on his status as a sannyasi, evoking models of personal as much as textual authority. By speaking at length of the *apta*, a person whose word can serve as a valid source of religious knowledge, by endorsing the compositions of *rishis* (*ārsha* texts) as religious authorities, and by mirroring the sexual and irascible qualities of epic *rishis* such as Vyāsa in his own writing, he made the conclusion that he himself was a modern *mahāṛṣi* nearly inevitable. His autobiography further amplifies his skill as a storyteller within the context of vernacular ascetic culture. Both texts are replete with dramatic dialogues between rival holy men and stories of popular gurus, yogis, *tantrikas*, travels to the Kumbh Mela and the Himalayas, encounters with bears, and court-sponsored debates. In all accounts, Dayananda emerges victorious, surpassing the very exalted yogis he trained under. These stories mirror hagiographies of spiritual conquest such as story of Shankara’s travels and debates, the *Digvijāya*, which Dayananda himself draws on directly in *Satyartha Prakasha*. In short, Dayananda was a master storyteller who spun dramatic tales of gurus, *sants*, *bairāagis*, and *siddhāas* as his rivals, reflecting both folk wisdom on authentic and fraudulent holy men and the tendency of ascetics to tell stories of about ascetics in ways that reinforce their own authority.

Taken together, the examples of Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayananda Sarasvati, and other leaders suggest a dramatic reemergence of an embodied asceticism within the shared colonial space after fifty and more years of marginalization due to state intervention, Protestant and affirmative Orientalist narratives, and earlier styles of modern Hinduism. The idea that Indian figures adopted but also transcended such narratives in order to rethink and legitimate ascetic practice and authority, to raise, as it were, the saints from their graves, should encourage us to look for the elements that exceed the imitative accounts most often used to describe this period. While Vivekananda for example may be faulted for misrepresenting the *tantrika* and Shākta Ramakrishna as a “great teacher, saint and prophet” and Advaita Vedantin, such moves can also be seen as creative legitimations via authoritative rhetorics. Appeals to a romanticized Golden Age were, when applied to elements of the delegitimized present, necessary moves. They also may have been less totalizing than we might expect: for Rama Tirtha, Viveknanda’s fellow neo-Vedantin, Ramakrishna’s Shakta identity was clear more than twenty years after his death (IWGR 4: 316). Furthermore, unlike Rammohun Roy’s rarified rationalist realm of text, petition, and debate, emerging Hindu leaders increasingly embodied and
performed the roles they described and wrote about. Vivekananda, like Sen before him, used renunciation as a lens through which to view Christ, and produced a Bengali translation of the medieval Catholic monastic text *The Imitation of Christ*. Rather than simply Christianizing Hinduism, as some scholars allege, Vivekananda, for example, critiques Protestantism in favor of Christian renunciation: “Luther drove a nail in the coffin of religion when he took away renunciation and gave us morality instead.”

In light of these significantly non-Protestant and non-Orientalist elements of emergent modern Hindu traditions, it seems particularly ironic to describe Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novel *Ānandamath* as David White does, as a *bhadrālok* reinvention of the yogi as a “forest-dwelling meditative, spiritual renouncer, something far closer to the idea of the sages of vedic lore” than to vernacular ascetics. After all, though displaced historically to the Mughal period, the novel is about militant ascetics on the model of the Sannyasi Fakir Rebellion, an event grounded in older worldly networks and practices of yogi-faqirs. On the ground, the novel reinforced the literally militant dimensions of Upadhyaya, Vivekananda, and, soon, Aurobindo’s ascetic religious nationalism. Such potent connections could, as Kirin Narayan shows, lead modernizing Indians from the Gandhian freedom struggle to a later full embrace of sannyasa or, as Shahid Amin documents, ignite the vernacular imagination surrounding the ascetic as a figure of power and magic. In Punjab, Dayananda’s appearance, and tales of his participation in the 1857 insurgency, inspired a wealth of “seditious literature” invoking him specifically as a faqir. Similarly, upon the conviction of B. G. Tilak in 1908, Punjabi nationalists donned the “garb of Jogis (saffron dress)” as a part of a vow demanding his release, and pamphlet literature compared the Punjabi revolutionary Ajit Singh, the nephew of the more famous Bhagat Singh, with Christ as anti-imperial, patriotic nationalist or “rebel” messiah (*bāghī masīh*). As Oberoi points out, the dichotomy of peasant rebellion and everyday resistance that structures much scholarship has tended to obscure important connections between militancy and everyday bodily practices such as dress, diet, and celibacy, connections key to understanding the Kūkā/Nāmdhārī insurgency. Such unexpected crossings, of course, traveled in multiple directions: the Vedantin essence of neo-Hindu religion could lead some Indian Christians to appropriate Vivekananda and Dayananda themselves within their own ascetic Christian, Punjabi lineage, as discussed in Chapter 7. It is against such a background that Antonio Gramsci’s interest in Brahmabandhab Upadhaya and Sundar Singh takes on a particular resonance, though this
must remain speculative. To point out these resonances is not of course to claim that ascetic spirituality was necessarily revolutionary or that all these figures were crypto-Bolsheviks, but that, in these historical circumstances, secular-religious dichotomies are unhelpful for understanding contexts in which spiritual links to militancy may have appeared particularly powerful.109

Modern Monks and Colonial Mimesis

To call attention to the figure of the modern “Oriental monk” is to enter fraught territory, both in terms of their own contexts, in which they were controversial figures, and in our own, where they are often seen as epiphenomenal to the rise of the “middle class,” as imitators of western religion and/or as precursors to Hindu fundamentalism.110 In contrast, modern ascetics such as Vivekananda and Dayananda were seen by missionaries of their time as reactionary figures whose asceticism represented their tenuous relation to the forward motion of the modern world and its “vigorous reform.”111 After Edward Said, however, we are more aware of the dangers of essentialized images of India: India as the spiritual nation essentially antithetical to materialistic, western modernity, whether for good or ill. Thus, typically seen either as belonging to an outdated “other” world or, more critically, in terms of an essentialized identity from colonial discourse, modern monks have seldom been studied in depth in their own terms by religious studies scholars. While we have a host of excellent treatments of colonial topics such as sati, idolatry, or neo-Vedanta, ascetics qua ascetics receive only passing reference and, when they are studied, almost no contextualization in terms of South Asian religious ascetic practice or comparative asceticism.

It is not that scholars have been completely silent, of course, as Agehananda Bharati’s essay shows. What they say, however, tends to locate asceticism within tendentious historical narratives, rather than attending to ethical, performative, and long-standing dimensions.112 For this earlier generation of Indologists, confident in social science models of modernization, key features of modern Hinduism betrayed an Indian inability to fully embrace an “empirical, social, autonomous individual.”113 As such, modern asceticism was, in this reading, of a piece with the limitations of Vedanta, its philosophical idealism, and the “fragile Renaissance ego” it produced. Similar binaries between modernity and tradition are at work
in Miller’s description of “the orientation of traditional, world-negating Hindu monasticism” as the contrast to Vivekananda’s work. With such stark contrasts assumed, the appeal of modern ascetic leaders has led most scholars to focus on western influence rather than Indian sources. In particular, Miller’s reading of modern Hindu monks is framed by a Weberian narrative in which Europe’s move away from Catholic monasticism to the “inner-worldly asceticism” (innerweltliche askesis) of Calvinist Protestantism proved foundational for modernization and served as a model in colonial India, specifically for modern monks. More generally, Copley attributes modern Hindu “monasticism”—along with a sense of sin, guilt, and repentance—to non-Indian sources, a part of the “imitat[ion]” of the “corporate life of Christianity,” which is, at the same time, a defensive strategy based in Hindu insecurity leading to fundamentalism. In such accounts, mimesis—imitation well or poorly done—is a central part of the story of India’s attempted entry into what Webb Keane has called the particularly moral quality of modernity.

In contrast, postcolonial scholarship, to the extent it has engaged the question, has argued that the modern Hindu asceticism and, more importantly, the entry of modern monks into the colonial public sphere derive from colonial discourse. The wider processes in which readings of emergent modern Hindu asceticism are set have included Christianization, Semiticization, “textualist/world religions,” and “Orientalist epistemology.” Nandy’s description is typical:

Vivekananda and Dayanand, too, tried to Christianize Hinduism . . . [T]he main elements of their Hinduism were, again: an attempt to turn Hinduism into an organized religion with an organized priesthood, church and missionaries; acceptance of the idea of proselytization and religious ‘conscientization’ (śuddhi, the bête noire of the Indian Christians and Muslims, was a Semitic element introduced into nineteenth-century Hinduism under the influences of Western Christianity); an attempt to introduce the concept of The Book following the Semitic creeds (the Vedas and the Gītā in the case of the two Swamis); . . . and a certain puritanism and this-worldly asceticism borrowed partly from the Catholic church and partly from Calvinism.

Mimetic models contain a strongly gendered dimension, as well. Revathi Krishnaswamy speaks of the embrace of “religion in the image of a
muscular, monotheistic, heterosexual, masculine Protestantism,” linking this form of religion explicitly with “The Book” and “an order of monks.”

One of the most sustained and nuanced postcolonial treatments of modern monks is Indira Chowdury-Sengupta’s consideration of the figure of the “heroic sannyasi” specifically in the context of Bengali nationalism. Writing about Vivekananda and noting the general lack of attention given to this topic, she argues that the Bengali appropriation of the “icon of the śāṃnyāsī and the accretions it came to acquire” is a direct result of Hindus’ “interactions with Orientalist ideas,” especially what Fox has called the “affirmative Orientalism” of Romanticism. This move should not be seen as a “revival” of tradition but, echoing Partha Chatterjee, as “a reconstruction which took over notions from the religious sphere and translated them into principles that were perceived as permeating every aspect of national culture.” As with King’s and Chatterjee’s work, Sengupta highlights the importance of the specifically religious—indeed, to her credit, ascetic and not merely “spiritual”—component in an emerging Indian modernity. Yet her analysis in some ways reinforces the idea that the “religious sphere” and “accepted norms that defined” Hindu ascetics had traditionally kept them separate from social and political realms, thus rendering the notion of the “political sannyasi…paradoxical.”

The paradox, of course, rests only in the eye already colored by the colonial privatization of religion.

Building on these approaches, Sanjay Joshi has argued for a more substantive role for religious traditions, not as a marker of an “alternative modernity”—for this term problematically implies normative secularity—but as a part of a kind of back and forth in which modernity is not the only actor. Religion, as a modern creation, is the result in part of an historical process that actively depoliticized and privatized the religious traditions colonialists encountered. Of special interest here is Joshi’s discussion of Rama Tirtha in just this context. The modern Punjabi monk, like Vivekananda, appears here as a key actor in the story of multiple, in particular, religious modernities, that is, a “modernity shaped by Indian middle-class activists [that] sought to transform the multiple strands of beliefs and practices into a more or less monolithic Hinduism and purge it of its divisive and hierarchical aspects so as to suit their own public sphere projects.” As such, asceticism again plays a telling, though ultimately, limited and supporting role, exemplified by Rama Tirtha’s transformation of asceticism into the “opposite of any sort of otherworldly speculation.” Thus, while attempting to grant religious traditions a more substantive role in the
context of modernity, Joshi nevertheless invokes longstanding stereotypes of renouncers’ typically passive “contemplation” and antiquated “rituals.” He describes Rama Tirtha’s reformist program for sadhus as one through which they might become “tied up with the world,” rather than already being deeply present within it. This reading confuses Rama Tirtha’s rhetorical positioning with a historicized account of ascetic traditions, an oversight especially puzzling given Joshi’s explicit rejection of such moves.

My point here is not to repeat now widespread discussions about religion as a category produced or deeply shaped by its Christian, Protestant and/or generally Enlightenment, western, and colonial backgrounds or to dwell on the effects of these via Orientalism. These topics have each been discussed by a number of scholars, and of course remain the subject of vigorous debates. Rather, by seeing how asceticism specifically has or has not appeared in such discussions, I aim to raise questions about their adequacy to the complexity and creativity of the colonial encounter itself. For example, while Sengupta generally finds the idea of a political sannyasi “paradoxical,” she does situate the symbol’s appeal in some, if not a fully developed, relation to the history of the Sannyasi Fakir Rebellion and to practices such as semen retention, by which (male) ascetics are said to generate internal power or heat (tapas). Where do such elements fit in our broader scholarly narratives of modern Indian religion, those that include modern monks and those that overlook them?

It is thus worth noting that both social scientifically oriented Indologists and postcolonial critics stress the effects of colonialism, relying heavily on accounts of Indian response and mimicry. In addition to neglecting the question of agency, this commonality is problematic in that asceticism in both accounts appears as significant only insofar as it sits comfortably within modern Hinduism’s turn to key markers of the modern, such as the textuality, scripturalism of “the Book,” and Christian models. Simply put, this elision belies the richness of South Asian ascetic histories and frames “guru faith” in terms of an assumed Indian middle-class alienation and sense of failure produced by “modernity.” Moreover, it overlooks the fact that the anti-ascetic, anti-sainthood discourses of Protestants, Orientalists, governmental officials, and reforming Indians in pre-twentieth-century India could hardly provide a model for an embodied asceticism in any way comparable to scripturalism.

What might we gain not only by being aware of the politics of knowledge but also by questioning how the story of those politics has thus far been told? Overall, my account of the faqir as a figure of vernacular culture
unsettles the received certainties of scholarship on colonial holy men by raising larger questions about South Asian history. Instead of reiterating the received wisdom that the British fundamentally altered the practice and meaning of Indian asceticism in ways that socioreligious reformers and nationalists mostly mimicked, if to new ends, might we instead ask how “older notions” connected with faqir traditions “continued to shape everyday experience,” much as Farina Mir has asked of the Punjabi literary formation? While acknowledging the role of the heroic sannyasi in “fashion[ing] a national state space,” might we turn to regional holy man traditions in order to locate territories that proved at “best difficult for the nation to appropriate”? Indeed, while both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh can and should be connected to nationalism, both also demonstrated enough resistance to an overtly nationalist program of institution building to displease many contemporaries. Finally, might regional asceticism be seen to play important roles in the agencies of resistance, thus complicating understandings of modern Hinduism as ultimately reinscribing Orientalist and brahminical models, a view that tends to confirm the subordinate and reactive status of colonial Indians?

Unless we are wedded to discounting these continuities and complexities as simply the result of Indian “response” and as somehow less authentically Hindu, we would do well to examine them, in terms of both their constraints and their creativity. As Singleton points out, however briefly, it was to the “grassroots ascetic traditions” that the swadeshi movement turned “to forge a new ideal of heroism and nobility for the modern Indian.” It may have been Katherine Mayo of all people—whose book Mother India crystalized Orientalist images of Indian women as helpless victims—who saw this truth far better than have most recent scholars of South Asian history and religion. Well before Gandhi was accused by Churchill of being a seditious fakir, Mayo saw in modern monks such as Vivekananda a disturbing continuity with the vernacular and seditious culture that preceded them. In her view, they were nothing but “disguised fakir-yogis.”

Saints on State Display:
The Delhi Durbar of 1911

The polemical atmosphere of Punjab in the colonial period began with the official arrival of empire in 1849 and its support for an intransigent, if pious, missionary program of transformation and conversion. As
the missionary work progressed, alarming census reports of dramatic increases in the percentage, if not in the absolute numbers, of conversions to Christianity suggested that there was a real cause for hope on the part of missionaries, and cause for insecurity on the part of indigenous elites. Sensationalized conversion stories, such as those of converted Sikh school boys that sparked the founding of the reformist Singh Sabha in 1873, led to new forms of organization and assertive identities. Orientalist, ethnographic, and missionary models of bounded communities, of singular “religions” founded around the pure doctrine of “classical” or canonical religious texts—and the powerful narrative of decline accompanying them—provided accessible counter-strategies for the indigenous elites of the Arya Samaj, the Sanatana Dharma, the Singh Sabha, and the Ahmadiyah in Punjab. As Kenneth Jones describes the context’s “new and refurbished forms of action”: “For many, religion became a matter of creeds that were explained, defined and elaborated. It was an age of definition and redefinition initiated by socio-religious movements that swept the subcontinent during the years of British rule.” Leading to communal tension, vitriol, rioting, and even murder as they did, such processes and their problematic consequences cannot be overlooked.

Yet as Ayesha Jalal has argued, the standard trope of communalization elides the important role played by individual consciousness and other dimensions of the religious in these contexts. This chapter has traced the ways significant individuals conceived of and related asceticism and colonial discourse. While giving due attention to the discursive context in which religion was shaped and reshaped in and between Bengal and Punjab, I have also attempted to attend to the creativity of figures such as Keshub Chandra Sen and Dayananda Sarasvati as they adopted, adapted, reacted to, and resisted newer and older narratives and lexicons available to them in a situation of subordination. Drawing on the performative repertoire of ascetic culture, as well as of course on modern rhetorics of religion and its techniques, such figures contributed to the continuation of as well as the transformation of Indian asceticism. The combination and interpenetration of rhetorics of reform, of what might be called the immersion of Luther, of reformers, prophets, and eventually sages in a fluid and emergent vocabulary of Indian exemplarity—of rishis, bhaktas, yogis—proved an effective strategy. Indeed, if British government reports on seditious literature in Punjab are to be believed, Dayananda’s power in the region came not so much from his invocation of the Veda as scripture, but his appearance as a vernacular ascetic, an “irascible rishi,” echoes of which we
hear in Aurobindo’s imagery of Dayananda as an austere mountain of a man whose power watered the plains below.137

Indeed, the rise of the ascetic holy man, within and beyond such movements, did more than contribute to communalization, but succeeded in getting the government’s attention, well before Gandhi returned to India from South Africa. Having tried to subdue, control, and critique vernacular asceticism into irrelevance, or steer it into quietist “religious” functions, the government was forced to publically acknowledge that saints are after all important to the modern state. The planning committee for the 1911 Delhi Durbar for the first time made extensive efforts to recognize the diverse lot of vernacular religious leaders, especially ascetics, as a group.

Political and Secret Files record the self-consciousness with which the British now felt it incumbent to court and display “Religious Personages.” The present study’s regional focus in connection with sainthood’s power and vernacular contexts is confirmed by these records’ specific focus on Punjab. As the report explains, the “novel idea of collecting religious personages on the occasion of the Coronation Durbar was originated by His Honour [the Governor of Punjab].” This was the region meant to supply the vast bulk of the holy men, with the “Hindu saints” of Bengal and Uttar Pradesh being invited only as a backup option. The backstage preparations for the display of the religious “Theater State” are described in the report as follows:

I was made responsible for inviting the holy people of the Punjab, but as there are very few Hindu Mahants in this Province, the Mahar Bahadur of Darbhanga undertook to do the needful in respect to the Hindu saints of Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, and Sardar Dyal Singh Man was asked to arrange to collect the Sikh Mahants. . . . I sounded all the holiest Muhammadan Pirs and succeeded in persuading the Pir of Pakpattan, who is recognised to be the head of all Chisti Pirs throughout the whole of India, . . . [T]he Sikh gathering was to consist of some descendants of Guru Baba Nanak, with certain other representative Sikhs from the Sikh States or from the Khalsa Diwan . . . In the afternoon the holy people, Pandits and Ulemas, and the distinguished Sikhs were arrayed under the jharoka where they sat on wooden platforms built on either side immediately under the thrones of Their Imperial Majesties. . . . The effect of this unprecedented gathering of the holy people has exceeded all expectations. They all went away thoroughly satisfied and greatly delighted at their reception, and the privilege of offering their blessings to Their
Imperial Majesties in person created in the minds of these religious leaders a sense of personal attachment to their Sovereign which is bound to have an everlasting effect, and will exercise a most wholesome influence upon the masses who come daily under their religious guidance. Letters of appreciation were sent to all the holy people who attended the Mela and to the Pandits, Ulemas and Sikhs who were presented to Their Imperial Majesties.138 (my emphasis)

We could ask for no better ritual performance of the continued worldliness of Punjab’s holy men (here recognized as a separate category), of the successful reversal of the nineteenth-century critique of asceticism, or, indeed, of the worldliness of the modern religion of the state (despite its rhetoric) than this. Far from an isolated incident, the scene painted here resonates with Waghorne’s description of the visual and material world of Victorian imperial power: “[T]he centerpiece for this world of display was always the Raj in India embodied in public statues and popular etchings of Victoria on her throne . . . , sometimes surrounded by India’s many bejeweled rajas, all paying obeisance to this queen-empress.”139 In 1911, the body of the Sovereign itself was on display in New Delhi, surrounded not only by the Indian political authorities, who were increasingly seen as out of touch with the “real India,” but the ranks of “holy men” of the “the masses who come daily under their religious guidance.”

An alternative, and decidedly less pro-imperial, memory of the same event occurs in the hagiography of the Sikh faqir, Sant Attar Singh (1866–1927), also in attendance at the Durbar. In the Sikh account, rather than a blessing of the King-Emperor or a demonstration of the religious neutrality and benevolence of the Raj, the image of the saint atop his royal elephant takes on an exalted and oppositional orientation. Sant Attar Singh, engaged in his properly “religious” practice of reciting his religious text, the Gurū Granth Sāhib, chooses a particular hymn (bāṇī) that praises the Divine King over and against the kings of the world:

No King is equal to God.
All these Kings or Emperors are false.
They will fade soon.
The outward exhibits and useless decorations have no meaning at all.140

Sung in front of the British ruler performing his role as badshah, the song’s implication is clear. In confirmation of the true outcome of the contest of
earthly and heavenly courts (*darbar*) evoked in the text, His Majesty George V himself stands to acknowledge the greatness of the saint passing before him. He was moved to stand by his recognition of the spiritual glow, more specifically, the “multicoloured face,” radiating from the holy man atop the elephant as he passed in front of “Their Imperial Majesties.” Appropriately then, “King George bowed his head.” When, a few days later, the king sought the saint out, however, the assembly Attar Singh was a part of stood up as the king entered. The holy man did not offer any such bodily recognition, as he was “busy in meditation.” Meditation, in other words, offers the powerful possibility of simply ignoring the Sovereign.

The myth of the *faqir* and the *shāh* and beliefs about the “spiritual government” of saints are well known in the Punjab, with variations in Sikh, Sufi, and Hindu hagiographies and other texts. In some of the very earliest Sikh texts, the gurus are referred to, in contrast to the Mughals, as the “true Emperors”—*sache patishah*. No locality, as Ganesh Das makes clear, is complete without its famous and powerful holy men. Thus as re-imagined here, the complex relationship between the religious and the political is configured not first the time, to be sure, but certainly at an opportune and creative moment, producing a counter-history that reverses the roles of performer and audience. It is no longer the holy men of Punjab who form the supporting cast for the “blessing” of their imperial sovereigns, but the emperor who witnesses the radiant display of sainthood, physically acknowledging its power. We are not far here from the story of Babur’s bowing before the radiance of Nanak’s effulgence. Indeed, such scenes evoked not only hagiographical but historical memory not long distant, as seen in Butler’s frustration at Indian rulers’ acknowledgment of fakirs. When first addressing his rebel supporters of the 1857 Revolt, who would restore him to the throne in Delhi, the late Mughal Bahādur Shāh Zafar denied he was a king. Rather he was, he told the rebels, simply a *faqir*, a beggar and recluse without any interest in fighting or political rule. Was this not precisely all the more reason to make him king, and thereby achieve a novel kind of “authority without power”?
The Saffron Skin of Rama Tirtha

DRESSING FOR THE WEST, THE SPIRITUAL RACE, AND AN ADVAITIN AUTONOMY

The parts of [my] body which are covered are as white as yours.

Rama Tirtha, “The Civilized World’s Spiritual Debt to India” San Francisco, 1904

As in few other races, the tendency towards metaphysical speculation is in the blood of India.

Friedrich Heiler, scholar of Comparative Religion

If it was affirmative Orientalism’s accomplishment to create a textual image of India’s past Golden Age sages, poets, prophets, and mystics, it was the accomplishment of modern leaders such as Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Vivekananda to use that discourse—its texts, lexicon, and moods—to raise living holy men, including of course especially themselves, from their Orientalist graves. This resurrection relied on and enabled several things. Most fundamental was time: while affirmative Orientalists idealized the long past Golden Age over against a degraded Hindu present, modern Indian leaders set the Golden Age to work in that very present, enabling modern Indians to speak with the authority, in Dayananda’s case, for example, of a modern rishi channeling the Veda. Beyond time was language: in resignifying the term “saint” to contradict nineteenth-century anti-Catholic usage, modern Indian leaders took an ascetic turn, away from Rammohun Roy’s rationalist Hinduism, and toward the vernacular world of faqirs, sadhus, yogis, and sannyasis, however haltingly. To be sure, it was the last of these—the purified sannyasi—that received and continues to receive the most attention. The ascetic that emerged was indeed thoroughly Hindu, brahminical, Vedantin, and
a patriot who often took the so-called self-torturing fakir-yogi as his target of attack.¹

That it was none other than Max Müller, the great philologist who wrote the first ever English-language book on a contemporary Hindu holy man—and used the term saint throughout to describe him—is witness to the successful rise of the living, non-Christian holy man in India and the metropole. To be a legitimate Indian saint was now, after centuries of Protestant critique and conflation of Hindu and Roman Catholic traditions, to represent an essential and newly present “metaphysical” nation. In this way, the Indian saint, having beaten out the Persian poets, became a metonym for, in Müller’s view, the spiritual preeminence of India in world history. As he put it, “From [Ramakrishna’s] sayings . . . we learn that . . . the real presence of the Divine in nature and in the human soul was nowhere felt so strongly as in India.”² Along with many Orientalists and modern Hindus, Müller represented this spirituality as “Vedanta,” calling it “the oldest religion and philosophy of the world.”³ The colonial saint becomes not only metonymic but also racialized: a “country permeated by such thoughts” must be seen as far superior to the “ignorant idolaters to be converted. . . . [from the] races of Central Africa.”⁴

I claim that what made such western discourses powerful in the case of modern Indian monks, including Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh, was not so much the discourse itself, but the creative enactment of ascetic practice. Ascetic capacities carried special possibilities within globalizing, visual registers of race, colonialism, and religion. Thus, my goal in these two chapters is to explore how Indian individuals used specific religious, here ascetic, aptitudes in varied, subtle, and original ways. As Punjabi figures grounded in vernacular religion, affected by Bengali religious nationalism and representative of India to the West, Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives as saffron-robed sadhus were a complex confluence of traditional, refurbished, and ambivalent asceticism. Traditional because history remains at least partially accessible (to them and to us) despite imperial effects, refurbished because here asceticism moves from its premodern publics into a modern public sphere among other things, and ambivalent because asceticism in the modern, Protestant West, as elsewhere, was simultaneously disavowed and central.

By approaching the modern monk in terms of “media,” I want to suggest the need to cultivate a broad awareness of the materiality of religion, especially of modern religion. In this sense, the modern monk’s physical presence, the dress he chooses, his reproduced image, and what he says
or doesn’t say about all these are crucial to understanding religion, colonial encounter, and their key tensions. Put differently, if the cassette tape helps us understand the aurality of today’s Islamic revivals, the saint—his body, his dress, and image—can give us insight into the visuality of colonial Hindu and Indian identities more generally. Through new stagings of the rich South Asian ascetic repertoire, I argue, modern monks used dress to un hinge the Indian body from imperialism, occupying alternative sites of authority and religious experience. In place of the dark body and caste-specific, colonial color-codings, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh offered their audiences saffron bodies of their own ascetic making. Put simply, the monk’s robe became what Terrence Turner terms a “social” skin, an incandescent material layer of spirituality. While this was a new application of older ascetic, broadly Indian, and in many ways cross-cultural logics, it proved once again that “clothes might actually make the man.”

Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s journeys in Europe and America, examined here, highlight, in particular, the connections between the monk’s dress, race, and sainthood. This movement between British colony and American context helps us track, rather than conflate, the potential connections between the colonialism and race in America. It was not just that the robes they wore symbolized the spiritual superiority of the East, but that these particular men did particular things with their robes and speech within a wider context in which colors, fabrics, and skins were all surfaces saturated with the sacred. Thus, in addition to giving a more robust account of the materiality of religion and racial marking and unmarking more broadly, whether modern or non-modern, Indian or western, attention to ascetic dress also narrows our focus on the ascetic deconstruction of the self and offers examples of particular colonial and global applications.

The Problem of What to Wear, Race, and the Colonial Body

More than a modern identification with “Indian” culture over against things “Western” or European, the significance of Indian, and I would add ascetic, dress depends on longstanding views that connect self, the sacred, and ornament. As Tarlo puts it, there is a “distinctively pre-colonial Indian view of cloth ‘as a thing that can transmit spirit and substance’ (Bayly 1986: 286).” This material-moral approach to clothing made, for
example, Gandhi’s dress powerful through the “transformative” qualities of cloth and makes sense of traveling gurus’ choices to wear conspicuously Indian rather than non-Indian clothing. Moreover, as Eliza Kent’s work on Protestant missionary concerns with their own dress and that of their converts makes clear, the spiritual substance of the sartorial was far from a uniquely Indian concern. Unfortunately, the saffron robe of modern monks has typically been seen as “prescribed,” turning clothing into “mere labels which do little more than reveal identities,” rather than as a key part of dynamic self-construction.

Set against the background of the historical, discursive, and material contexts of the rise of anti-colonial neo-Vedanta and ascetic history, however, it becomes easier to see saintly dress as “playing an active role in the making of identities.” Hindu nationalism has lead to the visual saffronization of ascetic identity, thus obscuring the diversity of South Asia’s vernacular traditions. Yet in some ways because of this same homogenizing trend, the meanings of sartorial choices were and remain hardly transparent; their ineluctable opacity requires extensive interpretation in both Indian and non-Indian contexts. In Roland Barthes’s terms, while the “caption” beneath the image of robed modern monks might read “Vedanta,” the materiality of their image and physical presence might simultaneously provoke an excess of meaning. For example, even as modern monks laid claim to the Advaita philosophy of Shankara, their robes might signal his hagiography as the Dasnami’s founder, in some ways contradicting the very “otherworldly” asceticism that Orientalism associated with him. The Dasnamis had, after all, provided many of the warrior ascetics who had bedeviled the Raj and preserved hagiographies of Shankara as a miracle-wielding, royal corpse-invading, yogic adept, and “world conqueror.”

In addition to attending to physical descriptions and visual representations, then, we need to examine what Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh—and others—said and didn’t say about the meaning of their dress. As Crane aptly puts this point in quite a different context: “At such moments, self-conception intersects with self-presentation and behavior. . . . Their words are a component of their performances that should not be isolated from the material register.” Similarly, Richard Davis has called for greater connection between the registers of visual, material, and textual in South Asian studies. In this sense, saffron—as material, as signifier, and as a part of behavior—forms a part of “the problem of what to wear rather than the description of what is worn.”
The connection of Indian identities to dress and color was also a major part of British imperialism, key to what David Arnold calls “colonizing the body” in his study of public health and disease in colonial India. More broadly, as Said points out and as is especially clear in the case of the faqir, the representation of deviant bodies not only secured the idealized western body, but also worked to delegitimize specific classes of South Asian religious specialists. In addition to the many verbal accounts of the bestial and contorted bodies of so-called saints, the visual portrayal of fakirs could also turn holy men into subhuman beasts (Fig. 4.1), for the consumption of Sunday school children. At more official levels, through the much studied categorization of Indian identity, religion, and caste, imperial knowledge drew on the Dharmaśāstra literature to color-code caste (varṇa)—white priests, red warriors, yellow merchants, and dark-colored servants. Bernard Cohn’s study of the centrality of the turban to colonial

and postcolonial Sikh identity also makes clear how the ordering logics of the census, caste, and religion worked materially.\textsuperscript{23}

Clothing embodied civilization and its discontents, as well: the Brahmos were known to their critics as “coats, hats, and pants” people in light of their fawning over all things European, in sharp contrast to the self-consciously and creatively Indian sartorial styles of Vivekananda, Dayananda, and others.\textsuperscript{24} As Kent makes plain, the religious and moral dimensions of clothing helped in “building up” respectable bodies for missionaries and Indian Christian converts.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, the overlap between western clothing and the performance of “civilization” for a Dalit straining against his oppression appears, for example, as central in Mulkraj Anand’s novel \textit{Untouchable}. In the realm of overt political resistance, the controversial Akali Sikh agitation around control of gurdvāras at times found their symbolic embodiment in the “yellow clothes” worn during protest marches (\textit{jathas}), clothes which the Viceroy considered confiscating in response.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, as Wills and Sen argue, we must be simultaneously aware of the ways in which colonialists “cho[se] the body of the ‘natives’ as the correct means of understanding ‘them,’” recognize that the body was at “the heart of the systems of [Indian] society, metaphor and of identity long before” Europe was on the scene, and understand the body as a “cross-cultural site of representation, control and resistance.”\textsuperscript{27} Taussig’s work on western “chromophobia” likewise explores both the centrality of color and cloth to Euro-American selves and highlights the anxieties provoked by too much color, of brightness brought too close.\textsuperscript{28}

Seen in this way, the body, clothing, and color unite British and Indian discourse as much as they were used to secure their difference. As Tarlo points out, \textit{swadeshi} sentiment and Ananda Coomaraswamy’s aesthetics, for example, more than the effects of essentialism, represent the wider late-nineteenth-century “aesthetic view of clothing,” which in England and India resisted industrial cloth in favor of “craft.” Niharikar Dinkar’s art historical work on the ascetic body in colonial Indian art similarly connects anti-colonial Indian nationalist aesthetics with pre-Raphealite trends.\textsuperscript{29}

Of course another, less appealing instance of the porousness of the self and its exteriors, whether cloth or skin, across cultures is the combination of nineteenth-century epidermal views of race and philology’s equation of language, religion, and race. The “Black Acts” of 1849 typified the growing “whiteness” of the English and the “blackness” of Indians, further hardening and enforcing racism through a government order against the then-common hybrid and “native” dress of many colonial officials.\textsuperscript{30} The
so-called Mutiny of 1857 would of course make this tendency even worse. At the same time, color could unite and construct certain elite classes of “fair-skinned” Indians with their “white” Aryan cousins against the “dark[er]” peoples of India through the study of texts and history.31

This of course is precisely the context of Rama Tirtha’s striking comment in this chapter’s epigraph, in which he challenges his western audience to imagine him as white. Yet, rather than a simple internalization of white hegemony, his appeal to a common racial whiteness remains ambiguous, challenging, open-ended. It is, after all, a whiteness that the audience cannot see, one that is concealed by the saffron robe of the Oriental monk, and one which asks them to imagine that which should not be revealed in public (the private body). In a colonial world in which the body, clothing, and color did their work, what did it mean, what did it do, dressing in saffron? In the specific citation given here, saffron cloth functions as a place-holder for the challenge to imagine the white skin beneath it—in other words, it functions to call attention to and thus destabilize the audience’s perception of him as dark/er. It offers ways of seeing, rather than assuming, color, specifically, whiteness, precisely in the way that it conceals whiteness while offering it for (unconsummated) visual consumption. Put differently, Rama Tirtha is engaging in and calling attention to the marking, unmarking, and remaking of bodies through clothing and color.32 Indeed, roughly twenty years later, the U.S. Supreme Court was asked to see another Punjabi, namely the Sikh plaintiff Bhagat Singh Thind, as white, but refused.33

_Saffron Skin and Those Piercing, Black, Spiritualistic Eyes: A Vedantic Modernity in America

How had Rama Tirtha come to America, to offer his saffron robe and white skin to his San Francisco audience, in the first place? After quitting his teaching job in Lahore, wandering in the Himalayas and Kashmir and taking renunciation in 1901, he had begun to take on more explicitly public religious roles. These largely followed the pattern set by other modern monks, including organizing “parliaments,” of religious leaders in India, turning to the press to propagate social and religious views, and cultivating connections with rulers of princely states. In Rama Tirtha’s case, the example of Swami Vivekananda provided an explicit model
for expanding his public into a global one: when he heard of a second Parliament of World Religions planned in Japan, he set out as soon as possible, with the support of the Maharaja of Tehri. Finding the Parliament long-canceled when he arrived in Tokyo, however, Rama Tirtha lectured on “The Secret of Success” and read a printed account of the Chicago Parliament, given him by his new Sikh disciple and soon to be sannyasi, Puran Singh. Puran Singh’s description of their meeting conveys the rapture made possible by hearing a modern monk’s “birdlike” intonations of “Om” in the midst of the Indian Student Club, a moment of oral power in tension with disenchanted semiotic ideology.34

This first meeting was as short as it was intense; the itinerant swami boarded a circus ship bound for America, where he would, as it were, start his own swami show. His two years in the United States were spent as a guest of Doctor Albert Hiller at Shasta Springs, California, who had also hosted none other than Swami Vivekananda. From this base he gave a number of lectures in the San Francisco Bay Area and traveled widely throughout America for almost two years, departing the country in 1904. When news of Rama Tirtha’s death reached America two years later, several of his American friends and followers expressed their grief in letters and newspaper articles.

Two examples capture the expanding dimensions of the figure of the heroic sannyasi that Rama Tirtha was becoming through his global visions, travels, and disciple-making. The first is an image that shows his figure superimposed on the map of India, the figure of the Vedantin sannyasi as the very essence of the nation. As the introduction to this text, Illustrated Life of Rama [Rām Jīvan Citrāvalī], describes it, Rama Tirtha was born during the English Raj, a time of political hopelessness and religious ignorance, when true dharma was forgotten by English-educated Indians.35 The Hindi (āvatārit) here echoes the Bhagavad Gita’s (4:7–9) description of Krishna’s divine descent in response to dharmic decline. Far from being unique, this fusion of the map of India and a religious figure itself is one of several, providing a new sense of a united and modern Indian nation-state and its religious dimensions.36 While we might be tempted to see such imaginaries as the later projection of followers, Rama Tirtha himself homologized his own body with India: the caption of the image, “I am India,” is drawn from a longer poetic passage of his own nationalist, spiritual identity (IWGR 2: xxiv) and is typical.37

In addition to the map’s reimagining of the modern nation-state, this spatialized sacredness also signals older models, as Diana Eck has suggested
in the context of pilgrimage routes and epic imagination.\textsuperscript{38} As Ramaswamy points out, however, we must attend to the concrete, shifting particulars and uses of such territorialities and to the potential “subterfuge” of modernity’s own attempt to naturalize and ground itself.\textsuperscript{39} In this case, such concrete details manifest in the location of the two Parliaments of World Religions framing Rama Tirtha’s global emergence—both in countries outside the British empire known for their anti-imperial wars, that is, Japan and America—which suggests older acts of physically \textit{locating} religion, so central to holy man traditions. Just as the Tibetan and Russian dimensions of Madame Blavatsky’s identity and claims “only added to her powers,” association with two of the world’s great powers that had defeated the older western empires could only add to Rama’s appeal and help situate his own anticolonial projects on imagined maps.\textsuperscript{40} In the context of vernacular asceticism, this image evokes the kind of territorial sovereignty of holy men seen in Ganesh Das’s history, the Sufi saint’s geo-spiritual jurisdiction (\textit{wilāyat}) and Shankara’s conquest of “the quarters” (\textit{digvijaya}). Indeed, Rama Tirtha’s travels beyond India were marked by a vernacular sense of the holy man’s supreme and spatial authority: when he learned that Lord Curzon was traveling on the ship he was boarding, he refused to embark. There is room, he said, for only one emperor (\textit{badshah}) in a single space at a time.\textsuperscript{41}

The second image is related to the spiritual map of India discussed above, for the painted pose of Rama Tirtha’s body in the nationalist image is derived from a period photograph titled “Rama Tirtha after his return from America” (Fig. 4.2). The link between an intensely inward nationalism and the awareness of the outward global stage is nicely illustrated here by the image of the map, on the one hand, and by the image referencing Rama’s American sojourn, on the other hand, a combination of national and transnational awareness likewise seen in Gandhi’s life.\textsuperscript{42} Much like Müller’s book on Ramakrishna as an “Indian Saint,” then, the holy man here not only stands for India’s geographical body, national unity, and spiritual essence, but takes his place within an emergent world imaginary. The saint, lost in meditative and poetic reveries, has returned from his encounter with America; the intensity of his inwardness is only amplified by his escaping, unspoiled, from the den of materialism where he delivered the truths of Vedanta. We thus have yet another iteration of the saint ignoring the worldly power of kings, or, in this case, capital.

Two of Rama Tirtha’s American lectures, “The Sun of Self on the Wall of Mind” and “The Civilized World’s Spiritual Debt to India,” delivered in San Francisco in 1903 in 1904, respectively, summarize much
of the message he delivered there, his Practical Vedanta. Importantly, his presentation of Vedanta as the very essence of India and, simultaneously, as universal religion is of special interest here for its interwoven discussion of ascetic dress and the language of color. If we take these gestures toward ascetic practice seriously in this context, that is as deconstructing the everyday social self, we must ask: what are the social selves created by Orientalism, and how might an ascetic attack them?

Put simply, the bifurcation of self and other was mapped geographically between Euro-America and the rest, historicized in the west’s futurity and
the Orient’s past, and naturalized through the scientific color schemes of race. Throughout these lectures Rama Tirtha unsettles these very divisions, arguing that everything his audience might find progressive—science, tolerance, autonomy, even socialism—is nothing other than the supposedly ancient, arcane, and otherworldly Vedanta. While many, such as Halbfass, have seen such neo-Hindu apologetic in terms of the inescapability of western norms, my reading complicates this view. In fact, we might read what I term the “coincidence” of Vedanta and modernity as a kind of ascetic performance, an (at least partial) deconstruction of the illusory social selves constructed by race, Eurocentrism, and Orientalism. We can see this possibility more clearly by focusing not on the question of whether ancient Vedanta was “really” scientific and socialist, for example, but by focusing on the effects of such rhetoric on its audiences. Even the affirmative Orientalists—in the popular sense—likely to turn out for a visiting swami’s lectures were attracted to the “East” because of its fundamental difference, its otherness, from the modern West, an illusion Rama Tirtha dissipates like the perceived darkness of his skin.

What thus makes these lectures especially interesting is the way they dwell on ascetic dress, multiply layered bodies, and, most importantly, the personal reactions of Americans to Indians. In the beginning of the first lecture, Rama Tirtha describes the offense taken at his monk’s robe by a passerby on the streets of San Francisco. In itself, this small incident is a helpful reminder that not all Americans were as enraptured with Indians wearing saffron robes as the exultant crowds of the Parliament of World Religions or in local shows where Americans themselves “played Eastern.” In other words, some contexts offered eastern garb in conformity with expectations, whereas, in the streets, something of the less scripted nature of encounter might more likely occur. The unusual color of an ascetics’ robe might lead to a traveling sadhu being mistaken for a red-colored post-box, as one story of Sundar Singh in England tells it, for example.

Somebody asked Rama, “Why do you attract attention?” Well, Rama told him, “Brother, brother, please see yourself if there be any harm in these clothes.” He said, he could not find any harm in them, but that others did. . . . Find out any fault with these clothes if you have to find, and if others find fault, you are not responsible for that [ignorance]. . . . Be not hypnotized through the opinions of others.

(IWGR 1: 48)
This passage suggests Rama Tirtha’s awareness of the charge, as it were, of his ascetic robe and the anxieties his presence in America could provoke. Mabel Daggett’s famous 1911 letter, “The Heathen Invasion,” for example, dwells on the material details of the “swarthy priests of the Far East” whose “gorgeous robes” may dupe irrational, affluent women, but in truth reveal such imposters’ true materialistic motives. Rama Tirtha’s account of such anxieties from his own experience echoes a passage in a lecture given two nights earlier where the same incident is discussed, but in which the emphasis on color is more pronounced: “Brother, brother, let Rama know the reason why this colour should not be worn and some other color should be worn? Why should Rama wear the black colour, or say, the white colour, instead of this? . . . It cannot escape from having one colour or other” (IWGR 1: 31).

Is it accidental that black and white are the two colors mentioned, the very signifiers used to separate Americans from “colored” folks? Rama insists that his new “brother” consider color as inescapable rather than a threat, and start to look at both white and black as themselves colors like any other. To think otherwise is simply being “hypnotized” by the ignorance of others. This exchange can be taken as a symptom of the western “chromophobia” explored by Michael Taussig, of which race is an example. The idea that the man who finds “harm” in his colored robe is in fact the one hypnotized by society’s ignorance is not without ironic comment on American rhetoric about Indian fakirs and “spiritualists” as hypnotists, an image that reoccurs in the lecture discussed below. In any case, here Rama Tirtha offers his audience (both the man in the story and the audience of his lecture) the color of his robe as an explicit alternative to the binary color categories, “black” and “white,” calling attention to the ways that “colour is a crucial but little analysed part of understanding how material things can constitute social relations.” In this sense, the saffron robe functions as a second or social skin for one who could otherwise be raced “black.” As Philippe Deslippe points out, similar sartorial moves would allow American blacks themselves access to Oriental identities. Rama Tirtha will go on to resignify the color of his robe, both in terms of an Advaitin image of layered bodies or sheaths covering the transcendent self (ātman), and by presenting the sun as nothing other the “greatest Indian monk.”

The second lecture, “The Civilized World’s Spiritual Debt to India,” begins with similar moments of controversy and threat provoked by
The Saffron Skin of Rama Tirtha

spirituality. Just as warnings of jail and execution in India never stopped him from addressing sensitive “political” topics, he says, he is bound to give his message in America, though it “will sound strange.” He begins with the general American ignorance of India, mentioning a Minneapolis woman’s recent question about Indian babies being thrown to crocodiles in the Ganges—a common missionary story—to which he jokingly replied, “Blessed Divinity, Rama was also thrown into the Ganga, but like your fabled Jonah, Rama swam out.” (IWGR 3: 232–233).

He follows this with an incident involving a fellow Indian in the United States, who, having shared a taxi with a woman leaving a “spiritual society,” was detained by the police for six hours. The young women’s official police complaint was that, “He looked at me with those piercing, black, spiritualistic eyes, and I felt as though I was going to be hypnotized and I was scared.” The erotic charge of the Indian’s “black” eyes repeat a pattern well-known in racial othering, but also makes the connection to trickster, performing fakirs and “spiritualistic” theosophical and Masonic circles explicit.

Thus in both lectures, Rama Tirtha begins with racial anxieties provoked by the presence of Indians in America, situating his presentation of Vedanta in its social and political contexts. What perhaps stands out here, in addition to what I argue is an ascetic deconstruction of social selves, is his use of humor to defuse the situation. Rather than rail at the Minneapolis woman’s ignorance, he makes himself into an Indian Jonah escaping Ganges crocodiles. If a mere glance requires police intervention, he asks, “Oh heavens, where should the poor Hindus put their eyes before they come to America?”

A Man or a Heap of Fire?
Imagining an Advaitin Autonomy

If the saffron robe in the streets of San Francisco could “attract attention,” Rama Tirtha’s lecture, “The Sun of the Self on the Wall of the Mind” harnesses that attention in order to transform the robe itself into a kind of symbolic spectacle, now with direct reference to Vedanta. Contrary to recent theorizing that neo-Vedanta is limited to a textual model of religion, Rama Tirtha identifies his robe as a “ritual” aspect of Hinduism tied directly to funeral cremation. Indeed, as a point of
comparison, he notes that Catholics engage in “elaborate ritual,” adding that, anticipating recent anthropology of religion, even Protestants cannot do without ritual (IWGR 1: 46). Weaving together Protestant idioms and Roman Catholic practice, he links the sannyasi’s robe to the Gospel injunction to “take up your cross,” that is to “crucify your little self,” and monasticism: “[W]hen the Roman Catholics. . . ordain a monk, they put him in a coffin and read over his head . . . the psalms and sermons which are usually read over the dead, and [he] is made to realize that he is dead, dead to all temptations.”

The comparison is apt: As with brahminical sannyasis generally, for Rama Tirtha renunciation includes the ritual performance of one’s own death rites. Thus, when explaining the color “red” of his robe, he associates it with “the color of fire.” The monk is the one who has died to the normal obligations of human life, who has “sacrificed his body, has placed his body on the altar of Truth” (IWGR 1: 47). Even as he shifts from the specifically ritual to the symbolic for the rest of the lecture, however, Rama Tirtha takes pains to mention embodied details. He notes the difference between the “red” color of robe he could find in America and the “exact color of fire” worn in India, creating a powerful image of the Hindu monk who appears from a distance as either a “man or a heap of fire.”

Whereas Buddhist’s yellow robes symbolize only death, explains Rama Tirtha, the Vedantin monk realizes that death itself has a “double meaning.” This multivalence indicates both the destructive and energetic qualities of fire, as well as multiple religions, carrying in itself the “red of the blood of Christ”:

[D]eath from one standpoint [is] life from another. You know, fire has life, fire sustains life, fire has energy, fire has power. The red robes imply that all the lower desires, all the selfish propensities, all the little ambitions have been consigned to the fire, have been put to death; but on the other hand, there has sprung out of them life, fire, energy and power. The red robe has a double meaning. (IWGR 1: 47)

We should note several things here. First, Rama Tirtha distinguishes Hindu asceticism from Buddhism, even as he unites it with Christianity, invoking the positivity of “life” to reinforce perceptions of Buddhism as world-negating. Second, he foregrounds the multiple meanings
of the monk’s robe, suggesting his hermeneutical sophistication and self-consciousness. Lastly, he exemplifies this multiplicity by quickly turning, not to scripture or philosophy, but to another image of the “energetic” aspect of fire.

Rama Tirtha now describes the rising sun on the Himalayan heights, glossing the sannyasi’s clothing with Romantic images of dawn. As the red sun blazes forth, converting an entire landscape into its own color, into itself, so the Vedantic monk embodies in himself the color of the self (atman) that, like the sun, pervades creation. The monk’s ritualized appearance is as beautiful and as overwhelming as a vibrant, ascending sunrise, bleeding the whole world red:

The greatest sādhu, the greatest Indian monk, the greatest swami in this world is the Sun, the rising Sun. The rising Sun comes to you everyday dressed in the apparel, in the costume of a Vedantic monk. In tonight’s discourse, the Sun will represent to you the Immutable with reference to the changeable bodies. . . [T]he light of the Sun sifted through the clouds falls upon the land and makes the whole landscape blaze up in the colour of fire, makes the whole scene assume the swami’s garb, converts the whole scene into a sādhu, an Indian monk. . . [T]here is one thing and one thing only on the scene, nothing else. That is the Sun. (IWGR 1: 48–49)

Thus, not only is there no “harm” to be found in the spectacle of an Indian monk wearing his outlandish outfit in the streets of San Francisco, but the attention drawn by the flame-colored robe is amply justified. The Hindu cremation fire, the embrace of death, and the sun-like burning power of the self, a power that gives rise to each individual consciousness and to the universe itself, spill out from the robe so that “the whole scene. . . assume[s] the swami’s garb.”

As a model of the human being, the Sun is nothing less than the atman. Expanding the image, Rama Tirtha imagines the sun rising over the Himalayas from whose glaciers rivers flow. The river in its three states—glacial, flowing swiftly in the mountains, and stultified below in the plains—represents the three bodies of the human being, the seed (karaṇa), the subtle (sūkṣma), and the gross (sthūla). In order to explicate the idea of the three bodies, Rama draws on a standard Vedantic analysis of the three states of consciousness to point to the atman that lies beyond
all three. Finally, of course, the point of the image is thus not simply about the sadhu’s robe, but that this atman, this true Self is “the Unchangeable, the Immutable in you, the true Divinity, Atma or God.” Or perhaps the point is precisely about the ascetic robe, that, at the beginning of the lecture, was the embodiment of difference, now—transformed not only into a different color, a saffron skin, but into a Vedantic “heap of fire”—has burnt that very difference up.

What has happened in this lecture? We might see Rama Tirtha’s turn to the symbolic meaning of the robe as a symptom of western and Romantic impulses that focus on meaning as opposed to doing, the robe’s interpretation as opposed to the practice of asceticism and its disciplines. But if we leave our analysis there, what have we missed? Most basically, we miss Rama Tirtha’s own attention to ritual rather than text (e.g., he does not mention the Veda, other Hindu texts, or scriptures generally in either of these lectures). More importantly, I suggest the symbolic reading misses the most interesting aspects of this lecture as a lived performance, which, seen against the background of ascetic practice, connects the critique of philosophical “ignorance” (avidya) with the dynamics of race in America.

Rama Tirtha’s encounters on the street of San Francisco demonstrate the attraction of and ambivalence around the saffron-clad swami. Through his appearance and his performance, the red of the blood of Christ, the yellow of the Buddhist’s robes, and the Hindu cremation fire blend into the color of the Vedantin self as sun. The very color of his robe, situated between the “black” and “white” of American experience, becomes a site of critique in favor of the possibility of new, cross-cultural alliances. And set in this perspective, the act of turning the robe into a symbol of the Vedantin atman, now universalized, can itself be seen as a part of a larger performance of identity and materiality. That is, the robe of the monk has in some sense become what it was said to represent through the duration of the performance. In one sense, it has become more fully the symbol it might not have been before. In another sense, it has been used to highlight and unsettle the ways color and cloth shape socialized perceptions of difference. Thus Rama Tirtha uses his dress in America to achieve his ends in ways familiar in vernacular ascetic contexts: he attracts a public, negotiates religious identities and, in many if not all ways, dissents from everyday social hierarchies—deconstructing the values and norms written onto the social body.
As Webb Keane points out, more than any one element identified as modern—whether secularization, scientific rationality, democracy, capitalism, and so on—modernity as such is a “moral narrative.” The “modern” is used globally in popular and scholarly discourse to relegate devalued categories, people, or objects to the realm of the past, which, even when romantically figured as “tradition,” remains essentially other. For missionaries and other Euro-Americans, however, Keane argues, modernity as moral narrative in colonial contexts insists that the pasts it breaks from are based on a “misrecognition” of the subject’s own agency in material objects. In missionary terms, this is the problem of the idol; in scholarly ones, the fetish; in Enlightenment ones, tradition or heteronomy. Since this is a feature of western modernity shared as much by Marxists as by missionaries, it was after all pragmatic for Rama Tirtha to construct a “Practical Vedanta” that engages it. Strikingly, the common centering of such moral narratives in the value of the autonomous individual over against external authorities is also at the heart of Rama Tirtha’s “Practical Vedanta.” Again and again, by locating the individual over against authority, Rama Tirtha does more than simply reverse affirmative or negative Orientalist discourse: he claims modernity in the name of Vedanta, retelling its moral narrative and their related histories in his own terms. That is, he embraces those very values that both negative and affirmative Orientalism had imagined absent, for better or worse, in the East, and relates them to older forms and stories that tend to question the exclusive right of West to claim modernity.

As mentioned above, Rama Tirtha’s lecture, “The Civilized World’s Spiritual Debt to India,” begins with the anecdotes about babies, crocodiles, and “black, spiritualistic eyes,” but moves on to a fundamental concern with the “modern.” The “negative side” of Americans’ relationship with Indians, as Rama Tirtha terms it, after all, was mediated not only by racial perceptions but by the split between present and past, a split that structured Orientalist discourses of India’s Golden Age and was the precondition for making a claim to the “moral narrative” of modernity itself. Having been asked by an American if the religion he preached was not “antiquated” and thus inappropriate to bring to advanced, western shores, Rama Tirtha answers:

Rama said to him, “Brother, do you know what is the cause of your prosperity and of America and Europe’s progress today?” Rama was
moved to make this answer because he said “your religion is antiquated.”... Rama said, “Blessed one, let us examine the cause of America’s prosperity, and what America’s religion is.” Rama told him that his religion was worn as a charm around the neck as an amulet. A boy wears an amulet and attributes his success to the charms of the amulet, but his failures he attributes to the lack of his own exertions. (IWGR 3: 235)

Recognizing this question about the past as part of a wider moral modernity narrative, Rama Tirtha adopts the language of fetishism as a means of turning the tables. It is not his philosophy and religion that should be written off as a stage of human development that, like the fetish, must ultimately also be left behind. Instead, the assumptions about progress his interlocutor makes are the functional fetish.

The fetish or “amulet,” as described by Rama Tirtha, resonates with Keane’s description of the misattribution of agency to an external object as central to the civilizing mission. It is applied here of course not to Hinduism or the totems of primitive tribes but to Christianity, religion, or progress itself as idols. The fact that he again employs the language of dress in this context—“his religion was worn”—demonstrates its centrality to the kinds of rhetorical effects Rama Tirtha achieves and, furthermore, reflects the importance of dress to modern constructions of religion. Again, however, here Christianity is reimagined as the material fetish: “[T]he cause of your prosperity is not Christianity... [but] true spirituality and true spirituality Rama always distinguishes from forms, the dogmas, the creeds, the garments, dresses in which it is presented” (IWGR 3: 238).

To be sure, the language of spirituality invoked here—much like the symbolic de/re-materialization of his own robe discussed above—is precisely a symptom of the privatization of religion. Yet more important is another kind of embodiment of “spirituality”—not in the symbol of the saffron robe, but in its mapping as simultaneously placeless and located. Where is spirituality? Like the atman itself, it is both universally accessible and found first and foremost in the lofty heights of the Himalayas, and more specifically in Vedanta. Crucially, however, Vedanta is nothing other than science:

True spirituality is what we call Vedanta. All the religions of this world are based upon a personality. Christianity hinges around the name of Christ, Confucianism around the name of Confucius,
Buddhism around the name of Buddha, Zoroastrianism and the name of Zoroaster, Mohammadanism around the name of Mohammad. The word Vedanta means the ultimate science, the science of the soul, and it requires a man to approach it in the same spirit in which you approach a work on chemistry. You don’t read a work on chemistry, taking it on the authority of chemists like Lavoisier, Boyle, Reynolds, Davy and others. You take up a work on chemistry and analyze everything yourself. Rama believes that water consists of hydrogen and oxygen on the authority of his own experiments, not on the authority of anybody else. . . . So a religion that is based on authority is no religion. *That alone is truth which is based upon your own authority.* (IWGR 3: 238)

What I want to highlight here is not so much Rama Tirtha’s appeal to the discourse of scientific rationality as the most authoritative modern discourse, which has been discussed elsewhere, but the use of science as one example of authority, ultimately, used to illustrate the autonomy of the individual. By acknowledging and challenging the role of Great Men or “personality” in contemporary understandings of religion (recall, for example, Müller’s link between scriptures and “founders”), here Rama Tirtha creatively blurs the line between the self (atman) of Vedanta and modern autonomy. The truly “spiritual” self finds itself by rejecting, first, the attribution of agency to physical objects such as idols and fetishes; second, other material dimensions of religion, the forms and dresses, and ultimately anything external; and third, the very notion of authority from another, of heteronomy. Like Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha appealed to an empiricism of personal experience to suggest that the scriptures of the Vedas are nothing other than reports made by earlier “soulful scientists”—otherwise known as the Vedic *rishis*. There was likewise no need to appeal to Christian scripture or Jesus, since their truths also derive from Vedanta. Put simply, as Rama Tirtha does elsewhere, “Vedanta means slavery to no saint.”

Thus, according to Rama Tirtha, it has not been true “Christianity”—identified, as above, with Vedanta—that has ruled Europe or America, but “Churchianity”—a narrow adherence to forms, dogmas and rituals, that was most often opposed to progress: “[If Christianity] were really prevalent in Europe, it would have been a matter of great delight to Rama; but it is not Christianity that is prevalent in Europe or America; it is Churchianity” (IWGR 3:116). The evidence offered for this statement comes in the form
of a history of Christian opposition to the leading figures of the lineage of modern progress:

If all the civilization and all the scientific progress were to be attributed to Christianity, then please let us know when Galileo made that little discovery, how was he dealt with by Christians? . . . Huxley, Spencer and Darwin lived in the very teeth of your Christianity. Their discoveries and progress and independence of spirit were not engendered and encouraged by Christianity; they are living in spite of all the crushing influences of Christianity . . . The feebleness and weakness in the philosophies of Hegel and Kant were due to the influence of Christianity. Do you know how Fichte had to give up his professorship and was driven out of his country? How was it? That was Christianity. From the very beginning all progress has been made in spite of Christianity and not by Christianity. . . . If there were something in Christianity which would remove slavery, why did not Christianity remove slavery during the previous 1700 years? (IWGR 3: 118–119)

As already noted, it is easy to spot the reworking of Vedanta for a western—or better, self-consciously modern—audience predisposed by Protestantism and the Enlightenment to decouple “true” religion as faith or reason from institutional and scriptural dogmas. In contrast, of course, as Rambachan has shown, scriptural authority (śabda)—rather than the authority of experience (anubhava)—plays a preeminent role in nearly all the classical Hindu darśanas, especially the Advaita that practical Vedantins so ardently claimed. Rather than see these presentations as somehow inauthentic, however, we can see them as practical: one speaks, strategically and self-consciously, to western audiences in a language they will understand, while in India using orthodox language that reaffirms the eternal, authorless status and authority of the Vedic text, for example, a pattern also evident in Rama Tirtha’s writings and lectures at home and abroad. Rama Tirtha’s climactic linking of Christianity and slavery, of course, clarifies the link between the language of spirituality and the period’s radical politics. At times, he would recommend adopting an African-American child to those coming to him for a cure for their spiritual ills.

We can take this argument one step further by thinking more specifically about Rama Tirtha’s audience. Informed by varieties of Orientalism and popular performances of “playing Eastern,” a modern audience might
associate the Orient with ancient wisdom, but this wisdom, whatever its content, would likely be precisely the opposite of the stereotyped features of the modern West, thus maintaining the separation of self and other. Even nascent Theosophical linking of science with the Orient, though certainly contributing to a receptivity among segments of the population, tended to emphasize the shortcomings of mainstream, western science and the credibility of “miraculous” Oriental phenomena. In short, if affirmative Orientalists and Theosophists weren’t looking to the Orient for the epitome of science, individualism, autonomy, progress, and freedom, neither was the broader public. Thus in claiming those very features in the name of Vedanta, Rama Tirtha was—but was also doing something more than—speaking pragmatically.

Coming from the mouth of an Indian monk, arrayed in a saffron robe and speaking in the name of Vedanta, the very truths of modernity could be infused with the aura of the Orient. His was the voice, his was the body, of reason as much as of experience, of mathematician as well as mystic. His was white skin and dark, spiritualistic eyes. Thus, the idea of an essential difference between the modern West and the mystical Orient was unsettled visually as much as rhetorically: the cost of appropriating the aura of the Orient to modernity was, for his audience, the possibility that like whiteness, Europe and America might not be its only owners. As Rama Tirtha put it, the illusion of possession, rooted in the illusions of the body and mind, is, after all, the fundamental problem renunciation is meant to address. The consequences of his view of the “little quarantine of the body,” could, at times, even be applied to the limits of nationalism and gesture toward universalism: “Washington is all right for Americans, but ask the opinion of the Englishmen about him. The English patriots are very good as far as, what they call, their own country is concerned, but just look at them with reference to those people whose life-blood is being sucked by their patriotism” (IWGR 1: 25).

Rama Tirtha would thus not allow the West to be the sole possessors of “Western” dress, but visually played both sides of the Orient/Occident division. If we look at the portrait of Rama Tirtha taken while in America (Fig. 4.3) and compare it to the two images of him with which we began, we see a less grandiose and less romantic, a more sober figure. Though robed and turbaned, he is seated at a simple desk, wearing glasses, his hand resting on books. His gaze is not lost in an otherworldly reverie, but directed straight at the camera; if not quite confrontational as in Vivekananda’s famous Chicago portrait, then certainly self-assured and calm. His body
is not merged into the geographical body of India or romantically at one with the natural landscape. Instead, his solid yet spare frame is itself framed by books and spectacles, suggesting the “professor” he also frequently asked his American audiences to imagine him as (IWGR 1: 32). This request occurs in the very lectures in which he explained his sadhu’s robes and recurs again in the above discussion of Vedanta as science, where he reminds his audience that he is a professor of “mathematics, trigonometry.”

Indeed, press reports show that, rather than stick to wearing the saffron robe of the sadhu, Rama Tirtha often lectured in the academic robes of the graduate (Fig. 4.4). In fact, in a fitting reversal of assumed origins, Rama Tirtha had his sannyasi robes made in America, but carried his academic robes with him all the way from India. American press reports reflected these various identities, announcing him as the “Sannyasi patriot of unsurpassable renunciation,” “high priest of India,” and the “Hindu Professor,” among other titles. At times, journalists detailed Rama Tirtha’s
As Beckerlegge notes of Vivekananda’s Indian and British garb, the “cyclonic monk” also played quieter sartorial roles, for example, that of the English “parson.”

Such choices offer evidence of the self-awareness of upstart saints, their sense of context, and the continued history of variety, creativity and critique at work in and around ascetic dress. As Singleton points out, photographs and classicizing drawings of scientific, naturalized yogic bodies could counter the degradation of the living ascetics through the western circulation. Going beyond this, Christopher Pinney argues that, even in the case of Orientalizing
images themselves, the “the enforced visibility induced by the photograph,” generated a kind of aura of esoteric power “in which ‘the Other’ could assert its own autonomy.” 61 If such is the case with drawings and photographs, I suggest that the carefully chosen poses struck in varied costumes by living, lecturing holy men held similar and perhaps greater potential. Their speech, as seen above, mirrored and refracted these forms of resistance, redefinition, and unsettling. Having claimed science, spirituality, and, more importantly, autonomy in the name of Vedanta, Rama Tirtha would appeal to “natural religion” and to Christ himself to bolster and dramatize his call to his audience to realize the individual freedom they claimed for themselves. To do so, they would also have to confront the unknown histories and consequences of western idolatry.

Are There Any Presbyterian Lilies?
Natural Vedanta

Who then could possess religion? Rama Tirtha’s self-conscious appearance as a professor and critique of external authority helped him construct an objective viewpoint above dogma, sectarian identities, and ethnicities. In this, he was approaching modern religion’s closest rational cousin, namely, natural religion. Thus, another of Rama Tirtha’s major themes in America was the relation of Vedanta to other religions and philosophies. Here he contended that Vedanta was not opposed to any other “religion” since it fact it was not a “religion” at all, but was something more like religion itself, uncorrupted by human interference. Rather than artificially constructed identities such as Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim, his was, in his words, the “religion of nature.” As he put it: “Are there any Presbyterian lilies?” For some time in his lectures he referred to his message simply as the “common path.” 62 It was thus scientific, reliant not on the authority of revelatory text (e.g., Veda, Bible or Quran) or divine personality (Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and, at times, Krishna being his favorite examples) but on personal verification by experience, as noted above.

Given the common western perception of Indian gurus keeping their superstitious disciples enthralled, exemplified by the ever-popular image of the swami as hypnotist, this rhetorical move raised a variety of problems. Foremost among them was Rama Tirtha’s own status as a guru from the despotic land of the Orient. In response to this challenge, Rama Tirtha ingeniously drew on Vedanta’s renunciation of the individual body
to argue that his audience’s significance lay in its members’ individuality, apart from him, apart from their fellow audience members, and, ultimately, apart from the world:

So it is nothing to Rama whether you continue holding meetings or not; it is nothing to Rama whether you remember the name of Rama or crush it under your feet, it is nothing to Rama, whether you flatter or curse or denounce this body, all the time the seed is being sown, let it produce results. Again why should we bother about the world or whatever there is in it? The moment we stand up as reformers of the world, we become deformers of the world. Physician, heal thyself. (IWGR 1: 195)

One could hardly hope for a more modern denunciation of the authoritarian figure of the guru, indeed of himself as guru, for a clearer declaration of autonomy and appeal to individualism, than this. Amazingly, Rama Tirtha turns to stories drawn from the hierarchical culture of guru and disciple itself to demonstrate this principle. He tells of a guru who taught that in the very act of bowing to another the disciple has shown that he had not yet “learned all.” Soon attaining full “God-consciousness” however,

[the disciple] left the presence of the master, knowing not whether he was the disciple or the master himself. . . . The disciple paid no respects or thanks to the master, and rested in unity to such a degree that he rose above all idea of gratitude. Then did the master know that he had really understood his teachings. Here is the master-state, where if you honour the man, he says you are belittling him. (IWGR 1: 27–28)

Claiming Christ, Christian Idols and the White God

And what better holy man to confirm the point, for an American audience, than Christ himself? It was it seems not enough to destabilize the too easy opposition of a modern, materialist, and scientific west and its spiritual other “Vedanta” by reclaiming the former in the name of the latter. Christ too, had to be claimed. As Stephen Prothero points out, a long line
of Indian swamis were to use Vedanta to produce their own version of a particularly American Christ, separated from the church and Christianity as institutional and dogmatic religion. In Rama Tirtha’s own terms, the “red” of the monk’s robe is also “the blood of Christ.”

More specifically, Christ derived his teachings from India, as Rama Tirtha explains in “The Civilized World’s Spiritual Debt to India.” He begins to address Christianity by highlighting the similarity of the New Testament and the Vedanta: “Read the books on the Vedas and you will know that these [Christian] statements are in the Vedic books, preached thousands and thousands of years ago. As to the resurrection and sermons of Christ, these are also Hindu and Vedantic” (IWGR 3: 242). Next he elaborates on the story that Jesus had spent his early years in India, describing the Unknown Life of Jesus by Nicholas Notovich. He grants that Notovich’s Tibetan thesis may or may not be historically true and suggests instead that Hindu teachings had come to Jerusalem “indirectly.” Whatever the historical case, “The fact remains, however, that [Jesus’s] doings as well as his teachings are only a faint re-echo of Vedanta, the philosophy of India” (IWGR 3: 243).

While appropriating key signifiers of the West’s uniqueness, namely, science and Christ, Rama Tirtha also focused on the negative aspects of Church history, first, as above, in western contexts. More creatively, however, he also offered his audience histories that reimagined Indian decline in similar terms, playing with the standard divisions constructed by modernity’s moral narratives. That is, the blame for Indian decadence lay, according to Rama Tirtha, not with Indians but with precolonial foreign Christian influence, in particular. Hindu idolatry came not from any indigenous source, but rather from Christians themselves. After a glowing description of India’s past glory and spiritually pristine sources, Rama Tirtha recounts the rise of Indian idolatry:

This idolatry in India came through the Christians. People have not read that page of history yet, but this investigation of Rama will come in printed form also. Rama proves it from external as well as internal evidence that between the 4th and 5th centuries after Christ, some Roman Catholic Christians came over to India, and these Christians are still present in India today. They are called St. Thomas Christians living in the southern part of India. These Christians introduced idolatry. . . . Ramanuja had for his preceptor one of these St. Thomas Christians. The first statue before
which these men bowed, Rama knows bears no Oriental face. This shows, blessed ones, that the origin of idolatry is from what you call Christianity. You took it there. The Missionaries come to India today denouncing idolatry, pulling it down on the one hand, and on the other hand they make those images and sell them to make money. This is how you want to convert these people. Will these idols which you make and sell to the people, have not a greater force than the Gospel? It is for you to decide. (IWGR 3: 241)

The account given here is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it seizes on the central element, the essence of Indian religious decline as defined in Orientalist, missionary, and reforming Indian discourse: idolatry. Incredibly, however, idolatry comes from Christians, not from Hindus. With the mention of Rāmānuja as the disciple of a St. Thomas Christian, the line between history and hagiography becomes increasingly blurred, as indeed it also had within Orientalist scholarship on bhakti, a possible source for this story itself. Crucially, the narrative plays on internal Christian difference and historical complexity, highlighting Roman Catholic use of images and the historical fact of Syrian Orthodox presence in India. While Rama Tirtha was aware of key differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity (if not particularly of those between Catholic and Orthodox), particularly its disagreement over the use of image in ritual and the centrality of the Bible, he deliberately blurs the line between them here. Switching from the historical mode, he addresses his “Christian” (but likely, broadly Protestant) audience directly: “You took [idolatry] there.” Furthermore, he represents current foreign missions in India as continuing to promote idolatry even as they claim to oppose it in favor of the Gospel text. Though his meaning is slightly obscure, Rama Tirtha is likely connecting the superstitious and idolatrous “Churchianity” of Protestant missions with their Roman Catholic rivals, despite their own sense of difference from them, as had Rammohun Roy. The point here of course is not the historical accuracy of Rama Tirtha’s narrative or his failure to distinguish Catholic and Protestant, but the force with which his narrative highlights and challenges the stability of those very distinctions.

Rama Tirtha developed not just one but several counter-histories. One more example deals specifically with claims of Christianity’s universal relevance as both a missionary and as the preeminent “world” religion. In one American lecture he describes being told: “[Christianity] prevails over the whole world, while your Vedanta is confined within the narrow limits of
India and is only the religion of the educated classes, not of the masses.” This claim was also directly linked, as he told it, to the metanarrative of progress: “Look here why are the Christian nations making all the progress in the world: The Christian nations are the only nations that have progress and civilization” (IWGR 3: 117). To this, Rama Tirtha responds with a two-fold historical relativization. We have already seen the way he retold the story of Christianity’s relationship to science and religious tolerance. In the second part of this retelling Rama Tirtha claims that a Christian theology of submission to God is the historical link that prepared India for its slave-like submission to a white, imperial God, God realized in the form of the British. This line of thought was already prefigured in his comment that the first image worshipped by Indians had “no Oriental face.”

Why had Vedanta failed to produce equivalent progress in India, he asks? If idolatry introduced by Christianity in part accounts for the failure of Vedanta to retain the level of Indian spirituality at a proper height, the introduction of dualistic Christian theology accounted for even greater degredation. According to Rama Tirtha, the early introduction of Christianity was in fact responsible for preparing India for colonial slavery. A theology of submission to God was of course prevalent in Europe and America, but was held only superficially; the core desire of the West was for material progress, not religion, which resulted in Europe’s material progress, since Vedanta teaches that one’s core desire is always fulfilled. In India however, religion was at the core of desire, and would thus bring about exactly what was prayed for so fervently. Just as soon as this passage articulates the material West/spiritual East distinction, ardent religious devotion, however, quickly turns from a marker of an essential Indianness into an infection of European religion based on submission:

[T]he Indian masses began to believe in a religion—“I am a slave, I am a slave, I am Thy slave O God.” This religion was imported into India from Europe. Here is a statement which will astonish the so-called historians and philosophers, which will astonish Europeans, but this is a statement. . . . which can be proved, demonstrated with mathematical certainty. The religion which wants us to look down upon the Self and condemn the Self and call ourselves worms, vermins, wretches, slaves, sinners, was imported into India when it became the religion of the masses, there began the fall of India. . . . [Thus] they were made slaves. By whom? They were made slaves by God, you say. Has God any shape? Has God any figure?
This God in His shapeless form could not come and rule them. God came. What God? The Light of lights, the White One. The White One came in the fair skin of Englishmen and made them slaves; thus it was. It was misunderstood Christianity . . . that wrought the downfall of India. (IWGR 3: 120–121)

And thus we come full circle: the interplay of racialized and saffronized skins discussed above finds its historico-theological culmination in this account of colonialism as a form of nothing less than sacred slavery and religious desire. The colonial God Indians desired was the very “White” god that came to rule. In many ways, this imagery prefigures Tolstoy and Gandhi’s controversial argument that Indians had given India to the British by will or choice, rather than the colonizers having taken it by force.66

Finally, we should note that Rama Tirtha’s reconfiguration of the moral narrative of modernity as colonial slavery was backed up with cutting critiques of what he called the “dark side” of the colonial presence. More than most visiting swamis, who stuck more to their “spiritual” messages, Rama Tirtha painted colonialism in rather stark detail for his American audience. Beginning with the possibility of a British death penalty for his type of “free” speech, he went on to accuse the British of draining India economically and of implementing a “divide and rule” policy that caused and deepened communal tensions. While he credited education and the work of foreign scholars, he did so in order to point out that even here only the elites benefited from these measures in any tangible way, and only slightly at that, since really significant positions were reserved for the British. While acknowledging some good done by missionaries and philanthropists, he asserted that in the end outsiders ended up doing “more harm than good.”

Overall, Rama Tirtha’s imaginative refashionings of history were, like his display and discussion of dress, the expression of his critical assessment of British rule and its underpinnings: both left no doubt about his opposition to and critique of racist and colonial projects in their intertwined religious and political dimensions. Such critical awareness of the connections of race and imperialism went hand in hand with Rama Tirtha’s denunciation of the caste system while in America. By Puran Singh’s account, Rama Tirtha’s critiques of caste were strongest in America, but faded upon return to India. A notable exception, however, suggests his continued awareness of caste as a problem, specifically in relation to untouchability: in Mathura in 1904 Rama Tirtha sought out a group of Dalit Christians in order to
praise them converting out of Hinduism and to acknowledge their choice to “raise” themselves thereby.67

Vernacular Variations: The Sufi Sanskritist and Bible-wielding Faqir

Although this chapter has focused on the relationship of ascetic capacities and critique in Rama Tirtha’s western tour, it is important to remember and point out that his engagement with the “codes” of autonomy, science, race, and colony were themselves set within a wider project of religious transformation and skilled performance. As I have emphasized here, this is true in the sense that religious accounts of the self have the potential to destabilize (as well as to strengthen) raced, imperial perceptions. It is also true with regard to Rama Tirtha’s sartorial practice in his Indian contexts. Indeed, much as Rama Tirtha donned his modern academic robes to destabilize his audience’s perception of him as “traditional” or merely “mystical” while in America, his dress was also dynamic and at issue when he returned home. After his American tour, Rama Tirtha had several sartorial phases, including a time growing the “beard of Vyasa” while working on his Sanskrit, and a rustically turbaned “Islamic” or “Maulvi” period.68 There was also a time when he rejected the saffron robe itself, citing its stale, “conventional” qualities. He was planning, he told Puran Singh, to hold a public meeting where he would “tear his robe into pieces in public and announce that the orange robe of the Sanyasi is no more the vehicle of freedom.”69

It is important to highlight this dynamism in order to guard against seeing Indian contexts as conventional or traditional in contrast to western ones, of seeing ascetic saffron as a saintly given that was nevertheless made creative in the West. Instead, at times, Rama Tirtha’s dress provoked direct challenges from disciples and audience members in India, just as it had in America: why had he changed his earlier simple homespun (khaddar) for expensive silk? Rama Tirtha answered this charge in the bridal idioms of Hindu “widow burning” (sati): just a widow dresses in her wedding finery to perform sati, so should the ascetic adorn himself for union with the Beloved.70 This image sums up the intimacy of the spiritual and material in Rama Tirtha’s religious pursuits and performances: the “beyond” of ascetic and Advaitin transcendence not only allows for, but delights in, the array of shifting adornments. My point here is thus not simply to decode
the different styles of dress as symbolic in a variety of ways or instances, but to call attention to power of the physical surfaces, interactional contexts, and transformational processes provoked and made possible by sartorial presence and practice. I want to end this chapter then by suggesting that these effects can help us resituate recent scholarly attention to modernizing modes of language as belief and the textual fixing of referential meaning within wider semiotic registers. A few words about the continued complexity of religious identities and the role of religious texts and language as they manifested in Rama Tirtha’s final years in India, and initial comparisons with Sundar Singh, are thus in order.

The image of wedding adornment in death suggests both the continued creativity and contestations of dress and the breadth, depth, and intimacy of Sufi layers of Rama Tirtha’s saintly repertoire, since his answer echoes the *sati* imagery of the Sufi court poet and disciple of Nizām ad-Dīn Auliya’, Amīr Khusrao (1235–1325). More generally, the death anniversary of Sufi saints is celebrated as a wedding day, an ‘*urs*, for the holy man’s union with God as the Beloved. These Islamic dimensions of Rama Tirtha’s continuing vision, language, and practice are especially important to highlight, since they were far from evident in his American lectures, a shift we might be tempted to attribute to an emergent “syndicated” and more exclusive Hinduism. Yet Rama Tirtha’s Sufi sensibility reemerges consistently on his return to India, suggesting that the homogenizing effects of Orientalist tropes may be less totalizing than often supposed.

Thus, much as Rama Tirtha’s reference to the Hindu practice of *sati* bleeds into Islamic registers and much as his dress shifted from saffron to Sufi, we can trace here more than a few Muslim references appropriated to convey pre-established Vedantic meanings. Rather, we see a continuous dynamic, a kind of back-and-forth pattern emerging. In this pattern, Sufism and Vedanta are actively brought together, not so much self-consciously as organically: languages or codes that, far from being easily translated one into the other, both remain necessary to hang on to and to work through. This dual, even diglossic, dynamic is exemplified very clearly in the last piece of writing Rama Tirtha ever composed, written, in fact, on the very morning he died. Interestingly, the inspiration for the piece comes from another question about ascetic dress, addressed to him in the pages of a popular Indian press newspaper of religious reform: is wearing the “orange robe” necessary for enlightenment?

His answering essay develops a hybrid Sufi-Vedantic language, not only connecting the *faqir* with the sadhu, but also improvising more
complicated and thoroughgoing composites. He describes the ascetic’s goal of mystical knowledge in Sanskrit as the fire of knowledge (gyānagni) but immediately follows this in Arabic with nūr-i marifat (the light of gnosis); along with the classical Upanishadic concept of “name and form” (nāma rūpa), he gives jism-o-ism. What seems to be a relegation of the saffron robe to the level of “mere” name and form, on first glance, however, in favor of a formless absolute, turns out to be more complicated: themes of renunciation, and, indeed, a specific affirmation of the need for renunciation, in both Islamic and Sanskrit idioms, to attain spiritual knowledge, emerge as the essay progresses.

As explored in greater depth in subsequent chapters, both sides of Rama Tirtha’s religious vision, the Sanskrit and the Islamic, are deeply connected to his sense of self. I quote directly from an autobiographical portion of the text, in which the Sanskrit categories that seem prioritized (they are after all offered first in some of the conjunct forms just mentioned) recede as the essay progresses. The Sufi voice takes over as Rama writes about his own gradual slipping away from householder life:

In the eighth heaven, the galloping sound of the hoof of the blue horse of that solitary one is heard. Below in the market people are moving about. And on the roof of the house, the residents are engaged in daily chores. In one corner, someone sits reading. And, what is this? He read a letter that cannot be written. That book which was lying on the ledge of reason just remained lying there. He attained solitude amidst the crowd (khalwat dor anjuman). He had achieved the satisfaction of solitude even in the city. He went out for a walk and fortunately no one came along. The moonlight is blossoming. Darkness is spreading out. The wind begins to whisper. But suddenly—while he was walking on the street, what partner (shartk) joined him? It was that one without a partner (wahadhu lā sharīk). Outside a red light dawned and then in his veins and body, a strange liquor (narālī shirāb) flowed. . . . I [hum] was sitting in a train and the constant clacking of the wheels sounded like the six rāgas. There was no one to talk to and he raised the veil (pur-dah). Suddenly in his heart the Groom (dālhā) descended (utar āyā). While sitting in the train, body and soul purchased a ticket to I don’t know where. He attained spiritual detachment and renunciation of the world (tārk-i duniyā) . . . [and] the true state of poverty (faqīrī) blossomed forth. (my translation)
The density of Sufi reference and vocabulary in this elliptical, evocative, and personal passage is striking. It begins by invoking Muhammad’s night journey on his mythical beast, \( \textit{būrāq} \), and his ascent into heaven, a primary symbol of Sufi mystical ascent (\( \textit{mi'rāj} \)), traceable at least as early as the ninth-century Baghdadi Sufi, Bistāmī. Descending suddenly from the heavens, the passage moves quickly into a mundane scene of market and household busyness. In the midst of this, while reading the “book of reason,” a solitary figure, likely the young Rama Tirtha himself, is struck by mystical insight, linked with the letter symbolism of Sufism. He attains “isolation in the crowd,” one of the distinctive principles of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi \( \textit{silsila} \), and leaving the “book of reason” behind, wanders outside “without a partner.”

The One who has no partner, a standard Islamic phrase from the statement of Islamic belief (\( \textit{kalima} \)) in divine oneness (\( \textit{tawhīd} \)), joins him as he wanders. Spiritual intoxication, the associations of music and spiritual experience, the imagery of God as Beloved, and renunciation expressed as \( \textit{tark-i duniya} \) all reprise widespread South Asian Sufi themes. Finally, we return to where we began this discussion of the Islamic dimensions of Rama Tirtha’s religious world, namely, \( \textit{faqiri} \), the spiritual and literal poverty of his religious path blooms.

While all such language and imagery may sound decidedly mystical, Rama Tirtha follows it with statements about the worldly and miraculous power of true holy men (\( \textit{saclce sadhu-faqir} \)), of a kind with Ganesh Das’s link between the mystical and this-worldly power and presence of Punjabi holy men. His example is a Punjabi story about the Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Though the ruler had only one eye, a \( \textit{faqir}’s \) blessing that no one would dare raise his eyes toward the king’s face protected his sovereignty. Since it is the ascetic who establishes the power of the ruler, Rama Tirtha praises the great-souled sadhu as the true Emperor (\( \textit{mahatma sadhu sacca badshah} \)).

The \( \textit{faqir} \) who has been colored in his own color, remains absorbed in intoxicating, mystical knowledge (\( \textit{nashe ‘irfān} \)). \( \textit{He} \) is also the emperor of emperors. He is the God of gods, too. Who has the authority to approach the colorfully adorned (\( \textit{rangile sajile} \)) emperor of truth and make even a peep? If the tongue of anyone begins to speak against the true \( \textit{sādhu-faqīr} \) (the \( \textit{mahātma} \) who possesses \( \textit{gyān} \)), it will become mute. If anyone’s hand would start to be raised (against him), it will become paralyzed. If the mind starts to think
(against him) it will go mad (janūn ā jāegā). Ram is explaining what he has seen with his own eyes.\textsuperscript{75}

The key phrases here are “colored in his own color” (apne rang rangā hu‘ā) and “colorfully adorned” (rangile sajile)—that is, the faqir who both within and without wears the color of renunciation, the color of the self.\textsuperscript{76} When the sadhu attains that for which he has embarked on his search, and that internal state which the color of his robe signifies, he has no equal. He takes on the very qualities of God’s majesty (jalāl) and the sun and moon prostrate (sajda karnā) before him.

Rama Tirtha’s following interpretation of the famous scene of the Bhagavad Gita in which Arjuna hesitates on the battlefield confirms the priority, if not exclusivity, of embodied renunciation for enlightenment, shifting back to Hindu examples.\textsuperscript{77} Like Arjuna at this moment, most people’s karmic state necessitates that they remain householders and consume their karmic seeds, however bitter. This is why Krishna incited Arjuna to fight, to eat fruit of the seed of revenge karmically implanted in him (badlā lene kā bij), ignoring his superficial desire to renounce the world. Arjuna wanted to eat, but did not possess proper seeds to grow, the mango of renunciation. Thus, in this reading, Arjuna does not renounce, not because he is not a Brahmin, or because the bhakti mārga as a this-worldly means of salvation is an equal or superior path to the gyānmārga, but because Arjuna is not karmically ready for the latter. As Rama describes the karmic state of householders, rather humorously, “Dear one, you have eaten a laxative, now you have to accept the shame of going into the jungle [to relieve yourself].”\textsuperscript{78} Of course, as the Gita teaches (3:20), there are exceptions to the renouncer-first rule, enlightened householders such as King Janaka—or, Rama Tirtha adds, George Washington and Oliver Cromwell.

In this sense, scripture and religious traditions remain for Rama Tirtha a site not of inward piety or doctrine, but for situating the practice of renunciation in multiple and specific ways. This focus on practice helps us understand how renunciation can be approached in both Sufi terms (tark-i duniya) and in classical Hindu ones (karmasannyasa). Put simply, scripture, like practices of asceticism, remains in many ways a site of transformation rather than a repository of referential truth, as in disenchanted models. In another lecture, Rama Tirtha gives a vivid image of the way scripture works for the meditator, working with yet another mango metaphor. He compares scripture (śruti) to a mother who gives a mango to a child to play with:
The mother gives her small child the fruit of immortality to play with. The child, as usual, takes it in his mouth and starts sucking it. While sucking, the fruit gets burst and his hands, feet and clothes are all smeared with the juice of the fruit. But he does not care for all this. He is so much absorbed in the good taste of the fruit, that he is, as if, all juice himself. In the same way, mother Shruti (Vedas) has given us the ripe fruit of the inspiring sentence (Mahāvākya) of I am Shiva, the Immortal Truth, I am consciousness and Eternal Bliss. After all, this immortal fruit bursts, while repeating the Mahāvākya, and causes complete absorption in eternal Bliss. (IWGR 4: 49–50)

Here, scripture is not only something internalized, but something that once internalized will ultimately burst open on the meditator, overtaking him, indeed, smearing him with its sweetness. While the emphasis on experience in this image is a clear feature of neo-Hinduism, the close relationship between text and experience in Rama Tirtha’s metaphor (the skin and flesh of the same fruit) is closer to contextualist understandings of mysticism, on the one hand, or traditional Vedantin understandings of the centrality of shruti as a source (pramāṇa) for religious truth, on the other.\(^79\)

Like Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh saw the Bible as a meditative and transformative rather than a “rational” text, describing his own reading and prayer style akin to monastic traditions of lectio divina. Rather than studying the original Greek or Hebrew of the text to yield an “original” or “plain” meaning, a Christian devotee (bhagat) must have the spiritual experience necessary to understand scripture’s “spiritual language,” a language outside the confines of ordinary thought and worldly scholarship (‘ālim/pl. ‘ulema) but natural to scripture’s authors.\(^80\) Accordingly, Sundar Singh consistently prefaced his own writings with warnings about the need to understand the polyvalent and figurative qualities of spiritual language, in explicit contrast to the linguistic ideology of most Protestant missionaries. Sundar Singh’s use of the Islamic terms “prophets and messengers” (nabī aur rasūl) to refer to scriptural authors and evocation of the ideal of the “knower” (‘arif) color his discussion of mystical polyvalence with Islamic and Sufi resonance. In these and other ways, we can start to see that adopting the premier colonial religious text, here the Bible, cannot be equated with accepting disenchanted views of language. Instead, there is a consistent suggestion in Sundar Singh’s writing that the “letter” of the text needs to be enlivened by Spirit. We might even speculate that there is something
like the “live and direct” divine power of Christian traditions that reject the Bible itself at work here, for example, hinted at in Sundar Singh’s story of burning the Bible as a prelude to his conversion experience.\textsuperscript{81}

A letter to the editor about Sundar Singh that appeared in The Christian Nationalist in 1921 certainly suggests as much, positioning the power of the holy man as akin to, but ultimately independent of, the Book, not as meaning, but as powerful religious object.\textsuperscript{82} The Indian writer tells of the Christian \textit{faqir} sitting on a train opposite a tantrik “wizard,” who is disturbed by the supernatural power protecting his rival, and searches for its source. The power is first revealed to come from Sundar Singh’s copy of the Gospel of John, and, second, the single, torn page of the Bible hidden inside the Christian ascetic’s robe (\textit{choga}). The apotropaic function of the physical book itself, even in fragmentary form, complicates any simple idea of textualism. More strikingly still, with his usual black magic frustrated, the Tantrik insists that Sundar Singh cast off the powerful holy page. The Bible-bearing holy man complies, but the sacred power of the page is revealed to have infused Sundar Singh’s own holy dress and body: “This time he asked the Swamji to take of his cloak (\textit{choga}) adding that he found a strange power residing in it. . . . Again the wizard tried but finally he gave up saying that he found that mysterious power permeating his very flesh.” Thus the rival holy man is vanquished, and Sundar Singh converts him to the “Guru” whose “power [was] within him.” Put simply, the tangible power of Scripture and the body of the \textit{faqir} have fused, and the book itself can be cast aside. The most powerful of sacred objects—bodies and books—are set to work in the longstanding contest of the saints. The fact that this miracle tale is told in a publication dedicated to Indian Christian nationalism suggests that the vernacular remained important well into the twentieth century in a range of seemingly unlikely contexts.

\textit{Conclusion: Rama Tirtha’s Ascetic Media}

Has God any shape, any color? The debate over such questions—like Rama Tirtha’s questions to his American audience set in the arena of colonial history—can be traced back in South Asian ascetic and devotional contexts for centuries. Such a religious history would include not only notions and affective modes related to concepts such as \textit{nirguna} and \textit{saguna}, but also complex interrelations and conflicts between Vaishnava and Shaiva renouncers, between bhaktas, yogis, and Sufis and their royal
The Saffron Skin of Rama Tirtha

patrons. Idols and holy men themselves of course offer two highly contested sites for answering such questions, as well. In highlighting the political, racial, and colonial dimensions of Rama Tirtha’s performance of sainthood, my intent has not been to expose the ideological uses and contexts of religion, but precisely the opposite. That is, I hope to have demonstrated the relevance, entanglement, creative possibilities, and connections of religion within and across precolonial and colonial, Indian and American worlds. If, as Khandelwal has suggested, the centrality of the non-gendered self to renouncer traditions renders patriarchy “underdetermined” and amenable to women’s agency, might not something similar be said here? That is, can we recognize the potential of an Advaitin self to work both within and against the racial and self-other relations structuring Orientalizing and colonial perceptions? Rama Tirtha began every lecture, not with Vivekananda’s famous overture to his “sisters and brothers of America,” but with a greeting to “my own self in the form of ladies and gentlemen.” This metaphysical intimacy foregrounded not familiar notions of the “fatherhood of God” and the “brotherhood of man,” but a more startling frame of cross-cultural, trans-racial identity. As Faisal Devji has argued, while the ethical passivity of common tropes of a universal human family can be seen in contrast to those of more active models, such as that of friendship, both follow well-known paths of nature and choice. Other paths might, however, be possible: while an Advaitin unity was, on the highest level (pāramārthika), already true, it could hardly be said to be “natural.” Rama Tirtha knew that his audience would have to work hard to realize, or perhaps to be shocked into, it.

More importantly, just as the multiple bodies and instability of mental constructs detailed in Rama Tirtha’s lectures on the self implied the malleability of racial perceptions, ascetic aptitudes involving dress and color were indispensable to the success of such conceptual moves in practice. Not only did Rama Tirtha not shy away from addressing—indeed, joking about—the racism he and his fellow Indians experienced in America, he foregrounded its embodied locations—white skin, objections to colorful dress, erotically charged fears of dark eyes. In the realm of religion, he likewise repeatedly called attention to ritual dimensions—from Catholic monastic practice and Hindu renunciation as cremation to the Christian sources of Hindu idolatry. In these and other ways, through the alchemy of ascetic performance, Rama Tirtha used his robe, physically and rhetorically, to deconstruct the raced body given him and to reconstruct himself as the embodiment of the “world’s most spiritual
race” and of modern notions of autonomy and science. Once again, it is important to set such moves and successes against the background of nineteenth-century dismissal of living Indian monks as mere fakirs, with all the negativity about the very notion of “performance” and materiality of religion implied therein.

The centrality of photography and visual description more generally to Rama Tirtha’s life and reception, in my view, can be seen to reveal the overlap between aspects of ascetic embodiment of the divine and modern technologies as media, that is, as material instances of the otherwise unobservable. Put differently, the modern monk continues to both give darshan, in the most active of senses, and have it taken from him. The next chapter turns to Sundar Singh’s use of the saffron robe, a performance that also drew on shared ascetic aptitudes to deconstruct racialized perceptions, but that did so not through emphasizing the spirituality of the East, but by bringing the Oriental Christ of nineteenth-century biblical imagination and visual culture, as it were, back home to the West. The Bible could be wielded, of course, as variously as it was powerfully.
For Sundar Singh, the saffron robe was, on the one hand, a means of evoking the subtexts of the spiritual superiority of the East, and thus, implicit comparisons to rival, non-Christian Indian holy men such as Rama Tirtha. These dimensions, however, rarely surfaced publicly; in fact, Sundar Singh noticeably downplayed the spectacularly Indian elements that had led to his fame in India and abroad, distanced himself from Hindu asceticism as such and, in stark contrast to Hindu or even other Indian Christian sadhus in America and Europe, refused to speak at length about Hinduism or Vedanta. Instead, combining his thoroughly biblical idiom with an unwavering Oriental style, Sundar Singh showed not only that he knew his Bible, but also that he understood an audience shaped by the recent explosion in Protestant visual piety and Orientalist scholarship. Thus, his robe, on the other hand, also offered a powerful entry point into the twentieth-century world of Protestantism, infused as it was with the materiality of the East and “iconic” constructions of modern identities.

Instead of seeing Sundar Singh or other swamis as somehow uniquely Indian or ascetic because of the importance of religious dress to them, we can resituate them in the wider context of the richly material worlds of modern religion and identity. More specifically, as the period of Sundar Singh’s life explored in this chapter makes particularly clear, the world of
Orientalism was not only a world imagining an Eastern “other,” but also one in which those other cultures and histories became intimately bound up with the self-perceptions of many westerners. That is, nineteenth-century America and Europe were biblically focused, image-rich worlds, where Orientalist, historical-critical biblical studies and popular material and visual culture worked in concert, making it “more and more difficult to evade the fact that the English Bible itself was an ‘Oriental’ book.” In fact, for many in America and Europe, Sundar Singh’s robe and turban transformed him into a vision of the biblical Christ himself, a figure who, like the Bible that was his word, was increasingly imagined within worlds beyond the West. Thus, while recent scholars of Christianity and race refer to America’s nineteenth- and early-twentieth century “white Jesus” typified by Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* (see Fig. 5.2 below), the often-noted similarity of Sundar Singh to Jesus on his western tours reveals a more complicated picture—including of Sallman’s famous image—helping us trace the sometimes blurry “contours of whiteness.” If Rama Tirtha could claim whiteness and Christ, could Christ be both “white” and “Asian” or “Oriental”? Entering western worlds awash in such anxious questions and the objects that gave them their shape and color, Sundar Singh drew on his own ascetic capacities to become a modern icon.

Comparing Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s uses of ascetic aptitudes yields a nuanced set of similarities and differences. In this sense, the point of similarity is neither simply the use of ascetic dress in relation to race, nor a Vedantin view of the self, but rather the way dress itself functions as a part of a broader set of bodily practices for deconstructing the everyday self. By seeing how this works for a Christian figure and in a modern context, we can get a better sense of how these practices were grounded in the shared idioms of South Asian asceticism rather than only in Hinduism, and proved capable of innovative appropriations fostering critique. While these aptitudes are well attested in the classical and regional histories of South Asian and Punjabi contexts, they also resonate with the results of recent cross-cultural comparative work on asceticism. What the vibrant individual lives of these two modern monks add to such accounts, for example, to the work of Gavin Flood, is a sense of ascetic disciplines as they work beyond both hermeneutics and singular accounts of religions. After examining how this worked in Sundar Singh’s case, I conclude this chapter by considering both the South Asian background to the ascetic deconstruction and reconstruction of the self and cross-cultural studies of asceticism.
Thus, in and through the speeches, sermons, jokes, costumes, photographic poses, plural religious registers, and social critiques that riddle the record of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s sainthood, the cosmologies and texts of multiple traditions are produced by and on the bodies of performing holy men themselves. Differences in those very cosmologies, too, can help highlight the shared possibilities of practice. In Rama Tirtha’s case, these dynamics took their own specific shape, including a brahminical understanding of renunciation as a ritual social death, a Vedantin sense of the self as ultimately divine and many-layered, and a daring claim to, as it were, an autonomy that outstripped that of western moderns. Alternatively, Sundar Singh’s comfort with comparisons of himself to Christ and his self-conscious use of them were more than mimicry of an Orientalist biblical imaginary or unchanging, singular Indian culture; they were a result of a deeply theological vision. For him, union with Christ meant not vague mystical or psychological states but physically replicating Jesus’s own divine body. As he told B. H. Streeter, the saints he beheld in his visions bodily resembled Christ himself, with faces displaying a shifting array of varied colors like those of the Lord. To become, rather than merely to believe in, the living Christ—indeed to resemble him down to facial features and coloring—was hardly unique to him, but was the call of all people. Thus, though he rejected Rama Tirtha’s neo-Vedantin monism, there is still something of the boldness, the spectacular and self-confident self-presentation of his fellow Punjabi swami in Sundar Singh’s western day-to-day presence and vision.

**Sundar Singh and the Western Oriental Christ**

Walking into the break room at Henderson Memorial Girls School in Kharar, Punjab, I was surprised to find the austerity of the space broken by a rather beautiful profile picture of Sundar Singh, complete with a paper lotus flower laid out in front of it (Fig. 5.1). In reflection, it now seems to me that at least part of the reason this image struck me as no other image of Sundar Singh had (and I had seen many), was the way it reminded me of the image of Jesus with which I was raised, Warner Sallman’s 1941 *Head of Christ* (Fig. 5.2).

What I did not realize at the time, however, was that the relationship between the two pictures was deeper than my personal reaction or a natural likeness between Sundar Singh and modern, western images...
FIGURE 5.1 Sadhu Sundar Singh.

FIGURE 5.2 Warner Sallman, *Head of Christ*.
of Jesus. In fact, it is quite possible that Sallman himself, a recent graduate of Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, was aware of Sundar Singh’s visit there in 1919 and that the Indian Christian holy man’s much-reproduced photographic image during this tour influenced Sallman’s 1924 original drawing for this painting. As we will see below, the British and American press certainly made much of visual comparisons between Sundar Singh and contemporary paintings of Jesus at the time of his tour.

Regardless of a speculative historical link between these images, however, the very possibility of such a connection is evidence of the wider context of encounter and imagination explored here. Specifically, the two images reveal the synergies between varied iconicities. Such connections were made possible by the period’s Euro-American emerging visual culture and biblical imagination, South Asian practices of sacred sight (darshan) and blessing through touch (baraka), and Sundar Singh’s own creative use of the charismatic possibilities of dress in relation to both.

As Rama Tirtha’s global tour makes clear, Sundar Singh’s trips westward followed those of other South Asian swamis and Oriental spiritual teachers, all of whom entered an America already imagining and performing the Orient. In this context, his popularity signaled Euro-American obsession with things Oriental and, simultaneously, their rejection. That is, as an Indian convert to Christianity and self-styled missionary to Tibet, Sundar Singh reaffirmed key tenets of the Christian missionary project increasingly under the attack of global-trotting Indian sadhus and subject to Christian self-doubt and debate: the need for and success of Christian missions; salvation in a unique Christ over against non-Christian religions, and the shortcomings of modernist biblical criticism in favor of a biblical world of the supernatural. After all, who better than an authentic Indian, invested with the authority of the saffron robe of the Indian saint, to reaffirm these? The thoroughly biblical idiom Sundar Singh embraced in his sermons, his testimony to the living Christ, and, perhaps most importantly, his notable silence about the very things his rival swamis talked so much about—spirituality, Vedanta, mysticism, renunciation, science—helped make him something of a Christian superstar. In this sense, it was by being an anti-guru that he became a Christian one. Sundar Singh’s saffron self-presentation can be seen as a form of “iconomachy,” a displacing of rival images and the ideologies associated with them.

Yet the saffron robe, and the ascetic Orient it evoked, remained a site of ambivalence. For undergirding the triumphalist missionary interest in him was another more ambiguous reality: the very Bible at the heart of the
Protestant missionary project and that Sundar Singh affirmed so strongly was increasingly historicized as an Oriental book. Thus, the biblical Christ, that is the very Christ evangelicals were saved by, was an Oriental. Indeed, the need to refute the Orientalized Christs of Indian swamis can be seen in direct relation to Indian encroachment not simply into Euro-America, but into the Bible itself. How could the Bible serve, for example, as an intimate manual for American and British gender and family norms, but at the same time be the product of languages and lands so foreign that the entire scholarly apparatus was needed to understand them? Jesus’s paradoxical familiarity and foreignness in the west was of course often noted by non-westerners trying to pass through immigration: Jesus himself would hardly be allowed into these Christian countries! In scholarly contexts, the very questions Sundar Singh refused to broach in his public talks motivated European interest in him: Was he a mystic or an ascetic? If so, in what sense? What was his relation to the history of Christian and Hindu mysticism and asceticism? To Roman Catholic and Protestant tensions? To an Indian Christianity or the image of the Oriental Christ? Were his stories of the Maharishi of Kailāśa, the naked Christian seer hidden in a cave the Himalayas, a part of his Oriental visions or were they historical facts? With these wider contexts in view, we return to this chapter’s central question: How does Sundar Singh’s ascetic practice and identity—a site of ambivalence as much as excitement—function positively in his negotiation of western worlds? The question is all the more difficult given what I term his “renunciation of renunciation” in Euro-American contexts, namely his tendency to verbally downplay rather than play up his Oriental background and identity. But we would be mistaken to take his critical comments about some forms of asceticism to mean that ascetic practice itself had become irrelevant. Rather, if we approach asceticism as a practice in which dress is a crucial part of the transformation of self, a practice that simultaneously allows an individual critical distance from social norms, access to authority within a public and a means of negotiating plural religious identities, new interpretive possibilities open up. We can start to see that Sundar Singh’s combination of biblical idiom, witness to the living Christ, and uncompromising Oriental style allowed him, quite self-consciously it seems, to assimilate to himself something of the power of the very Oriental Christ that Hindu swamis had begun to claim. In many ways, this was the same Christ that western Christians had begun to imagine and yet remained anxious about meeting. As I show below, while his popularity depended in
many ways on his affirmation of Christianity’s vibrancy, the critical racial dimension of his ascetic Christ-like self-fashioning argued for here is supported by more subtle themes in his sermons and, especially, in his private exchanges challenging western orders of religion, civilization, and color.

Very Interesting but Not Useful: Renouncing Renunciation

When asked to speak about the occulted Christian sage in the Himalayas, the Maharishi of Kailasha, by Euro-Americans, as he repeatedly was on his western tours, Sundar Singh refused. “That is very interesting, but not useful,” he firmly told his Swiss secretary as she pressed him, having been refused once already, to at least tell some of these stories to an audience of waiting children.12 Similarly, when told of people’s intense interest in his spiritual visions, Sundar Singh’s “only remark was a long, indifferent ‘Yes.’”13 Such refusals and Sundar Singh’s related denials to indulge interest in things exotically Hindu, Indian, or mystical is especially interesting because such stories were a key part of his life and rise to fame in India. Indeed, stories of Indian Christian martyrs, an ancient, occulted Christian rishi, secret orders of Christian sannyasis, and eventually, his own other-worldly travels, rather than strictly biblical preaching or the figure of Jesus, formed much of his repertoire throughout the 1910s.14 In striking contrast, while on his western tours, Singh spoke publically only on biblical texts and repeatedly emphasized the figure of the “living Christ” of his own personal experience.

The one exception to Sundar Singh’s refusal to speak of his mystical experiences is precisely the one that proves the rule of this transformation. For that narrative, unlike his many other visionary and miracles tales, neatly fits a biblical precedent of conversion that also served as a common template for the stories of converts of global missions—St. Paul’s vision of Christ on the road to Damascus.15 Sundar Singh first spoke of his conversion being the result of his own near suicide and a vision of Christ to the London Missionary Society missionary Rebecca Parker in 1917 and repeated it often on his many tours afterward. Here is a version from his 1918 tour:

In the room where I was praying I saw a great light. . . . Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus
Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, “How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it?” The thought then came to me, “Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself.” So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else. This is the joy I was wishing to get. This was heaven itself.

The Pauline elements of this story are clear: in particular, a framing narrative of persecution of Christ, Christ’s specific phrase, and the divine light. The role of the Bible in the narrative, however, unlike Paul’s context in which there was no New Testament, marks the story as a version adapted within a particular missionary context where the Bible had an almost magical power to convert, its own agency. Of particular note here is not only the Pauline character of story, but also that this version of Sundar Singh’s conversion appears at this point for the first time, some ten years after his life story had been appearing in print. To point out this earlier absence is not to claim that Sundar Singh had no such vision of Christ—for how could we access his spiritual experiences?—but to point out that the way the story of his conversion was told changed significantly. This suggests the shaping of a life story to fit a more clearly biblical model for new audiences, while also retaining details, such as a threatened suicide forcing a divine appearance, that continued to resonate with well-known stories of Hindu holy men from Namdev to Ramakrishna.

The shift in narratives, the earlier tales replete with ascetic figures and the later one sidelining them, also affects the interpretation of Sundar Singh’s decision to become a sadhu. If addressed at all, the Pauline version of Sundar Singh’s conversion subsumes his asceticism within a larger narrative of non-Christian opposition to Christian converts: on conversion his father outcasts him. He is thus forced into homelessness, becoming a wandering holy man almost by default. If it is given independent attention, his decision to become a sadhu is attributed to his mother’s reverence for holy men and her desire that he become one. It is, of course, only a short step between a mother’s rearing and values to constructions of Indian “culture” that his ascetic robe would come to represent. Both Protestant missionaries and emerging Indian religious nationalists focused on the essential role of mothers in the preservation of a pure domestic space, a symbolic and sovereign domain of national culture, character, and tradition. These
tellings are in stark contrast to Sundar Singh’s own account in his 1915 Urdu text. Here he states that, after his baptism, he purposefully took on the robe of faqir as the result of divine “guidance.” This framing of his conversion creates a much stronger claim for his ascetic practice. Here asceticism is not a necessity of a homeless happenstance, a filial response to his mother’s wishes, or a simple manifestation of Indian spirituality: it is the result of a divine command.

The point here is that as Sundar Singh shifted his narrative to fit biblical and missionary models, the divine command to take up an ascetic way of life faded into the background. Nor did Sundar Singh’s attempt to distance himself from strongly ascetic images or narratives end here. As mentioned above, his oft-told tales of Indian holy men, secretly Christian but outwardly Hindu, stopped abruptly in Europe and America. More importantly, when asked whether he was an “ascetic” he took pains to point out that, in fact, he was not: Hindus renounced the world out of mistaken notions that the world was unreal, desire itself bad, or for “self-torture.” In contrast, he was only a sadhu as a method of service and preaching. Such pronouncements undoubtedly set largely Protestant audiences, uncomfortable with Christian monasticism, Indian renunciation, or comparative discussions of mysticism, at ease and helped him assimilate the image of heroic missionary. Indeed, for one American writer, Sundar Singh’s significance could be summed up as the revelation, however ironic, of “the hollowness of Eastern mysticism and asceticism.” This assurance was necessary and precisely because asceticism was already far too close to home and charged in nineteenth- and early-twentieth British and American contexts.

Anti-ascetic assurances also gave Singh’s scholarly admirers what they needed to secure his essential difference from a variety of others: for the comparative religionist and Catholic convert to Lutheranism, Friedrich Heiler, Sundar Singh’s rejection of the Catholic monastic “counsel” of obedience, among other things, showed that his “whole temper is not characteristically Catholic, but Protestant.” On the Indian side, his robes had nothing to do with the “gloomy pessimism” and the spirit of “rigid asceticism” that is “nearly akin to it,” which, despite the Buddha’s condemnation, remained ingrained in the “Indian temper.” For Streeter, Sundar Singh, though at times called “an ascetic,” was emphatically not, since he rejected the guru-worship common to superstitious Indians. Like Max Müller’s reassurance to his readers that admiration for a “Hindu saint” such as the sannyasi Ramakrishna would not lead Europeans toward asceticism, Sundar Singh’s presence
The visual production of Sundar Singh’s Indian presence through descriptions of the “strange figure” of a man from “another world” in such contexts is indicative of the widespread interest in the Orient and its common tropes. In contrast, details such as the Anglican bishop’s dress symbolize not so much the materialist West but the inauthentic self-awareness or “self-consciousness” described by James Adams, the bishop as “dandy.”

Rather than see this as a kind of media imposition, we can interpret such passages as the likely outcome of Sundar Singh’s own comfort with the distribution of his visual image. As personal letters show, he was often asked for and frequently sent images of himself to his many American, European, and Indian admirers. The importance of images can also be
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seen on his preaching tours, where “postcards of the Sadhu were for sale at the entrance, and everybody seemed to be buying one.”

Thus, during his Euro-American tours and afterward, photographs, visual descriptions, and circulation networks played a major role in western remembrance. A letter of 1924 from a teacher at Westminster Missionary Sunday School to a retired colonial official, for example, asks for permission to keep the photograph of Sundar Singh he had sent her, adding: “I am sure God will hear a great wave of prayer rise up to His Throne for this His son from more than one heart at Westminster. One of the boys, quite spontaneously, having looked at the photograph in quietness for a few moments, said quite suddenly to his teacher, ‘Isn't it like the face of Christ?’ ” In this boy’s meditative gaze on the image, we get a hint of the “fleshiness” of the sight that beheld Sundar Singh, that is, of the embodied, affective attitudes that focus a range of sensory practices.

We might of course interpret Sundar Singh's visual presence and power in terms of Indian models of darshan, the sacred gaze central to Hindu traditions of image worship and sadhu veneration and thus to sensibilities and capacities Sundar Singh had developed. We must also keep in mind, however, that the circle of adulation here is Euro-American and, often, evangelical missionary. As Pinney argues, photography is more than a simple “transfer of the real”; it is an agent that creates, that suggests possibility and impossibility, and that may have “unpredictable consequences.” What we have then is something more like western Christian darshan, a visual encounter that creates a sense of sacred presence, a form of “iconicity.” The boy’s meditative gaze and his comparison of Sundar Singh to Christ repeat countless accounts in Euro-American sources. An American press report reads:

This tall strong young man has come from India to tell the world of Christianity again. He has an entirely ageless look of both youth and age in one; joy, energy, wisdom. . . . He has a high glad way about him. He is said to look like the pictures of Christ, and he does; but there is a greater vitality and joy about him than is ever represented in the pictures of Christ. Perhaps the pictures are wrong.

Thus, importantly it is not that Sundar Singh seems similar to contemporary paintings of Jesus, but that he outdoes them, giving a more direct access to the reality that art tries to represent. Again, the importance of Sundar Singh’s appearance, in the sense of dress, but also more broadly in
the sense of “total personality,” shapes the sacred through Protestant popular visual culture. Streeter writes, “Sadhuji always wore the saffron robe and turban and even during travel to the West, he wore the same. Not only in his external appearance, but even the appearance of his total personality was such that it was said about him that his look is ‘as if he stepped straight out of the pages of the Bible.’”36 As the American press quotation makes clear, that link was made possible by the rise of Euro-American Oriental biblical art and the nineteenth-century Bibles that incorporated it. In the words of the shorthand secretary accompanying Sundar Singh in Switzerland: “Many persons have made the same remark, [‘C’est le Christ!]’ and I too have noticed the resemblance to pictures of Christ.”37

Less favorable observers put it somewhat differently, still stressing the importance of dress, however. Calling him the “the ascete, mystic and ecstatic of the age,” Sundar Singh’s Jesuit critic, Fr. Hosten, writes:

Who is this man? The same who, dressing as a Sadhu in a yellow robe, calling himself a Christian, has been hailed by a certain section of Christians as the new Messiah. Women press round him to kiss the hem of his garments; children are brought for a blessing; at Tavanne, in Switzerland, in 1922, people climb on the trees to see and hear him . . . and someone in high position, it is said, tried to bring about an interview between the Pope and our new Dalai Lama. Such is the power of bluff.38

While Hosten’s near obsession to discredit Sundar Singh was, as Heiler pointed out, at least in part driven by resistance to a Protestant craze for a “saint” outside the Catholic Church, it is helpful here as evidence of the anxiety over idolatry that infused Sundar Singh’s presence. The line between claiming Sundar Singh as an ascetic or mystic and a Messiah or Dalai Lama blurs; all are equally results of “bluff,” that is, an inflated self-presentation and its superstitious, Euro-American embrace. Such charges would have to be refuted by Sundar Singh’s Protestant defenders even as they were shared by others, including Protestant missionaries. More generally, the relative Christ-likeness of both Sundar Singh and Gandhi—and at times each in comparison to each other—sparked live controversies from Indian Christian nationalist publications to the New York Times.39 Throughout the accounts of both critics and admirers, however, what comes through is the physicality of Sundar Singh and his image, his sacred power for European and American Christians. His “Sadhu’s yellow
robe” becomes, in Hosten’s use of the biblical phrase, the “hem of his garment.” And, indeed, it was not uncommon that “people touch[ed] his robe as he passed” on his way to the pulpit.40

The racial subtext of the controversy and its context, with its language of color, dress, and idolatry, emerged in varied ways. Heiler would write, against the charges of Hosten and others, that Sundar Singh’s continued humility despite the, admittedly sometimes superstitious, adulation of the “crowds” proved his saintliness. This was nothing less than a racial miracle: “To receive such honour in one’s lifetime is dangerous for any Christian; it was doubly so for a convert, and still more for an Indian—one has only to remember how a Guru may be deified; how much more dangerous it was then for an Indian to receive such honours from Europeans!”41 Indeed. How did Europeans and Americans—most of them missionary-minded evangelicals—come so close to deifying a colonial subject? In hindsight, several readings of such surprising moments and reversals are possible. We might read Sundar Singh’s darkness or, alternatively, his saffron-bright otherness as apotropaic, much in the way that European veneration of the Black St. Maurice suggests that “attraction and revulsion are affective responses that can exist as alternating—reversible—currents.”42 Or we might interpret Sundar Singh’s simultaneous westernness (in reaffirming the core Christian texts, beliefs, and global mission of his Euro-American audiences) and Indianness (in appearance) as a tense and thus compelling juxtaposition, something akin to the simultaneous masculinity and femininity mysteriously and disquietingly “cohabiting in one body” of the nineteenth-century Jesus.43

My main interest here, however, is to see how the colors of race bleed out, as it were, beyond an “Oriental” skin to inhabit other surfaces and manifest multiple presences. First, the visual and physical importance of Sundar Singh’s race is apparent in press descriptions that do not make comparisons to the Bible or Christ. Here race is to be seen as more than skin color, but in the period’s wider sense of racialized dress or “appearance” or, even, in Streeter’s words, “total personality.” In an Iowa newspaper, for example, visual description is given as much attention as Sundar Singh’s life: “When he arrived in Des Moines on Tuesday he was wearing the turban of an Indian sadhu or holy man. He is of middle height and apparently full of vigor. His head, well-poised and intellectual, is still covered with raven-black hair. His eyes are dark, deep-seated and wistful, his complexion bronzed and his expression kindly and grave.”44 Second, these were precisely the kind of details that had animated the imagination
of Jesus in Europe and America, a combination of Orientalist biblical imagination, phrenology, and popular and fine art that helped standardize “exotic” racial markers of skin, face, body, and clothing. Regarding the latter, for example, Sundar Singh’s turban visually connected him with a long line of Orientalist biblical art, in which turbans, styled on western perceptions of Ottoman Turks, signal the East. Such imaginings were bolstered by nineteenth-century scholarship on the historical Jesus; for example, Renan’s *Life of Jesus* drew on his travels in the Levant and on his belief that today’s Bedouin presented a living window on ancient Semitic life.

While Walter Benjamin called attention to the way that “art in the age of mechanical reproduction” was drained of its artistic aura, the capacity for vast reproduction of images also exuberantly expanded a new kind of visual charisma through multiplied images of Christ. Catholic France had offered the world Gustav Doré’s *Sainte Bible* in 1865, replete with Bedouin-style illustrations and, closer to Sundar Singh’s own time, the massive, internationally traveling set of paintings of Christ’s life by James Tissot. In England the pre-Raphaelites drew on research into the historical world of Jesus to offer their new religious and artistic vision, even as the Oriental Bible brought the East into the English sitting room. In the United States, the nineteenth-century effeminate images of Jesus described by Prothero gave way to the life-affirming, manly, and “virile” Christ of the early twentieth century, culminating in Sallman’s *Head of Christ*. Though it would later itself be perceived as too effeminate, Sallman’s image aimed to show an active Jesus approaching the cross “in triumph.” The Orientalist dimension remained strong; Sallman pursued the “new learning” of Orientalism by attending lectures on biblical archeology at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. While, from the perspective of a post-1960s west, such images offer a problematic “white” Jesus, we should not overlook the ways they simultaneously manifest nineteenth-century ambivalence over Christ’s ever more undeniably “Jewish” or “Oriental” character. Pictures of an Oriental Jesus raised the question of how to keep his image “not too dark-skinned, with not too curly hair and never with a ‘Semitic’ nose,” suggesting the inner tensions and contradictions of the category “white” itself. It was precisely these features—an Oriental biblical imaginary, the visual and verbal repertoire of race and the western desire to find an Oriental but not too Oriental Christ that made the elaborate veneration, the meditative gaze, the physical touch, and the grand rhetoric of the “St. Paul,” “Apostle,” and even Christ of India possible. The vitalistic descriptions of the American press
reports, in particular, reflect an increasingly this-worldly and masculinized image of Jesus that eschewed what was now seen as a far too otherworldly Christ feminized by Sunday School teachers and their surprising allies, “cloistered monks.”

What then of Sundar Singh’s own role in all the adulation? First, as we have already seen, he adapted a more clearly biblical idiom on his tours, suggesting his desire to link himself with scriptural precedents and, in particular, the model of St. Paul. Indeed, the link between his own experience and that of the Apostle Paul not only could be inferred from his oft-told, post-1917 conversion narrative, but, in more than one sermon, he meditated on the similarities between himself and the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” Second, Sundar Singh seemed more than comfortable with the visual circulation of images that undoubtedly encouraged the sense of iconicity of his person, often sending images of himself to friends and admirers. His posing for pictures with clear Orientalizing features while on tour, perhaps modeled on those of Vivekananda, like his tenacious identification with his saffron robe, suggests a self-consciousness of the role he intended to play. That he might have thought of his own presence in terms of a kind of “contest of images” is suggested by the fact that his only objection to speaking in a Catholic church was that “there are so many pictures, there would be no room for me.” Protestants, with less sacred art in their churches but with a burgeoning visual biblical culture, seemed, after all, especially willing to give Sundar Singh center stage. Third, in terms of comparison with Christ, it is interesting to note that we have no record of Sundar Singh rejecting his frequent role blessing children or the physical contact his admirers often desired from him, or objecting to comments about his physical similarity to Jesus. Indeed, Sundar Singh was not averse to comparing himself to Christ, describing his experience on tour in the west with biblical images of Jesus and the crowds: as the crowd walked too closely and damaged his sandals, he remarked, “Christ had the same experience.” In the present context, of course, the fact that his own clothing serves as the site of comparison tangibly suggests a process of identification with Jesus.

Western controversy over reverence for Sundar Singh had ample precedent in objections in India already. It is ironic that, in the context of the European controversy, Heiler uses Sundar Singh’s saying about Christ’s donkey to justify his humility: as the donkey that Christ rode into Jerusalem also received the signs of honor given by the crowd, so Sundar Singh was no greater than this donkey. In contrast, having emerged out

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of similar anxieties about idolatry in the Indian colonial context, the point of Sundar Singh’s comparison was not his own humility, but justification for receiving physical adoration.

The women crowded round him, took hold of his scarf and put it on the heads of their children. They would also touch his garment reverently. A missionary in the station objected to these signs of veneration and took the Sadhuji to task: “Why do you allow people to pay you their respect in all these ways? . . . “This honour belongs to Christ, not to you.” Sundar Singh said: “Well, Sahib, I shall tell you why I get it and why I accept it. My beloved Jesus went to Jerusalem riding on an ass. The people took off their clothes and spread them on the road. It was the ass who walked on the clothes, not Jesus. The ass was honoured because he carried Jesus. I am like that ass. People honour me not for my sake but because I preach Christ.”

The sadhu’s acceptance of bodily forms of respect in a Christian idiom affirms both his own humility and, simultaneously, his own nearness to Christ. Importantly, it is the servant, not Christ, who receives honor: “It was the ass who walked on the clothes, not Jesus.” That interaction of course flowed both ways, as physical contact with a powerful sadhu was also a source of blessing (baraka), as indicated by the women’s placing of his scarf on their children’s heads. While touch played more of a role than one might expect in Euro-American contexts, the transfer of charisma through objects in these Indian contexts is especially pronounced; the role of blessing-infused scarves and shawls is in keeping especially with Sufi traditions, for example. Indeed, Sundar Singh was known to give his turbans to admirers. To his translator and would-be disciple, Vincent David, he gave a “scarf of black velvet, with red velvet stitched on it, with the letters ‘Christ came to save sinners,’ ” telling him specifically that he had worn the scarf “for the last three years on his body outwardly.” In Japan, an entire crowd of Bengali workman “got on [their] knees and made a profound obeisance to him.” Later on, stories that Singh’s shawl had been preserved and carried the power of physical healing would circulate among Indian Christians. In the above passage, the pointed use of the term “Sahib” while justifying the acceptance of “honour” underscores Sundar Singh’s defiance of missionaries’ colonial authority. Positioning himself within the biblical world, Sundar Singh links himself to Christ,
while never directly claiming identity, much in the way he presented himself in Europe and America. While many western and missionary authors displaced these forms of embodied reverence onto superstitious Indians or the European “masses,” Sundar Singh’s comfort with and justification of them is striking.

Sundar Singh’s Christ-like image, dress, and reception, however, also positioned him on the margins of western Christian theologies of sainthood, indeed of dominant European notions of holiness itself. The generally Protestant context of the missionaries and wider audiences who sponsored and hailed him on his tours make this tension particularly obvious: the threat of idolatry especially inhabited the medieval cult of saints that Sundar Singh recalled for not a few Protestant critics, echoing their rejection by the likes of Luther and Calvin. A large part of these early modern objections, of course, was that attention given to “saints” distracted from the glory of Christ and from the Word of scripture. What does it mean for a (Protestant) Christian to imitate Christ, to directly and indirectly compare himself with his Master? At what point does imitation become (self)-deification? More subtly, strains of Christian theology stressing the alterity and invisibility of God, including especially some Roman Catholic traditions, likewise understand the holiness of the saint to be an essentially inaccessible quality. If, as Jean-Luc Marion puts it, even the holiness of the incarnate Christ, “the holiness of the resurrected—remains by definition invisible,” then the saint’s similarity to Christ will likewise recede into the unselfconscious, hidden, unnamability of sainteté. While these are certainly theologically substantive accounts, such views may obscure the ways that, through the layers and colors of Sundar Singh’s clothing and skin, an assertive form of sainthood actually soaked its way into the west. While understanding this materiality requires that we attend to Indian ascetic practice and history, these contexts overlap with and engage the western power of racialized bodies, the prestige of Orientalist scholarship and Protestant visual culture, and, perhaps most importantly, species of Christianity less fixated on invisibility.

Sundar Singh’s comfort with the role of venerated holy man should not be simply attributed to static Indian “culture” or an ineluctable Hindu “syncretism,” but should rather be seen in terms of the explicitly Christian theological rationale it had for him. The bodily resemblance of the saints to Christ he had seen in his visions could be explained by no less an ancient Christian authority than St. Athanasius. Quoting him, Sundar Singh would write, “[God] became man that we might be made God.” God, he writes elsewhere, can only be satisfied by the love of his
or her equals, infusing devotees like water fills a sponge submerged in the ocean.\textsuperscript{62} Given the radical rejection of idolatry so common among both Hindus and Christians in this period, Sundar Singh’s comments in his Urdu writings on the positive effects of and divine presence in image worship itself are certainly relevant to his broader sense of God’s immanence:

[I]dol worship for some people can be one means (\textit{wasīla}) of fixing attention on God, and God blesses them with satisfaction (\textit{tasallī bakhshnā}) according to their faith (\textit{īmān}). But the danger and the risk in this is that the worshipper may not advance further (\textit{āge taraqqī na kareñ}) and having become influenced by proximity to stones, might himself remain lying unconscious and unfeeling like a stone, and may not recognize the Creator of both himself and the stone, who is present there but who is veiled (\textit{darpardah}) and who fulfills the heart-felt desires (\textit{dilī murād}) of all his true worshippers. (my translation)\textsuperscript{63}

Indeed, Sundar Singh could describe the incarnation of Christ as God’s response to the desire of image worshippers to physically see and touch the object of their love.

The writings of Sundar Singh’s close followers in India confirm the link between local forms of reverence for both human and material “idols” with explicitly Christian understandings. One Indian writer, for example, critiques missionaries who complain that granting Sundar Singh the titles swami and \textit{mahatma} may deify him. First of all, the writer complains, the title “Lord” is given in England for secular reasons of wealth and worldly prestige; second, since Christ dwells so deeply in Sundar Singh, these titles are more than justified. Another writer, commenting on familiar stories of miracles performed by Sundar Singh, turns not to affirming his supernatural power, but to theme of divine indwelling, relating it to medieval Christian theology:

Christians greet him rapturously wherever he goes, and have voluntarily entitled him “Swami” and “Mahatma,” two terms of honour and respect which mean “a partaker in the divine nature”\ldots Some ignorant and ill-informed people have objected to these titles, but none else merits these titles better than Sundar does, for in \textit{Theologica Germanica} we read “Some may ask ‘What is to be a
partaker of the divine nature,’” or a godlike man? Answer “He who is imbued with and illuminated by the eternal or divine light, and inflamed or consumed with eternal or divine love, he is a godlike man, and a partaker of the divine nature.”

While these stories and arguments construct an exalted position for Sundar Singh, it would be a mistake to equate that construction with a simple bid for self-aggrandizement.

Specifically, the line separating God from creation, while not entirely absent in many South Asian traditions, was far more porous than in missionary Protestantism; the role of devotion to and even submission to human embodiments of that divine power in Hindu, Islamic, and Sikh traditions had little official parallel in the Christianity that informed colonial missions. Importantly, however, citations of Orthodox and medieval Christian sources makes clear that this contrast is not between the West and India as such, but between a parochial Protestant theology and other forms of Christianity itself. Within traditions of Christian sainthood in both early Roman and Egyptian contexts, for example, the imitation of Christ could result in a kind of “double vision”: devotees could see the living saint morph into Christ before their eyes.

What the Robes Hid: Training Civilized Animals and the West as Judas

Like his theological views, removed in many ways from the mainstream Protestant theology of most of his sponsors, there was much about Sundar Singh that remained, as it were, largely cloaked in his sermons, the price perhaps of mediating the living Oriental Christ in Europe and America. If his renunciation of renunciation and his use of biblical idiom kept the threat of the “Orient” at bay while quietly harnessing its allure, a closer reading of his private conversations and letters reveals a more complicated picture. There he admitted that witnessing to the living Christ was only part of his motivation for going west: he wanted to evaluate the spirituality of the so-called Christian countries and was coming to rather unfavorable conclusions. One did not need to be in countries long to “smell” their spiritual state, he said. As he traveled with his western hosts, small incidents, such as waiting at the train station, would call forth unflattering stories of European racism in India, set against claims of a Christian Europe.
Reminiscing about a mutual American friend in India could turn into a sharp rebuttal of stereotypes of “unpractical” Orientals. Gandhi and Tagore could not be blamed for resisting Christian conversion because Europe had failed to show them the living Christ. He could invoke Eastern spirituality through plays on the language of race and color to unsettle assumptions about European superiority: “I used to think that the inhabitants of Western lands... were like angels. But when I traveled through these countries I saw my error. Most of them have white faces and black hearts.” In a private letter to a British friend about prominent church leaders in New York, Sundar Singh expresses the link between racism, color, Christ, and his own experience in the west especially clearly: “I don’t ask money or help from them, but I expected Christian fellowship which could have help [sic] in my spiritual life... They seem to me artificial spiritual leaders, if I am not mistaken if Christ would have come today here from Palestine these leaders would have rejected Him as a coloured man.” Interestingly, a parallel if more enigmatic off-hand comment suggests that had Christ come to Europe as a “fakir”, like Sundar Singh, he would have been viewed as “cracked.” In my view, this comment suggests Sundar Singh’s sense of his western audiences’ rather shallow understanding of ascetic traditions in favor of an Orientalizing exoticism. Western interest in him and encounter with the living Christ through him, too, had their limits, limits that linked race and ascetic practice. For Indian Christians following Sundar Singh’s western tours, those limits could have more local results when negative European press was echoed in foreign missions publications, inevitably unsettling the “state of good feeling and harmony between the two races such as all true lovers of India aspire after.”

To be sure, such commentary with its explicit racial resonances remained mostly private; Sundar Singh’s public addresses focused on biblical texts, missionary themes, and evangelical piety. It was especially these latter two, however, that carried with them a subtext that shared much with broader invocations of the spiritual superiority of the East. First, by exemplifying biblical themes of evangelism with tales of Indian martyrs and of his own harrowing near-death experiences in Tibet, Sundar Singh presented an image of Indian converts that tended to take the high ground of heroism away from western missionaries. It was in Tibet, where he and other Indians went to preach, that the real New Testament drama of hardship, preaching, darkness, and light was playing out. Of course, Tibet, too, was a space beyond colonial control or missionary access and powerfully present in western imaginaries for its
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secrecy and allure. Second, in stressing the vital difference between the “dogmas” of Christianity and Christianity itself—that is, knowing “about” Christ and “knowing Christ”—Sundar Singh made the same basic differentiation between genuine Christianity and “Churchianity” (his term) invoked by other swamis, such as Rama Tirtha. In this way, Sundar Singh’s appeal to the living Christ resonated with Vedantin and evangelical appeals to experience as the “heart” of religion. As Prothero has argued, it was precisely this split, with deep roots in American history and European Pietism, that lead ultimately to the visual severing of Jesus from not only the Church, but also from the Oriental biblical scenes that had adorned the nineteenth century. Sallman’s Head of Christ, like Sundar Singh’s invocation of the living Christ of experience, ostensibly left the detailed world of the Orient behind, inviting its audiences to a highly individualized sense of religious encounter.

Sundar Singh’s physical presence and image brought them at least one step closer to just such intimacy, as they simultaneously depended on and forgot the Orient that had brought them so close.

Finally, Sundar Singh’s appeal to the living Christ also carried a sharper edge that cut at the righteousness of the European self, exposing some of his more private motives for his tour to his audience. While attributing western progress to Christ’s impact on Europe and America, he could likewise reduce western “civilization” to animal training, insisting that the routinized, modern world missed the goal of a person’s spiritual development. Such critiques generally remained assertions of a vague Eastern spirituality. More to the point, however, and in contrast to Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh also invoked the providentialist narrative of the divine blessing of Europe: “Europe owes all the blessings of culture, freedom and education to Christianity.” This of course was the very narrative that had long been used by Europeans, and some Indians, to justify imperial rule. Using stark biblical imagery, however, Sundar Singh flipped the blessing quickly to curse: “Europe is like Judas Iscariot who ate with Christ and then denied Him. But now Europe has also to fear the fate of Judas (it may hang itself on the tree of learning).” The providentialist narrative of European superiority and progress quickly became one of impending doom, often set against an eschatological horizon. Thus, while Sundar Singh’s message may have been an overtly religious call for repentance, the critical recasting of the common providentialist narrative of Europe’s blessing suggests something more than a mere repetition of well-worn missionary calls to re-Christianize Europe. In sharp judgments, Sundar Singh spoke
of the Great War as only a “little punishment” for the West’s “rejecting
Christ.”81 Just how far such assessments went for Sundar Singh is likely
to remain unclear, but it should at least be noted that for some in India
at the time, the internecine fighting of a far from homogenous “West”
was a sign of hope, a part of a vision of the future that Simona Sawhney
describes as a “dark fertility.”82

In fact, Sundar Singh shared political sympathies with Indian reli-
gious seditionists, in clear contradiction to the way in which he was rep-
resented on his western tours.83 According to Gandhi’s article in Young
India, Singh approved of non-cooperation in the political sphere, view-
ing it as something of a divine miracle.84 Similarly, Singh’s friendships
with Indian Christians and non-Christians committed to nationalist
non-cooperation, such as K. T. Paul, Samuel Stokes, C. F. Andrews, and
Gandhi, would seem hard to understand if he were a staunch supporter
of British rule. His friendship with Stokes and Andrews, in particu-
lar, highlights the transnational complexity of anti-imperial alliances,
an important connection between spirituality and dissent also seen in
missionaries’ prominent role in advocating for Asian immigrants in
America in the same period.85 The priority Singh assigned to follow-
ing Christ over a purely political agenda, often pointed out to depo-
liticize him, actually echoes Gandhi’s recommendation that national
self-rule be grounded in self-rule understood first as individual, spiri-
tual discipline.86 In fact, writing in 1927, he calls svarāj (self-rule) “our
birthright.”87 Against this background, Sundar Singh’s comments con-
trasting, not so much materiality and spirituality, but Euro-American
militarism and India’s material religious culture can be seen as indica-
tive of a political strain in his attitudes: “In India one feels everywhere,
even through idols and altars, pilgrims and penitents, temples and
tanks, that there is a desire for higher things, but here everything points
to armed force, great power and material things. It is the power from
below which makes me sad.”88

Dress, Comparison, and Ascetic Publics

For the two upstart saints considered here, the pursuit of spiritual lib-
eration and the fate of nations could not be divorced from each other.
Rama Tirtha’s sophisticated sensibility about his own ascetic dress in
his American lectures emerges out of critical and creative assertions of
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self-transformation, expanding the edges of his critique to engage broader accounts of the modern self and its place in racial and Orientalist narratives. For Sundar Singh, India as Orient was the (mostly) unspoken subtext of the Christ he became while on tour, the Christ who Euro-Americans had already started visualizing and now materialized. For Rama Tirtha, India was the very name of the modernity he addressed as “my own Self in the form of ladies and gentlemen.” For both, the meanings attached to the color of their robe, and their practice of wearing it—of “drawing attention” with it—were as crucial as they have been overlooked. Like countless ascetics before them, their bodies positioned them on the margins of but very much in view of social worlds, that is, at the center of a public. Like very few ascetics before them, however, they wandered not just in the Himalayas, not just through villages and towns of householders or courts of rajas and badshahs, but into the heart of something called “western civilization”—that would both venerate them and be unsettled by their presence and dissent. Even here, as we have seen, ascetic traditions and practices of dress provided the capacities and concepts that Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh set to work with powerful effects. By examining the differences between the two of them, we can thus start to see the continued importance of shared, older, and widespread South Asian renouncer traditions and their complex interrelations of inner and outer, spiritual and material, public and private for both working within and challenging particular modern contexts and codes. By highlighting the Orientalist and Christian dimensions at play for both figures, too, I hope to have avoided “oversimplified” notions of romantic resistance, of the marked unsettling the unmarked, in favor of the “more interesting question [of] how the practices of self-formation in such figures are both constituted by and in tension with the racial and religious ideological waters in which they swim.”

We should hardly be surprised that ascetics and asceticism were often at the very heart of engagement between alternative notions of self and religion in the colonial encounter, offering critical commentary on public issues. Ascetics were the figures most associated with radical transformations in notions of the self before the colonial period, emerging publically again at a moment when South Asian selves were very much at issue. The history of South Asian ascetic critique—its assumption of an outsider status, its alternative social visions and deconstruction of society in and through the body—offers productive sites in which to rethink the power of asceticism to highlight and unsettle colonial hegemonies beyond the
idea of reversal of Orientalist discourse. This kind of rethinking, however, requires that we attend closely to topics and dynamics often viewed as marginal, mundane, extra-religious, or anti-modern: dress, race, India's global role, and world renunciation. It also leads beyond itself and South Asia, toward a simultaneously pluralistic, cross-cultural, and comparative consideration of asceticism as such.

Although my account stresses the often overlooked public and performative aspects of asceticism, the ascetic critique of desire (kāma) and location of the self (atman, jīva) outside of both mental processes and the body are, in a specific sense, profoundly otherworldly. These discourses, like rhetorical contrasts between householders and renouncers, seek to disentangle the self not only from the world or wealth but especially from its identification with the everyday ego or sense of “I” (ahāṃkāra). As Sondra Hausner’s ethnography of Hindu ascetics shows, recent scholarly and popular views of India that ignore sharp contrasts between self and body in ascetic discourse in the search for an alternative to western “dualism” are as problematic as Orientalist views of the otherworldly Indian with no ability to negotiate the material world.90 However, as Hausner’s study also makes clear, the practical transformation of the self this critique proposes depends upon profoundly this-worldly processes, in that ascetic practice requires intense attention to the body, its location, and its ornamentation. To put this in terms of Gavin Flood’s comparative model of the “ascetic self”: while control of body and mind reverses the everyday desire that fuels the flow of the body from outward to inward, this is pursued by “entextualizing” the body—writing “memory of tradition” onto the body itself.91 It is for this reason that ascetic transformation begins in South Asian traditions with a “setting out,” often marked by rituals including a fundamental change in dress, for, as just described, dress is arguably a layer of the self with potential as a technique of the self.92

The practice of ascetic nakedness historically common in South Asia vividly suggests this fundamental point. Nakedness helps us conceive ascetic dress as more than expressive or symbolic of particular, tradition-specific religious identities—even as more than communicative—but as an ascetic discipline in itself, a part of ascetic practice. This feature of asceticism also includes a kind of paradoxically assertive deconstruction of the self, a performance akin to what Flood terms the very “ambiguity of the self”: the ascetic renounces what gives him social identity (e.g., top knot, sacred thread, ritual fire), but simultaneously asserts a new identity, appearing recognizably as a tapas-generating ascetic via his nakedness. Similarly,
building on the sociology of Mary Douglas, Patrick Olivelle argues that since the body is a primary site of the symbolic inscription of social meaning, ascetic practice deconstructs the social self written on and in the body precisely through the body. The ascetic rejects the bodily practices of ritual purity and caste related to food, sex, and life in the stable social world of house and village. Instead he ridicules and rejects the theology of purity by begging (accepting food without regard to caste), the value of procreation by celibacy, and the stability of the village and home by wandering or forest-dwelling; ascetic practice is thus a means of opposition and of deconstructing the self formed in the social world.\textsuperscript{93} Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s critical comments about caste and untouchability, while not unproblematic, continue to link ascetic practice with such outsider perspectives, as in Rama Tirtha’s endorsement of Dalit conversion to Christianity seen above. For Sundar Singh, British class divisions associated with ecclesiastical styles of high and low church Anglicanism were comparable to caste discrimination in India, just as the observance of caste among south Indian Christians impeded the spread of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{94}

Attention to dress, however, also helps us see asceticism as more than negative, critical, or oppositional. In classical Hinduism, for example, great energy is expended inscribing the physical objects that accompany the ascetic with meaning, such as the triple staff (\textit{daṇḍa}). Among Dasnami sannyasis, those who have taken the first step on the ascetic path are termed “those who have put on the clothes” (\textit{vastradhārī}).\textsuperscript{95} Tradition and divinity are embodied in the very form and emblems of the renouncer, an insight comparable to important wider, comparative discussions that highlight the constructive vision that motivates ascetic practice.\textsuperscript{96} Similarly, the narrative traditions of later bhakti and Sufi gurus, sadhus, \textit{bhagats}, \textit{faqirs}, and pirs provide countless stories in which dress also functions de- and re-constructively, is creatively adopted and adapted to challenge settled orthodoxies; it embodies power, helps gather followers and reveals inner truths in and on the surfaces of the body.\textsuperscript{97} To give a vernacular example drawn from the hagiographies of Punjab: the transformation of Nanak, the first guru of Sikhism, from an exemplary householder into an authoritative holy man begins with his return from an otherworldly journey to the divine court (\textit{darbar}) and his public appearance, first, naked, and second, clothed in the distinctive dress of \textit{faqirs}.\textsuperscript{98} It is significant that Sikh traditions, despite their increasingly “bounded” or crystalized nature, continually chose to represent Nanak in close association with \textit{faqirs}, often specifically described as Muslims, and, indeed, as himself a good (\textit{bhallā})
faqir, well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Working from very different sources in south India, Waghorne draws similar conclusions about the embodied nature of ascetic transformation in Hindu contexts, arguing that yoga aims at the perfection of the yogi’s body, which, much like the king’s body, becomes what it is through ornament.\textsuperscript{99}

Placing ascetic dress within the larger context of ascetic discipline and self-transformation also helps restore a greater awareness of its variety. Importantly, this can also contribute to a sense of the historical change and negotiation that take place through dress, of which, I argue, saffronization itself is one example. Historically, South Asian ascetic dress (or lack thereof) is extremely diverse, both within Hindu, Sikh, Sufi, Buddhist, and Jain traditions and between them. Though titled \textit{The Ochre Robe}, for example, Bharati’s account of his life as a Dasnami monk mentions the variety of Haridwar’s “ochre sādhūs, white sādhūs, red sādhūs.”\textsuperscript{100} In addition, the black robes of Nath jogis, dress made of tree bark mentioned in Sanskrit epics or in living traditions such as the Rāmanāndīs, for example, mark different levels and traditions of renunciation.\textsuperscript{101} The distinctive dress of the Vaishnava devotee (bhagat) brought a closer connection between householding and asceticism but continued to allow for both to be practiced as distinctive lifestyles. Sufi traditions of ascetic dress (khirqa), especially blue and green robes, but also black and orange, also add to the hues of the sacred landscape and imagination of South Asian asceticism, even as they echo broader Islamic attention to the Prophet’s appearance and clothing.\textsuperscript{102} Given such variety, Cohn’s description of the possibilities for “originality and uniqueness” within the royal world of textiles might easily be applied to ascetic idioms of dress, as well.\textsuperscript{103} Indeed a holy man or woman might proudly assert that wearing “all the colors” of a wide range of lineages is a key part of their spiritual practice and following.\textsuperscript{104}

Within these diverse contexts, adoptions, adaptations, and variations on ascetic dress offer many creative combinations. The head of a Sufi order may, for example, appear on special ceremonial days (e.g., ‘urs) wrapped in the ochre robes of a Shaiva monk.\textsuperscript{105} Again, the Punjabi context provides excellent examples both of the variety of ascetic dress and its use as a form of the negotiation of identity. In some accounts, Nanak is described as creating his own variation on the multiple types of ascetic dress prevalent in his day, combining elements of Sufi, Vaishnava, and yogic dress.\textsuperscript{106} This creative act simultaneously identified him with the general class of ascetic specialists (the faqirs), commented on the traditions of others, and suggested his own unique status among them.
The Vaishnava contexts of dress assumed by Nanak’s stories are especially important to highlight here, since bhakti sainthood has been primarily discussed in terms of inward faith and dissociated from outward ritual markers, bodily disciplines, and ascetic practice. These characterizations are hard to reconcile not only with bhakti sadhana as Haberman points out, but, somewhat ironically, with Sikh or Vaishnava hagiography. In fact, several distinctive items, including a forehead mark (tilak), prayer beads, and garlands of tulsi, are described by the hagiographer Mahīpati as the “outer marks of the saints” or sometimes more generally as “Vaishnava dress” (veśa, bheṣa). While these sartorial forms may or may not be associated with renunciation per se depending on particular contexts, they share with ascetic traditions the demarcation of a contrastive religious identity from that of everyday householders. The importance of such dress can be seen in a story told by Nābhādās, in which the brothers of a devotee send him a donkey in Vaishnava dress to see if his violation of caste in favor of devotional ornament will extend even to animals. When the devotee greets the donkey respectfully, delighted at having a four-footed saint as a guest, his brothers fall at his feet in devotion. In Bengali contexts, Vaishnava ascetic identity is similarly embodied in dress, down to the very term that indicates them as renouncers “those who wear the dress” (bhek dhari).107 Tellingly, Smith comments that such a focus on the importance of the “outer” seems out of line with the inner meaning of bhakti. In contrast, my own view is to take the text’s understanding of the interconnection of the outer and the inner, though the medium of dress, as foundational.108

As dress mediates the inner and the outer in this bhakti tale, so it mediates the performer’s relationship to his audience, serving, in Rama Tirtha’s speech, as the dividing line between the esoteric white skin of the holy man and the outer world of social constructions. The shifting, contextual, and audience-specific functions and meanings of ascetic dress and difference, can, as in Rama Tirtha’s case, lead to a wide range of interpretations and shifts in practice even within the life of one saint. By blurring the line between his Hindu ascetic appearance and an Islamic one on his return to India or by threatening to publically destroy his saffron robes, Rama Tirtha simultaneously pointed out the limitations of such identities and the ways that materially experimenting with them could carry powerful effects. Similarly, close attention to Sundar Singh’s various costumes and styles complicates the standard account of his embrace of the “saffron robe.” In his earliest wandering phase, he carried the deerskin and wore the black robes associated with Nath yogis, for example, a resonance repeated in
his drawing on Punjabi Nath tales. At the same time, black robes could be associated with the medieval “friar” of Franciscan traditions evoked by Sundar Singh’s co-worker Samuel Stokes. Similarly, Sundar Singh’s story of the ancient, naked, wild, black-skinned, and bear-like Christian sage in the Himalayas, explored in Chapter 7, suggests a wider, vernacular imagination for the guises of holy men that, I argue, is as crucial for understanding his success in Indian contexts, as its suppression was in the context of the western imaginings and experience of the Oriental Christ.

The idea of an ascetic public can help us see renunciation embodied in dress as bridging the inner and the outer at the social level, connecting the search for individual moksha that leaves society behind with forms of social protest with inherent political potential. Though Louis Dumont’s language of the renouncer as an “individual-outside-the-world” might reinforce the former impression, his main, though often overlooked, point is that the renouncer’s individualism enables a dialogue with the very “society” he left behind and that this dialogue is a creative source of change in Hinduism. If we broaden this insight beyond the narrow confines of Dumont’s understanding of Hinduism and Indian society, the idea of an ascetic public then might be one way of naming that very space of negotiation, whether in premodern or colonial contexts. Indeed, since a public functions by means of performance and creative repetition, and since publics, like individuals, are numerous and inherently heterogeneous, this model requires attention to cultural practices and individuals, working to undermine problematically singular notions of South Asian society, culture, and religion. Introduced into the colonial setting, in which the construction of a modern, self-organizing, and singular “public sphere” in Habermas’s sense is an important reality, ascetic publics are potential examples of “counterpublics,” helping to unveil the “structural blindness” built into liberal thought’s account of its own ideals of ownership, autonomy and expression.

We might thus, while acknowledging important critiques of his sociology, give Louis Dumont some credit for recognizing the possibility that South Asians were capable of being “individuals” without reference to the west, colonialism, or modernity. Coming in 1961, this can be seen as no small accomplishment in light of the very recent emergence of a scholarly consensus that premodern South Asia was not devoid of individuals or history. In this sense, Dumont’s essay on “world renunciation” anticipated the idea that notions of the self and individual agency, like Novetzke’s work on bhakti publics, are hardly unique to modern
South Asian history. Rather, present in a variety of religious, philosophical, and ascetic traditions, South Asian selves enter, as it were, the modern period, and take up complex relationships with the western bourgeois subject. As Openshaw’s work on modern “Baul” traditions shows, renouncers “qualify for the role of ‘individual’ ” and achieve “relative autonomy” in a variety of modes: through structural and physical distance from society and through symbolic registers and esoteric practice. The next two chapters focus on the Indian context to argue that Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh pursued and performed their sainthood at the intersections of autobiography, ascetic self-transformation, and the publics attracted to both.

Actual ascetic political and military leadership, of course, is one possible, paradoxical result of an individual’s achievement of such autonomy. This is especially so given the history of ascetic and saintly resistance movements in the nineteenth century and emergent leadership of modern monks described above, which helped set historical precedents for Gandhi’s own better-known example. In fact, the political, racial, and anti-colonial dimensions of Sundar Singh’s western tours, however subdued, would seem to be confirmed by his own sense of struggle with the idea of ascetic leadership on his return to India. His first piece of writing after his two worldwide tours, Maktab-i Masīh [The School of Christ], begins by dealing with this very question.

The book is written as a dialogue between the “Master” (khudāvand) and his disciple (shāgird), and begins with an incident centering on Sundar Singh’s reception among Christians. As the disciple retreats to the jungle for prayer and solitude, he is approached by a beggar. Knowing he has nothing to give him, the disciple sends him away, only to find, as the figure vanishes in a flash of light, that this was Christ himself in disguise, come to give him his blessing (baraka). Soon another visitor appears, whose “color and style” (rang-ḍhang), suggests that he is an experienced (tajrabahkār), very noble (baṛā sharīf) devotee of God (khudāparast). The stranger points out that the disciple’s self-sacrificial example has been limited to a narrow Christian audience and that, in fact, even many Christians view him with suspicion. If, however, he became the leader (peshwā) of the Hindus and Muslims, who are looking for such leaders, he would have millions of followers. The scene, of course, ends with the disciple rejecting the temptation of this devil (śaitān), praying, and the revelation of Christ that begins the dialogue between master and disciple in earnest. As lightning-like liquid streams of blessing (baraka) flow through the very bodily depths of
Christ’s disciple, he is filled with the divine presence, so that only Christ can be seen inside or out.\textsuperscript{115}

In my reading, this story is about more than Sundar Singh’s triumph over temptation and pride, or the conscious rejection of the political in favor of an apolitical spirituality.\textsuperscript{116} Rather, the story reflects a longing for a world in which holy men could in fact function as powerful leaders, roles that contemporary Protestant Christianity, and many constructions of modern religion in general, had marginalized. Recently returned from tours in Europe and America, where he was hailed as a saint, an Oriental Christ, and the fulfillment of Hindu mysticism, Sundar Singh considers the possible wider functions of the holy man. The point here is not that his current fame and success are his temptation, but that in fact his influence is too limited. This seems strange given the fact that Sundar Singh is writing at precisely the moment of his greatest pan-Indian and international acclaim.

We should note that Sundar Singh chooses the word \textit{peshwā} to describe the kind of role that tempts him. Rather than the actual history of Maharashtra where the term is best-known, this usage reflects the local context and imagination of the period. \textit{Peshwa} was the name of a leading revolutionary journal in the Punjab, banned by the British at just this time.\textsuperscript{117} In this context, the term recalls local versions of the imagined history of Punjab and Maharashtra’s religious nationalism, in which “world-renouncers” such as Nanak and Gobind Singh drew swords and rajas such as Śivājī were guided by sannyasis.\textsuperscript{118} Sundar Singh’s private conversations with Gandhi may well be behind the suggestion here that Hindus were looking for a fusion of the religious and the political, as the translator puts it, searching for a “Pope.”\textsuperscript{119} After all, Gandhi appeared both as a sannyasi and as a Congress leader, in spite of the modern wall dividing sacred and secular, fulfilling popular and elite hopes for a “sannyasi” like Dayananda Saraswati but who would prove fully capable of freeing India at the proper time.\textsuperscript{120} While the narrative rejects this possibility for Sundar Singh himself, it provides the background against which the encounter of the heavenly guru, Christ, assumes its significance. At the height of his fame, Sundar Singh longs for a different kind of worldliness, a public role that, for a variety of reasons, made little sense to contemporary Christians, but retained powerful potentials in non-Christian contexts. Since playing such a role would mean conversion to Hinduism or Islam, traditions that offered important links between the ascetic, the public, and the political in ways not recognized by Protestantism, Sundar Singh instead remained
in the heavenly court of the majestic Lord (*jalālī khudāvand*). An awesome being, flowing with electricity-like streams of blessing, the Christ who appears here could easily be a powerful (*jalālī*) Sufi pir, a figure who remains hidden, but is for that reason the more powerful in his worldly effects.121

As argued earlier, the potential for political and other forms of power for a wide range of South Asian holy men paradoxically depends in many ways on their separation from and superiority over outward state structures and offices. In Sufi terms, saints form a “spiritual government” that parallels and might either support or undermine the power of ruling elites. Like Rama Tirtha’s turn inward and retreat to Himalayan caves toward the end of his life, however, Sundar Singh’s rejection of organizational structures, political forms, or an official position as leader (*peshwa*) should not be understood as apolitical. Rama Tirtha was at just this time meditating on George Washington and Oliver Cromwell as *faqir*-like men. It is rather, in some ways as Partha Chatterjee has argued, an affirmation of a sphere of spiritual sovereignty, but, in my reading, with a greater recognition of the worldliness of premodern religious traditions and their relations with dominant governmental orders. As Faisal Devji argues, such forms of sovereign authority *without power* were rooted deeply in north Indian Sufism and saint traditions and formed the wider context in which Gandhi could succeed.122

A final tale of a saint from Sundar Singh’s writings offers a good example of the contrast between these two kinds of power, one governmental and one spiritual, with the clear preference given to the latter. This dialogue between a philosopher and a “Sufi” takes place in a cave famous as a den of “thieves” (*dākū*). The holy man is situated in a space far removed, or even in opposition, to the social world and finds this thieves’ jungle hide-out most conducive for meditation and prayer, echoing hagiographical, popular, and colonial associations of saints and thieves.123 In response to the philosopher’s question about whether he knows that this is such a disreputable and dangerous place, the Sufi replies that he eschews everyday, worldly logic. He describes the cave as a space marginal to society, which is a “refuge” both for thieves and for himself.

As the cave is a place of refuge (*jā’e panāh*) for thieves, so it is for me also. When I get free from my business (*kārobār*) and I want to pray in the city among people, many obstacles get in the way. My thoughts are scattered (*muntashir*), because of which no benefit
The association of saints with robbers and thieves is a trope going back as far as the story of Aṅgulimāla in Buddhist hagiography, adding another layer of resonant imagery to Sundar Singh’s exemplary Christian ascetics. The special mention of the government in relation to criminals, however, can be read not only in terms of the spiritual over the religious, but also as a direct critique of criminalization of any number of Indian “tribes and castes.” More pointedly, coming from the mouth of a Christian faqir, such an approach stands in stark and specific contrast to that of another “fakir,” Fakir Singh (General Booth-Tucker) of the Salvation Army: as Cox points out, it was precisely through participation in government work-house rehabilitation schemes that the earlier more radical spiritual politics of these anti-racist “Christian Mahatmas” had lost nearly all the credibility it once had among Indians by the 1920s.

As with Rama Tirtha’s Sanskrit Vedanta, Sundar Singh’s holy man Christianity is simultaneously grounded in a wider Sufi imaginary, shifting back and forth between Christian and Islamic mystical traditions, a dimension especially prominent in this passage. First, it should be noted that there is an intercessory element to the Christian Sufi’s prayer: the prayers themselves are caused to reach others; it is as if the Sufi beams out his baraka (here fa’idah) to those in the surrounding area. The spatial sense implied in the Urdu suggests the concept of the Sufi’s territory (wilayat), over which his protective spiritual power rests. As the dialogue progresses, the Sufi’s interlocutor inquires as to the meaning of the phrase “the silent God” (khamoš khudā). No one, answers the Sufi, has ever heard God, for God never makes noise or speaks (śor macānā aur bolnā). Yet it is in silence that one hears the “voice and words” of the silent God (khamoš khudā ke avāz aur alfāz): “Then without sound and words, in the secret chamber of
the heart (dil kī koṣṭhī) he converses with the spirit.” Adopting the Sufi metaphor of spiritual experience as diving, he goes on to describe spiritual life as “submersion” (gota) in the sea of the real (bahir-i haqīqat) and criticizes those who consider asceticism (tārk-i duniyā) useless or careless. Like a diver goes down alone in silence, holding his breath, in order to retrieve precious pearls, the wise meditative man, the man of prayer (dhyānī gyānī aur mard-e du‘ā), must remain shut off from the world in silence in order to retrieve spiritual wealth (rūḥānī daulat) for himself and others. The Sufi can even express the notion of God’s revelation, not in terms of the words of scripture, but in terms that circumvent the need for language: it is by the means of God’s own men, prophets, and messengers (bandoñ, nabioñ, aur rasūloñ), and ultimately by becoming incarnate himself (khud mujism ho kar), that God addresses humanity (nabī Ādam) who has gone astray.

As seen above, the agency of the holy man can never directly be observed, or directly stated. It is a paradoxical kind of agency that deconstructs itself as a condition of its assertion. The Sufi says, “I can never say that I have become holy”—only that he is trying to become holy. By comparing himself with Socrates’s claim to learned ignorance, the saint’s refusal to claim holiness is precisely a sign of his being a saint, just as his rejection of governmentality is precisely the reason he, again like Socrates, is politically dangerous. Like his silent God, the saint succeeds in speaking his truth, in making claims about himself, without directly speaking them. As the Gita says, an enlightened man acts in non-action, and, when he acts, is inactive (4:18).

**Conclusion**

I hope to have shown above that new racialized notions of India as a land of spirituality embodied in living “saints” deeply shaped the context into which holy men on tour in Europe and America brought their message in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this has been pointed out already in a number of contexts, the materiality and ambiguities of this moment of emergent geo-spirituality have largely been overlooked. That is, the perception and performance of Eastern spirituality in the Europe and America depended on particular men who used their innovations on Indian ascetic and other sartorial repertoires to engage the visual culture and imagination that, in turn, shaped their reception. As David Morgan has argued, visual culture becomes in the modern period
an ever more significant locus of contestation for rival visual forms, here to be situated with reference to the encounter of Indian modes of *darshan*, ascetic critique, and Euro-American forms of iconicity. By comparing Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s western tours, we are led all the way back to the origins, histories, and shared dimensions of asceticism in South Asia and, simultaneously, pushed forward to consider recent attempts to study asceticism across religious traditions as something more than anachronistic life-denial.

Sundar Singh’s life and message help illustrate these dynamics in action and also highlight another overlooked connection: the deep and mutual relationships, we might even say intimacy, of Christianity and its so-called Oriental others. As is increasingly acknowledged, Orientalism was shaped not merely by Eurocentric but especially by deeply Protestant presuppositions and biblical imaginaries. Less recognized, however, is the fact that perceptions of the Bible and Christ were, at the same time, themselves being reimagined and reworked through the imagining of Christ’s Oriental world. The diversity of terms that might characterize that world—Semitic, Jewish, Bedouin, Eastern, Oriental, and Asian—suggest the ambivalence, uncertainty, and variety of the racial, cultural, and religious identities that swirled around the figure of the otherwise “white” Jesus in this period.

In terms of the analysis of race and sainthood, Sundar Singh’s life pushes us to think in complex ways about the relationship of skin and other surfaces, such as clothing, and even more expansive, yet still racialized, concepts such as “total personality.” In fact, Sundar Singh ultimately went, as it were, under the surface of skin and dress to the “heart” of race. His image of white European skins and the black hearts they housed forces us to consider the way race not only extends outward from skin to envelope dress and appearance but also reaches inward. Race, in this sense, goes deep. It is not that underneath all the varied skin colors of the “races” we find the same kind of universal human heart or red blood, but that the many darks hearts of Europe have a kind of subtle materiality, are colored as much as skin itself, color reversals and contrasts echoed, for example, in anti-colonial sentiment in Christian Africa. At times Sundar Singh would speak of this collective reality as an overall “smell” of a country or kind of spiritual cloudiness that blocks out the divine Sun/Son. In terms of sainthood, specifically Christian sainthood, Sundar Singh’s life and recognition as nothing short of the Oriental Christ of the West raise questions of just how
“near to Christ . . . it is possible to be,” as one devotee put it. That this same person claimed that witnessing Sundar Singh in prayer in a Swiss chapel established this space as truly sacred, that “he has consecrated” the church as church, suggests that the visual, spatial, and material dimensions of the sacred so clearly expressed in South Asian holy man traditions converged in important ways with contemporary Protestant Euro-American religiosity.

As I have argued, we can see this transformation as the deployment of an ascetic capacity of deconstructing the socialized (racialized) body through a religiously remade one. We can also ground Sundar Singh’s own self-consciousness and self-presentation, not only as an imitator of Christ, but as his living embodiment, in forms of Christianity, Indian or otherwise, at home with the visibility of holiness. Such embodied forms of sacred power also converge in powerful ways with Sufi traditions of spiritual sovereignty, histories of this-worldly ascetic leadership and rebellion in Sikh and Hindu contexts, and the varied, indigenous theological imaginaries that shaped and generated ascetic publics. Ultimately, Sundar Singh’s transformation from a dark colonial subject to a “Christ-bearing,” saffron-robed holy man, a black that whites longed to touch as he passed, was—as Heiler suggested for rather different reasons—nothing short of a racial miracle. It might not be too much to claim then that, as in Rama Tirtha’s case, religion, specifically ascetic identity and practice, was central to reimagining the world through a greater range of signs than the black and white they were often assigned.
These final two chapters examine some of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s Urdu writings about themselves. *Pace* expectations that South Asians generally and holy men more particularly are reticent about or somehow lack a personal identity, both produced substantial writings about their own lives. This characteristic suggests that what might be superficially taken to be their calculated self-promotion for Euro-American audiences was rooted in their ascetic practice, religious subjectivity, and Indian autobiographical traditions.¹ If the previous chapters emphasized the often neglected public and material dimensions of supposedly privatized modern western religion, then, we must now similarly recover the absent South Asian individual, tracing the lines of connection between the spiritual and the material in and across their varied modes of articulation. The rich religious experiences that both men claimed revealed the ultimately real (*haqīqat*) were at the heart of who they were. Put differently, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s Urdu writings help us see the ways Indian mysticism overlapped and creatively interacted with the public for and through which the self was shaped.

Thus, rather than take the effusive Indian self-writings of Rama Tirtha examined in this chapter as a conundrum or (too) simply as only a symptom of westernization, I examine them in their own right. I read them for what they can tell us about renunciation and about Rama Tirtha’s own individual spiritual quest, especially as it addressed the shifting codes and
contexts of his colonial audience. His writings reveal the way that quest transcended but also remained intentionally placed in view of the colonized and westernizing social worlds he renounced. Capturing the need to rethink our categories in light of such examples, Robin Rinehart has coined the term “autohagiography” to draw attention to the ways Rama Tirtha’s writings contain explicit statements about “how he hoped he would be remembered.” For Rinehart, Rama Tirtha “intended his autobiographical statements to function as a self-directed hagiography, or autohagiography,” and his writings “chronicle reflexively his own experience of himself as a spiritually advanced person.” The importance of self-presentation, what I term the performance of sainthood on the part of would-be saints, then needs to be seen in relation to the view that autobiography, perhaps especially in the case of renouncers, cannot simply be seen as absent in either the precolonial or colonial South Asian contexts.

This chapter highlights four dimensions of Rama Tirtha’s writings, aspects that explore their autohagiographical character, arguing that the process of writing such an account is itself a means of deconstructing, reconstructing, and resituating the everyday, individual self. First, Rinehart’s notion of autohagiography can be expanded to explore the complex self-awareness of the upstart saint, who not only presents himself as a “spiritually advanced person” but who does so by drawing creatively on exemplary models. Rama Tirtha’s quotations, or better, recitations, from Sufi and bhakti vernacular poetry reposition him and, moreover, the figure of the modern Hindu renouncer in relation to exalted figures of Punjabi and wider Islamic imaginations. Thus, for example, the appearance of ninth-century Sufi “martyr of love” Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj in several places in his texts tells us something about the figures he was imitating and situates his self-presentation in well-known saintly contexts for his audience. Second, rather than the Orientalist, textualist, and brahminical dominance that Richard King associates with the Hindu mystical “essence” of Vedanta, I argue that Rama Tirtha’s claim to Advaita was deeply entwined with and legitimated these shared regional idioms. The fact that he does this by telling his own individual story of ascetic wanderings and meditative experience through a serialized, journalistic Urdu adaptation of colonial print culture leads me to reconsider mysticism itself through the lens of autobiography in its Indo-Persian and colonial modes. In particular, I highlight: (1) writing as a performative process of self-fragmentation that repositions the ascetic opposition of renouncer and householder in the register of emergent middle-class “respectability”; (2) reinscription of
that self within ascetic-romantic landscapes as the stage for the drama of mystical realization; and (3) strategies of self-assertion that work through exemplarity and lineage. Put simply, this is a narrative practice that helps position the singular saint amid a host of better known holy men and women. While similar to what White has termed “charismatic impersonation,” I present this as a lived dynamic, as central to ascetic subjectivity itself. 

Third, a close reading of Rama Tirtha’s writings resists imagining this kind of saintly self-consciousness as mere self-aggrandizement, on the one hand, or mindless “copying,” on the other. For these texts are shot through with both self-denial and self-assertion. We can therefore start to imagine a kind of autobiography that enacts ascetic accounts of the self, in which self-denial paradoxically brings individual fulfillment, or even assertiveness, with and through submission to tradition. While Gavin Flood has described this dynamic in classical Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, we have here a compelling example in the life of a modern Indian turned monk. These texts help us explore the ways his early discipleship to his eccentric ascetically oriented guru, his missionary and English education, and his success as one of the first Indian mathematics professors inform his deepening religious consciousness.

The three short pieces at the heart of this chapter were written during a crucial period of this change, on the road during summer vacations between 1897 and 1900, as Rama Tirtha considered renouncing home, work, and family life. He published them for his growing audience of householder and ascetic devotees and those who would soon become his ascetic disciples. In fact, the developmental sense of a “life” displayed in hagiographical works by those very disciples, such as R. S. Narayana Swami and Puran Singh, about their guru, can be traced to Rama Tirtha’s own writings examined here. He writes, for example, in the last of these three pieces: “Two years have passed, since Rama threw his body in the Ganga. Also, it was a year ago that Rama visited Kashmir” (IWGR 5: 362).

The writings themselves thus construct their own relationship and retrospective quality through a linear sense of time and the experiences of the self at the heart of them, features characteristic of autobiography. In terms of life events, we can read these three autobiographical pieces as culminating in Rama Tirtha’s formal renunciation in 1901, just one year before his world travels preaching his Practical Vedanta.

Fourth, the serialization of much of Rama Tirtha’s writing pushes the formal limits of autobiography, producing a literary mode that
fragments the professionalized, rights-bearing individual under the weight of sacred identity. Much as western historiography has excluded divine agency, the time of the gods from the time of history, normative forms of modern, western autobiography may similarly work against religious accounts of the self. How does one write one’s life story when, as Rama Tirtha put it, God is the “first person”? What account can be given of one’s own actions and choices, if God is the singular agent in the heart of all bodies and at the center of all tales? My suggestion here is that we look to Rama Tirtha’s own life and writings to get a sense of how it might be done.

Writing Mysticism between Autobiography and Hagiography

As Rama Tirtha sat with his disciples, in the last days of his life, reciting Bulleh Shāh’s poems, he wept. Emerging from the roughly twenty minutes of silence that ensued, he was inspired to tell stories of his own childhood guru, Dhanna Rama. The particular verse that so moved him expressed Bulleh Shah’s devotion to his own teacher (murshid), Shāh Ināyat. He then commanded one disciple, Narayana Swami, to contact Dhanna himself, then in advanced old age. The letter Narayana sent now exists as a part of the substantial collection of Rama Tirtha’s own letters. Narayana writes:

Swami Rama Tirtha Maharaja . . . [has] told us stories of his love and devotion (prem va bhakti) for you. He ordered that some token of memory should be sent in your service. Therefore, in your service, a packet of two issues of a journal (in which Swami Maharaj’s lectures are published) are being sent to you with great love and reverence. (RP: 240, my translation)

We could have no better image of the very matter of modernity—the modern journal of religious reform—resignified within older networks of asceticism and intimacy. The products of print capitalism are here entangled in economies of guru dakṣinā, now infused with mystical tears and given devotionally. I thus approach mysticism as a form of writing, enmeshed in multiple linguistic, relational, and historical contexts. More than an example of contextualist theories of mysticism, however, Rama
Tirtha’s own serialized self-writings are integral to what he calls his quest for realization.

The complexity of the relationships between modern print, life stories, ascetic devotion, and public and private religion in these examples suggests something of the difficulties of assessing autobiography as a genre in South Asia. In the view of some, the lack of written history in premodern India is paralleled by its lack of premodern autobiography. That is, before imperialism both genres of writing and the social and conceptual frameworks they depended on were absent. For Bhikhu Parekh, for example, individuality, a developmental sense of life without a transcendent frame, detached reflection, and an audience with shared values define the genre—all features lacking in India until the late nineteenth century.10 The view that holy men do or should remain silent about personal background, mundane details of their pre- and post-renunciation life, is widely shared and depends on and reinforces such broader claims about India’s assumed historic lack of individuality in general. As one scholar of South Asian religion puts it recently of a holy man, “As a true mystic he would have no interest in revealing his family background.”11 Holy men and women thus often provide a convenient contrast to modern Indian middle-class, autobiographical self-awareness: saints were just too humble, exalted, or busy to bother to write about themselves.12 In the specific case of renouncers, this alleged reticence is reinforced by the ritual death of the social individual in sannyasa and by the prohibition against discussing one’s former state (purvāśrama). For Parekh, at the heart of the ahistorical and anonymous culture of premodern India is the metaphysic of Advaita, belittling the ego as illusory and devastating individuality, a view voiced earlier by Indologist Agehananda Bharati regarding the “delicate novelty of the [Hindu] Renaissance ego.”13 Such frameworks of course pose a fundamental problem for Rama Tirtha’s narratives about himself, produced as and after he renounced the world and embraced Advaita. After all, Advaita is at the center of his texts, a religious view that asserts that the individual soul (jīva) dissolves in the Absolute (brahman) upon liberation. How does the metaphysic accused of barring Indians from autobiography for centuries suddenly become so generative?

Of course we might argue that the power of modernization, if not secularization, is demonstrated by the harnessing of Advaita itself toward these very un-Indian goals and written forms. And the colonial period does, undeniably, see a rise in the genre of prose autobiography, particularly those written by social classes shaped by middle-class “respectability”
and English-language education. Studies of *bhadralok* Bengali literary production offer numerous examples. Yet the Indian results of supposed Euro-American influence are often judged as being flawed in predictable ways: colonial Indian autobiographies are too episodic, lack the unity brought by retrospective vision, or are not sufficiently introspective to qualify for the genre. For Parekh, this weakness comes from modern Indians who were “unwilling to fully embrace the new and unable to break with the tradition, . . . [who thus] became puzzles to themselves.”

Must even modern Indians remain puzzles to themselves so that we can reify their inability to embrace a singular modernity? The first thing to be pointed out in this context is that the limits of “autobiography” are contested in western, Christian, Indian, and colonial contexts. Does Augustine’s *Confessions*, for example, lack the requisite “personal detail” and attention to human relationships to qualify as genuine autobiography? In South Asia the range of premodern and modern traditions of self-narrative is further complexified at the level of the most basic assumptions. For example, the idea that the first person voice is definitive of self-narrative is, in South Asian contexts, questionable. Indeed, both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh often told their own life stories in the third rather than the first person, a convention of speech that helps convey ascetic detachment. In the case of self-writing, we might also see it as a more active literary technique of defamiliarization of the individual from himself, a literary invocation of the divine voice, or a making present of the transcendent “I” in and through language. These texts then might be theorized in terms of a kind of “relationality” that “produces a disorienting instability into self-knowing,” as in recent comparative literary studies of the genre. I thus take my task not to be a search for South Asia texts that meet or fail to meet a predetermined standard (either western or South Asian) but rather to call attention to the ambivalent instances of a range of tellings of the self. Indeed, the process of applying a western standard to non-western examples that “fail” to meet it suffers from the usual Eurocentric circularity.

Instead, provided that we do not assume an overly rigid definition, premodern India offers many examples of autobiography, from the ancient Buddhist *gatha* literature to Krittibas’s Bengali Ramayana. This is especially important since premodern forms, most often poetic in style, remain a vibrant literary force in the modern period apart from the “Bengali prose autobiographies which began in the mid-nineteenth century . . . which are indeed plausibly related to “Western” models.”
Tanika Sarkar has shown, the first modern autobiography of a Bengali woman, Rashsundari Deb’s *Amar Jiban*, was largely inspired by earlier “devotional and biographical texts”; telling one’s unique, personal story is *motivated* rather than *constrained* by “tradition.”

Similarly, figures supposedly representing tradition in modern India, such as colonial Bengal’s Sanskrit pandits, produced several autobiographies. Although far less scholarship has been done on autobiography in Punjab, we have at least two significant examples written by figures far removed from western literary influence. First, Dayananda Saraswati, though from Gujarat, composed an autobiography that became widely known in Punjab where his Arya Samaj flourished. Second, the writings of Piro (d. 1872), a low-caste Muslim prostitute of Lahore who joined the shrine (*dera*) of the Gulabdasi sect, offer another example of a woman’s self-narrative of intense religious experience told with older literary forms. Her *Ik Sau Sath Kafian* is marked by a “manner of telling” that incorporates the “*kafis* of the Sufis, *qissas* of Punjab, *nirguna* of the *bhaktas*, *saguna* of Vaishnava” and a biting critique of Hindu-Muslim difference. Taken together both texts suggest a strong connection between self-awareness, agency, religious multiplicity, and ascetic communities, whether in vernacular or more Sanskritic contexts.

More broadly Sikh lifestories from the hagiographical *gurbilās* literature to Bhāī Vīr Siṅgh’s 1921 novel *Bābā Naudh Siṅgh* likewise reinforce the link between individual holy men and the formation of communities around them, which I have described above in terms of the “ascetic public.”

In light of such examples, it may be that a central contribution of western autobiography was that of form, that is, of the “newly fashionable prose” that came to characterize many nineteenth-century Indian texts. To the extent that content, literary tropes, or concepts of the self appear to accord with western norms in modern Indian autobiographical texts, these might be seen in terms of Hatcher’s “convergence” model in which bourgeois values creatively interact with premodern Indian models. Taking this argument one step further, the very emergence of prose autobiography in the colonial context can be seen as a significant convergence with autobiographical sensibilities that predate, inform, and inflect them, even as the new arrivals no doubt opened up fresh possibilities and influences. As Jeanne Openshaw has shown in a study of a modern renouncer’s autobiography, even for texts that fulfill “our” notions of an “‘intellectual’ and ‘inner’ (originally ‘confessional’) autobiography” whose author was exposed to western education, premodern South Asian models remain dominant.
While acknowledging the complexities of autobiography, then, can we still distinguish Euro-American or South Asian autobiographies from other kinds of writing about oneself? The discussion of autobiography offered by Karl Weintraub offers an appropriately flexible and yet differential account, which at the same time makes more space for conversion experiences than others. The key feature of autobiography, distinguishing it from memoirs, diaries, and res gestae, for example, is that in it “an author undertakes to formulate a retrospective vision of a significant portion of his life, perceiving his life as a process of interaction with a coexistent world.”29 The “restrospective” quality of autobiography thus requires that a “formidable portion of an experience” be set within a larger pattern characterizing a “full personality.” While such an account lends itself well to religious narratives of sudden conversion in the Pauline model, it also makes room for a “crisis” or the subtler ranges of a “cumulative set of experiences which can play the same function as a crisis.”30

In the context of colonial South Asia, such experiences might operate on a number of different levels present in the self-writing of Rama Tirtha. As Hatcher points out, moving from a village world to the heart of imperial centers such as Calcutta or Lahore constitutes a formative period or even crisis.31 For Rama Tirtha this process took him from a boyhood in a poor, nonurban Brahmin family and long training under a vernacular guru through English-language and missionary institutions all the way to a career teaching college mathematics in Lahore and, finally, representing India’s spiritual greatness as a global swami. Of course the last of these transitions required another kind of crisis or conversion, that of his renunciation of his Lahore life, profession, and family. The vantage point offered by renunciation on the earlier, significant period of householder life certainly meets the criterion of retrospective insight, and especially of “detachment” suggested in some accounts of autobiography. The values of renunciation help to set the often unsettled events of an earlier period within a comprehensive pattern dictated by a view of householder life as a realm of suffering (samsāra). Yet, what is most interesting is not that framework itself but how the author interprets and innovates with it. Much as Rama Tirtha’s poetic recitation of Bulleh Shah and live storytelling put flesh on ideas of guru-devotion for his disciples, the lives and poems of earlier holy men and women bring life to a largely abstract framework, offering color, precedent, variety, and intertextual resonance. Indeed, renouncers talk about their life stories far more than the conventional wisdom on silence about pre-renouncer life would lead us to expect.32
Finally, as Openshaw suggests, a fundamental shift in consciousness might offer subtler forms of “conversion” than the coming of modernity or overt religious change. In Rama Tirtha’s case, this shift in consciousness involved both disassociation from his life as a householder and the reorientation of his intense Krishna bhakti toward Advaitin realization. This process is at the heart of the writings examined here. Unlike some hagiographical and his own portrayals of his sharp break between a bhakti and an Advaitin phase, Rama Tirtha’s experience resembles the bhakti-flavored Vedanta of notable Advaitins. Indeed, theatricality and sentiment (*rasa*) seem particularly relevant here, since these texts draw the reader into a passionate and tearful process, of the lover in pursuit of the Beloved, rather than of a supposedly static Advaitin oneness. Rama Tirtha’s serialization and fragmentation of his own life story, which opens, as it were, *in medias res* of his epic pursuit of realization, conveys this dramatic quality in its very form. In addition, the importance of sacred suffering to this drama has a wider resonance with Islamicate, Indo-Persian self-writing: episodic in structure, these traditions present the self as being shaped and defined by the powerful presence of others, often in the context of tales occasioned by sorrows that aim principally at conveying affect. Each convention and intertextual reference is harnessed to offer something quite new in the history of Vedanta, a kind of phenomenological report of Advaitin bhakti.

Vedanta itself, like autobiography, is thus in some ways an oversimplified category, even in accounts that recognize the effects of Orientalism. For the sources and styles of Rama Tirtha’s experience and writing were, as described above, varied and polyvalent, as much indigenous as elite. The idea of the textualization of religion may distract us from these important layers and textures of premodern and modern Vedanta, just as it may obscure the presence of living asceticism, poetic recitation, and storytelling in Rama Tirtha’s life. Indeed, while he might be accused of having a mish-mash of distinct and perhaps incompatible philosophies and theologies at play in his thought, such criticism would miss the point, not of the ineffability or ultimate unity of the mystical, but of the importance of practice and Punjab’s characteristic pluralism. Seen in this light, we might consider the multivocal and performative sensibility that infuses Rama Tirtha’s ascetic pursuit of Vedantin realization as typifying the “internalization of the cultural habit of diglossia” that characterizes Sanskritic traditions themselves. In my view, however, the complexities of Rama Tirtha’s texts go beyond even this kind of translational habit to suggest that the process of piling up of identities—in all their intertextual densities,
potential convergence and divergence, lexical variety, and specific textures of multiple languages—is itself an indispensable part of a mystical, processual drama. The multiplication of symbolic reference and sensibility ultimately achieves something like the “non-literal non-figurative” effects of poetic resonance (dhvani) theorized by Abhinavagupta and transmitted in the very Sufi romance and later qissa traditions that form so much of the background to Rama Tirtha’s spiritual world.\textsuperscript{36} Aditya Behl’s description of the “symbolic excess” of such literary traditions captures this sense well, better than most translation metaphors.\textsuperscript{37} Before jumping to the label of “neo-Vedanta,” then, we first need to be “struck by the diversity of tropes, elements, and indeed, discourse, which intersect in this work and render it, in effect, appropriable by several discourses that we might consider formally opposed.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{Renouncing Respectability, Forest Theaters and David Hume in Ecstasy}

As noted, his search for an experience of truth led Rama Tirtha to start spending his summer vacations wandering between spiritually significant sites, especially in north India’s ascetic Hindu heartlands of Haridwar and the Himalayas, between 1897 and 1900. Writing from these established Hindu holy sites, but also from “Islamic” Kashmir, Rama Tirtha constantly quotes Persian poetry, draws on vernacular bhakti imagery, and uses Indo-Persian narrative conventions throughout his fashionable prose self-writing. Indeed, these writings are of a piece with his first major literary project, the self-published journal \textit{Alif}. As the first letter in the Perso-Arabic alphabet, this title links his growing commitments to Sanskritic Vedanta with his earlier immersion in Sufi themes of the unity of existence (wahdat al-wujūd) symbolized by this letter. The key shift at this point in Rama Tirtha’s life is that these developing pluralistic philosophical speculations and poetic sensibilities are harnessed to a \textit{sadhana}, a method undertaken in continuity with ascetic models. As a \textit{sadhana} connected with pilgrimage, Rama Tirtha’s wanderings and the writing he did while on them evoke the shared norms not only of brahminical Hindu traditions but also of the bhakti, yogic, Sufi, and Sikh voices that weave their way through his texts. The complex textures of his texts show how each of these contributed to his central goal of transforming the everyday ego (ahamkara, nafs, humai).
What emerges in these writings, however, is the way in which Rama Tirtha deconstructs not only the everyday self of the householder, but specifically colonial forms of respectability. Samsara now is not simply suffering, rebirth or domestic life, but especially the “new world of Western style salaried employment, and the pre-requisite ‘English’ education,” the encroaching order of clock-time described by Sumit Sarkar. In fact, this very world, ostensibly left behind in Lahore, followed him into the Himalayas via the British post. In his words, letters “reached Rama’s hands in the hill forest” and attempted to “persuade him to return home,” by “describing the disrepute and taunts at Rama’s leaving the domestic life to become a sannyasi” (IWGR 5: 326). In response, Rama Tirtha uses self-writing as a form of dialogue, a public letter to his critics and family declaring his resolve to turn his back on domestic life. “Oh! Your Rama is now wholly devoted to God. He is of no worldly use. It is really very surprising that you are sorry for the domestic matters. But why? Why are you not sorry for neglecting the affairs of your Real Home, God-Realization?” (IWGR 5: 327)

The presence of an audience, of the gaze of an ascetic public—that is, a public imagined in its relationship, positive or negative, to ascetic practice and the social worlds of renouncers—erupts into Rama Tirtha’s self-writing repeatedly. Writing from what he describes as the “territory of solitude . . . my kingdom” (IWGR 5: 331) during his wanderings along the banks of the Ganges, he spontaneously addresses imagined onlookers. Importantly, he includes not only family and marriage, but his students:

O parents! your son will not go back now. O students! your teacher will not now return to his profession. O dear wife! your husband is now gone, gone for good. How long can our marital relations continue under such circumstances? How long? How long? Rama has got to snap all worldly connections and, as such, all your hopes and aspirations have to be wiped off. (IWGR 5: 331)

As Hatcher points out, English-language training and colonial education were linked with the aspirations of families that supported their male members’ migration to colonial centers, even as they coped with their absence at home. Likewise, Rama Tirtha’s father, childhood guru, wife, and children all looked to him for significant financial support.

In fact, in the same piece of writing, Rama shifts away from issues related to family or marriage in order to focus on the issue of useful work. The relationship of asceticism and idleness, was, as we have seen, central
not only to his relationship to his family but to common critiques of the "lazy crew" of fakirs. To the question, "Is Rama Without Any Work?" he answers that the overflow of his ecstasy is "diverted for the good of the world. He is consistently distributing prosperity and cheerfulness for the benefit of the afflicted masses. Who can say that Rama is sitting idle and doing no work?" (IWGR 5: 334) He takes up this same theme again, in the final of these three pieces, beginning the litany of farewells in his self-composed hymn of renunciation, "Farewell, O dear Mathematics." Sannyasa itself is thus marked in relation to colonial professionalism and to the knowledge of imperial education.

His next two rhetorical questions make it especially clear that Rama Tirtha conceives of such accusations as directly related to western categories. These evoke biblical concepts of idolatry and the major modern British philosophers John Stuart Mill and David Hume, respectively. First, he asks of his affirmation of himself as God, "Is it Ego"? His answer draws on Sufi readings of biblical and Quranic characters, Faroon and Namrood (Pharaoh and Nimrod) who "declared themselves to be God" but were guilty of confusing their "little self" with Divinity. Instead, Rama Tirtha interprets his own claim to be God as akin to that which "bestowed greatness upon Mansoor" (IWGR 5: 345). In this invocation of Mansur al-Hallaj, one of Punjab’s and Sufism’s preeminent models of ecstatic God-consciousness, he acknowledges the possibility and threat of idolatrous self-deification but contrasts it with the realization he describes.

Second, he asks, "Is it Madness?" developing a contrast between "intellectuals" characterized by western opinions, on the one hand, and divine intoxication premised on the rejection of conventional ways of thinking, on the other.

It has come to the knowledge of Rama that certain so-called intellectuals opine that he (Rama) is suffering from melancholia and is developing madness. The king of the present day logicians, Mr. J. S. Mill writes that only that man has a right to prefer either of the two happenings who is fully acquainted with each of them. One, who knows about only one phase, is incapable of comparing the two. You followers of Mill or David Hume! O you intellectuals or logicians! Did you ever care to have any personal experience of this madness? (IWGR 5: 338)

Noteworthy here is the way in which the ascetic public, traditionally the realm of householders, expands to focus on British philosophers and
epistemology. What we have then is a critique of the colonial conversion experience in several dimensions. Rama Tirtha targets professionalization, English education, and training in western knowledge. Invoking madness on the model of al-Hallaj, he goes on to link Sufism’s drunken states with bhakti themes. References to Mirabai’s unconventional behavior as “madness” flesh this connection out. In these ways, Rama Tirtha simultaneously connects his own path with saintly forebears and indicts western philosophers for their narrow range of experience. It is a fair enough question: Had David Hume ever known Mirabai’s madness?

In an article published soon after these pieces of self-writing, Rama Tirtha links this kind of madness to Enlightenment notions of autonomy, much as the above passage simultaneously uses Mill’s reasoned recommendation of experience before judgment to undermine reason itself:

Do not care for the opinion of the world. It is wrong to see things with the eyes of others or to depend upon the opinion of the unthinking masses, without exercising your own discretion. Do away with duality and otherness and make yourself free from any bondage. It is irksome madness to swing, like a pendulum clock, between pain and pleasure and to remain undecisive. (IWGR 5: 338, my emphasis)

At least two unique connections are established here. First the Enlightenment model of the thinker liberated by reason above the “unthinking masses” is connected with nonduality. Is the renouncer most like the philosopher who dares to think freely beyond tradition? Second, the passage links the clock-time of the petty bureaucracy awaiting aspiring Punjabis in this period with dualities such as happiness and sadness (sukh-dukh) transcended by ascetic equanimity (nirddvandva). Indeed, one of Rama’s distinctive habits while teaching mathematics dramatizes his attitude toward British time well. When asked for the time while on campus, the young professor would take out his pocket watch, kept with the hands frozen at one o’clock, and laughingly remind the inquirer of the ever-present, eternal moment of Divine Unity.

Rama Tirtha’s audience was made up largely of those deeply affected by the coming of “clock time.” In other essays, he discusses the desire for vacation among westernizing classes, setting it in the wider context of Advaita. The need of the “public servant” for a holiday, for example, indicates the self’s ultimate and essential freedom: “O! Students, public servants and others, please say an oath how strongly you covet for
a holiday ... [I]t is freedom you pine for” (IWGR 5: 64). The colonial bureaucratic class it seems has a particularly difficult time realizing the divinity of the self, but also a real need for it. Elsewhere, Rama Tirtha writes a dialogue with a skeptical interlocutor who typifies this class. The interlocutor contrasts Rama Tirtha’s teaching about the exalted atman with his own routines; an office worker’s life is so mundane, how could he actually be God? “I get up early in the morning. After daily routine, I take a bit of exercise. Thereafter, I do some reading and writing. After the morning breakfast, I go to my office. On return I take my meal and go to outing or meeting friends. Then I read the newspaper. Thus passes the day. In the night I sleep. . . . I also keep waiting for the magazine Alif (a periodical) at due time.” Such passages are evidence of Rama Tirtha’s self-conscious sense of audience and of the appropriate written forms and examples for attracting them. Having himself experienced something of the world of salaried employment of the colonial middle class, he reaches out to those still within it to offer a vision of the divine self through the very printed forms that shape the experience of a colonial subject. Thus, while many have read colonial print culture in terms of homogenization and elite privilege, it simultaneously can be seen in terms of a vernacularization that opened up new relationships between renouncers and householders of the emergent middle class.40

The internal presence of colonial norms, a dialogical rhetorical style, and writing itself all transform Rama Tirtha’s isolation into public space and the isolated ascetic into a performer. He even reimagines his empty landscape as an audience; the “lecture theater” follows him into the Himalayas: “The hill fields are arranged like a science lecture theatre, one row above the other” (IWGR 5: 341). Yet the lecture halls themselves are simultaneously repeopled with a retinue of gods and, ultimately, relocated within the Sufi and Mughal idiom of royal and saintly audience of the darbar. He writes, “It seems that the chairs are spread in a lecture theater and the gods—Pavan, Varun, Kuber, and others have taken their seats on them. The Darbar of Emperor Rama is in session” (IWGR 5: 345).

**Landscapes of Conversion**

Such imagined landscapes belong to what I term the geo-spiritual dimension of Punjabi and ascetic traditions and are, as this last example suggests, very much at work in Rama Tirtha’s self-writing. Not only are holy
men and women foundational to Punjabi history and identity but the landscape of Punjab is also fundamental to them and their representation. The overlaps between sadhus, 
faqirs, jogis, bairagis, siddhas, and sannyasis and the land are clearest in the way each locality is describable in terms of the holy figures and shrines, especially evident in Ganesh Das’s Char Bagh-i Punjab. This network becomes a key part of the setting for shared regional narratives in which the holy man (often a jogi or faqir) associated with particular shrines plays major roles. In the stories of the Pūran Bhagat or the Hir-Ranjha cycle, for example, sites such as the Nath monastery at Tilla and saint shrines serve as gathering places for faqirs and for hopeful lovers’ petitionary prayers. They also provide key dramatic backdrops and enable powerful negotiations of identity via ascetic disguise and spiritual allegory. In these ways, shared idioms of piety as grounded in the land prove productive for moving beyond longstanding descriptions of circumscribed religions, syncretism, or superstition.

Landscape plays a central role in Rama Tirtha’s autohagiographical writing, as well, especially with respect to the kinds of “conversion” at issue in discussions of autobiography and hagiography. First, wandering deconstructs one’s given connection to the land, which is viewed now as part of the ascetic’s body, defined as other to the self. If the plains of Punjab are, in effect, a piece of the body, the landscape of the Himalayas seems to have the potential for the body’s deconstruction. Second, a fundamental critique of materiality at work in asceticism reveals even the Himalayas as threatening and deceptive, potentially distracting from transcendence. These descriptions are in turn balanced by Rama Tirtha’s enjoyment of nature as a divine manifestation, passages reminiscent of both South Asian poetic traditions in which landscape embodies affect and of European Romantic longing for the pristine. Third, the affective, romanticized landscape provides a backdrop for the intimate romance with the Beloved, a drama that draws on the poetic modes of bhakti and Sufi erotic imagery and in so doing vernacularizes Vedanta with its own inflections.

In response to the letters from his family entreating him to return home, Rama’s first piece of self-writing frames his relationship to them through the distance between the plains and the mountains he now wanders in. He writes, “Rama would also request you to rise above your body-consciousness and come out of the mud of the five rivers (blood, sweat, semen, saliva and secretion). Leave this Punjab (land of the above five rivers), i.e., be above
body-consciousness and gradually proceed to the hills of your Real home, God realization” (IWGR 5: 328). While the contrast between plains and the elevated haunts of ascetic wandering are common to ascetic discourse, the specific association of the land with the body carries more specific Punjabi resonance. Mir’s recent study describes widely shared regional sensibilities in which “human beings are believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory.” Opposition between plains and peak resonate in turn in the echo chamber of South Asian oppositions between other symbolically and ascetically charged locales, between the village and the forest in the period of the Upanishads or between royal court and Sufi hospice during Mughal times, for example.

The link between land, body, and ascetic practice is also rooted deeply in Rama Tirtha’s personal development. As Rinehart points out, his life at this time can be charted through stages of his understanding of his body, its deconstruction, and eventually its renunciation. During his Vaishnava period, Rama Tirtha struggled to purify himself of substances that he felt both kept him from good health (he was very often ill) and from God. At its height this understanding led him to limit himself to a diet of milk, seen within many devotional traditions as an austerity and as the ingestion of a pure (sattvic) substance connected with Krishna. By purifying the body through diet, he could move closer to a bodily encounter with the Lord. During this time he also moved physically closer to Krishna during his pilgrimage to Mathura, spending long hours on the riverbank awaiting visions.

With his deepening interest in Vedanta, Rama Tirtha’s suspicions about and thus attention to the body only increased; he now felt the need not to harness his body to help him attain the Lord, but to abandon his body to the Lord—in his words, to sell it. Already in 1897, responding to his father’s reminders about financial obligations, he claimed that his body was no longer his own, but God’s:

The body of your son Tirath Ram has been sold, sold before God (Rām). He doesn’t have anything of his own anymore. Today, on Diwālī, he has defeated (hār denā) his body and won over the Lord (mahārāj). Thank you. Whatever you need now, request from my Master (mālik). . . . God (mahārāj) is the only true wealth of we Gosains. It isn’t proper for us to renounce (tyāg) the true, priceless wealth of our selves for the false wealth of the world (samsār). (RP: 204–205, my translation)
Here the body becomes something wagered and lost in the struggle to attain God. The body is now under the direction of God, who is the Master (mālik). On the mundane plane, Rama Tirtha thus absolves himself of his father’s authority (also addressed as mahārāj earlier in the letter) and familial financial obligations. Setting up a series of familiar oppositions, Rama Tirtha aligns the body and material wealth with the false, deceptive (jhūṭī) things of the world over against the priceless (amūlya) realities of God, the true self (sacca niṣṭ), and the joy (ānand) brought by “real,” that is spiritual, wealth. It is actually those involved with worldly wealth that renounce (tyāg) the truly valuable realities; it is the renouncer (tyāgī) who gains the only wealth worth having.

Presaging future themes, these letters come just before the summers of 1898 and 1899 in Haridwar and Rishikesh, preeminent gathering places for renunciants, trips during which he began writing the self-narratives examined here. While here, again in response to a letter from his father urging him to see to his family duties, Rama Tirtha moves beyond even the idea “selling” his body to God and instead speaks of renouncing and sacrificing it, offering his bones, marrow, and even life breath (prān) to the sacrificial fire.

I have renounced (tyāg) my body, this misperception (adhyāsa) made up of the five rivers of the Punjab (blood, semen, urine, sweat, and saliva) and obtained my real home, Hardwar [“the door to the lord”]. . . . We all end up as dried-up flowers in the Ganges, so why should I not submerge the green flower of my new body into the Ganges of knowledge? Or else I should make wood out of my bones, ghee out of my marrow, recite ‘svāhā’ as I offer my life’s breath into the fire of knowledge, and thus obtain the merit of human sacrifice.

(RP: 204; my translation)

The most important word in this passage is the Advaitin term adhyāsa, “imposition” or “misperception.” In this view, liberation (moksha) depends on overcoming human ignorance (avidyā) through the acquisition of knowledge (gyan). Put simply, this ignorance is the misidentification of the self (atman) with the body, and more particularly, with its subtle layers and empirical ego (ahamkara). In fact the self is identical to the unconditioned Real, “One without a second” from which all creation arises, that is, with Brahman. In accordance with scripture (shruti), one must “wake up,” as from a dream or from the misperception of an object in the dusk.
By homologizing his body with the Punjab, Rama Tirtha suggests that the death he writes of is also the death of the illusory social identity he was given there. As he describes his final departure from Lahore, “Just as they take the dead body away from the house, while singing hymns, to the cremation ground, so, too, all the friends and the relatives, while singing Bhajans, took Rama to the Ganga” (IWGR 5: 358). It remains important of course to read this moment as more than the entry into isolation. Rather, here renunciation is a social, even celebratory event. It is an occasion for public song and procession toward a sacred site, and, through Rama Tirtha’s own writing, is reproduced in memory via publication and reading, something to savor.

The leaving from is thus also a going toward—to the river, toward the mountains. The landscape is what is left behind but is also a destination, shifting dynamically depending on context and audience. We see this most clearly in Rama Tirtha’s powerful descriptions of the swirling, potentially pulverizing waters of the Ganges itself as he sits by her banks. As the sacred river at the heart of so much of Rama Tirtha’s symbolic vocabulary, the Ganges offers not only a site of meditation, but adds dramatic potential to his prose. Without its swirling currents, we might otherwise have a rather dull description of the eternal nature of the transcendent self. Here the spiritual symbol becomes a more literal presence, as Rama Tirtha threatens an actual leap into the rushing waters. This entire piece of self-writing in fact begins with an invocation to the Ganga herself:

O Ganga! Is it thy breast which nurtures Brahm Vidya (Divine Knowledge) . . . Do you remember the days when Rama came to seek peace under your shelter with anemic looks, dejected heart and tearful eyes, and passed his nights, all alone . . . Is “Turiya Avastha” only to be described in the scriptures? How, when and where is that stage to be achieved? Rama is wandering like a mad man in the thick mountainous jungles, bare head, bare feet and bare body with only a few copies of the Upanishads in his hands. (IWGR 5: 322)

To be sure, this passage might be seen as symptomatic of the growing textuality of neo-Hindu religion, essentialized in texts such as the Upanishads. For what sannyasi or faqir had wandered with a printed copy of the Upanishads, like the missionary’s Bible, in hand, before this? At the same time, as Rambachan has shown, however, textual authority and scriptural
revelation (*shruti*), rather than the experience-centered presentation of Vedanta of Vivekananda and Rama Tirtha in America, was traditionally the foundation of Vedanta.

The point I want to make here is a different one, for surely, on the one hand, sannyasis traveled with scriptures before Orientalism, and, on the other hand, colonialism changed what religious texts might do or mean. More important than textual continuities or innovations, however, are the autohagiographical and dramatic functions of this text-within-a text. That is, the classical-colonial text of the Upanishads plays a role within a performance of the vernacular: the philosophical, scriptural, now textual word is taken by hand into the landscape as a part of Rama Tirtha’s confrontation with textual authority itself. The Upanishads’ description of *turiya* is measured against his own experience, the text physically placed against his bare body, as he wanders in his crazed search. In this way, the text simultaneously appears authorizing and abandoned in favor of direct experience. Sufi and *bhakti* critiques of textual authority are certainly precedents for Rama Tirtha’s emphasis on emotion and direct experience, while, at the same time, the presence of the classical text lends authority to madness.

 Appropriately then, instead of scriptural quotation or exegesis of the very Upanishads he has with him, Rama turns consistently to vernacular poetry: “Go to the solitude of the forest and weep there, bitterly to attract His attention.” As he weeps and writes, he dwells on describing the details of the landscape itself. The trees appear as God-realized sages meditating by the side of the Ganga, and the Ganga’s swirling currents call out to the seeker to submerge himself and allow his ego to be devoured. Finally, the act of throwing himself physically in the Ganga, hinted at here and described elsewhere in his self-writing, appears as a culminating moment of realization. As he writes in his third autohagiographical fragment, the temporal series of his summer vacation spiritual experiments is measured by this very moment: “Two years have passed, since Ram threw his body in the Ganga.”

Renouncer as Lover

What did Rama Tirtha find in those currents? While the answer is in part certainly the divine self he spoke so clearly about, the language of Rama Tirtha’s moment of realization mixes monistic and theistic idioms, often
those of romantic and erotic love. It is thus important to highlight that
despite Rama Tirtha’s mention of the Upanishads, classical Hindu philos-
ophy and notions of renunciation are muted throughout his self-writing.
Instead, the vast majority of his text is taken up with poetic citation evoca-
tive of local Sufi and Vaishnava devotion, often with the landscape itself
seen as the natural setting for lovers. This repertoire helps create the effect
Rama Tirtha achieves by offering a kind of eyewitness account of enlight-
enment in and through his setting. He writes,

How wonderful is it now to behold Him face-to-face with full satis-
faction! He is fully exposed to Me . . . I am He and He is myself. . . .
Why are the tears rolling down at the time of our blissful Union with
the Beloved? Are these tears the death of my mind-consciousness?
This is the end of all worldly rituals. . . . I am myself the Turiya. Tears
are rolling down, as if it is the rain of ecstasy of Union. (IWGR
5:330)

Rama Tirtha mixes affective and relational language—a Union with the
Beloved, tear-drenched—with the static language of turiya. This passage
thus raises the question of the relationship between Rama Tirtha’s ear-
lier intense Vaishnava devotionalism and immersion in Sufi poetry to his
emergent Advaitin monism, calling for a more complex description than a
clean break between the two.44

Indeed, Rama Tirtha’s intense experience of the landscape had its roots
in just such devotion. According to Narayana Swami, during the monsoon
Rama Tirtha wandered on the banks of the river on the outskirts of Lahore,
contemplating the dark, incoming clouds as the Dark Lord (shyām),
Krishna. He desperately longed for, and eventually had, visions of Krishna:

[Rama Tirtha] told me with his own blessed tongue something like
this, “Today while I was bathing my Krishna gave me a beautiful
vision. And we drew near each other, that is, we embraced so tightly
that I could barely breathe. But after a brief moment of fulfillment
and clasped hands, he disappeared. And he abandoned me just like
that, leaving me calling out and weeping in my love.” In this way
visionary states (didār kī hālat) and samādhi would often very deeply
overwhelm Gosainjī. And like Sūrdās and Mīrā he would remain
mad in his love for days. (my translation)45
Since Narayana first came to Rama Tirtha as an ardent member of the Arya Samaj, which took the devotional styles of contemporary Vaishnavism as one of its central targets, it is highly unlikely he would have invented stories of Krishna’s intimate appearances. They are, moreover, consistent with passages in Rama Tirtha’s own lectures and, in particular, with the sensibility evident in the self-writings examined here.\footnote{46}

Much like the letters of his family and the accusatory rumors from his former public life, this faith in the embodied God Krishna followed Rama Tirtha into his Advaitin isolation. In one remarkable passage in the first of his threefold serial of the self, he writes of a dream of Krishna.

Gole Chand, who is called Lord Krishna, is playing “hide and seek” with Rama. Rama is on the look out for Him. He is not to be found anywhere.

Rama: “Where are you hiding? You are neither within nor without. Where are you then? Yes, yes. I have now found you out. You are hiding behind the shutters of the door. Come out, come out, or Rama will pull your ears and slap you.” So saying, Rama actually pulled His ears and slapped Him. Exactly, at this moment, Rama woke up and found that his own ear was paining \footnote{sic} and that his palm was on his own cheek, slapping himself. (IWGR 5: 333)

In many ways, of course, this dream embodies the shift from an outward focus on an object of devotion such as Krishna toward an inward one, toward the self within, seemingly away from Krishna and toward the inner atman. Yet it is, after all, Krishna who reveals it and who is revealed, in some sense, as Rama Tirtha himself. Furthermore, even two years after this dream, as he rides through the countryside of Kashmir on horseback, the mythological imagination transforms the weather, landscape, and a local boy into an entire Krishnaite panorama: “All of a sudden, the sky was covered with thick black clouds. A sweet tune filled the air. A hill boy was playing a flute in melodious tunes. Oh! A charm was floating in the atmosphere. . . . Was it something surprising, when the Gopis were drawn by the melodious sweet tunes of Lord Krishna’s flute from their abodes, like snakes from their holes at the music of the snake-charmer’s flute?” (IWGR 5: 346).

The persistent importance of Krishna, devotional idioms, and effusive poetic citation to Rama Tirtha should be seen as more than merely symbolic, as if Krishna and devotion always function merely to point to
the higher, static truth of Advaita Vedanta. Rather, his self-writing points to the continued centrality of devotional language and idioms, of lover and Beloved in union or in other dynamic states of relationship, to Rama Tirtha’s experience. In light of this, it seems unsurprising that Puran Singh records that even some four years after this, Rama Tirtha was still keeping a small statue of Krishna hidden in his robes at all times, calling it part of his secret magic or māyā.47

Formally, the importance of emotional, embodied devotion expresses itself in the fissuring of the text of Rama Tirtha’s own realization with the voices of Sufi and bhakti poets throughout. Indeed, he introduces the strange dream of Krishna by quoting four Urdu couplets marked with the classical language of Sufi traditions, the wine-bearer, cup and wine, the rose Garden and the Beloved, for example: “When I went to the rose garden, I found that every rose has got not only my own color but also my own fragrance.” More specifically still Rama Tirtha evokes the Sufi renditions of the qissa romance tradition of Punjab, such as Laila and Majnun: “It is enough for me to love Laila. It is unjust to wish for a Union with her.”48 Such language, like his citation of Mirabai’s holy madness, is indicative of a wider range of emotional states, images, and experiences than classical Advaita addressed, in which the state of jivanmukti, for example, is an unwavering one. Here, however, separation is preferred as in viraha bhakti. Similarly, as Mir describes Sufi qissa traditions, the idea of union is not “permanent” but marked by suffering and sadness on return from the state of annihilation (fana’): “This pain is reflected in Sufi writings as akin to that of separated lovers yearning to be united.”49 Rama Tirtha takes this one step further, suggesting that suffering is integral to the genuineness of God’s love: “I requested God, ‘Kindly relieve me of my troubles and ailments.’ He replied, ‘If you are a lover, I will aggravate them all, so that I many have an opportunity to test your love’” (IWGR 5: 360).

In these ways, local Sufi and Vaishnava devotional idioms transform the landscape into the natural setting for lovers. The division between renouncer and householder can be recast against the landscape of those engrossed in love and those outside it: “I am enjoying the moonlit night and the fragrant breeze at the banks of a refreshing river with my Beloved by my side. How can the persons, drowned under the waves of worldly worries and miseries, appreciate my feelings of ecstasy?” (IWGR 5: 342–343)

The language of death, too, though it can be linked to sannyasa as a death rite and Shaiva cremation imagery, has its parallel in Sufi parlance, again, adding a romantic dimension to more standard Vedantin conceptions: the
death anniversary of the Sufi saint is known as an ‘urs, literally a marriage. Finally, the ideal of union as an identity exchange seen above in Rama Tirtha’s description of his state has direct parallels in the qissa tradition he evokes. In the best known and loved example of the region, Bulleh Shah’s Hir-Ranjha, Hir, the heroine says:

Remembering Ranjha day and night  
I have myself become Ranjha.  
Call me Dhido Ranjha,  
No more should I be addressed as Hir.  
I am in Ranjha and Ranjha is in me,  
There is no distinction left.  
I am nowhere; he himself is there.  

God’s Own Gurus: When You’ve Become Your Own Self, to Whom Do You Write Letters?

In drawing on poetic Sufi and bhakti idioms so thoroughly, Rama Tirtha accomplishes several effects via both form and content. First, he interrupts his prose with long-established literary forms, opening up the surface of the text through the inclusion of a riotous eruption of other voices. I would argue that this literary move has the effect of loosening the tight relationship between author and text, an effect that allows for a sense of divine reality to emerge through precisely those gaps. That is, in keeping with the devotional poetic traditions in which authorship is neither absent nor understood as literal, Rama Tirtha’s individual authorship of his personal story enters an in-between discursive space in which he himself is neither fully present nor fully absent. We might see this breaking down of the line between author, performer, and community of memory as a novel form of “corporate authorship.” In this sense, fragmentation characterizes not only of the serial nature of his writing, but its very style. Second, these verses set his own emotional states within a universe of meaning and precedent, in which, for example, tears evoke far more than sorrow. Third, much of the poetry adorning his self-writing is that of popular religion in Punjab, a context that knows no hard boundaries, but relies on familiar imagery to convey its spiritual message. As Mir says of Sufi use of local idioms, so too here: “The power of a single kafi, even a single couplet, to
convey complex Sufi ideas rested partially in the use of metaphors that the audience could relate to. Fourth, connections to culturally familiar narratives also abound, not only to qissas, but specifically to hagiographies. A good example of this is the Persian Sufi verse he recites, “The Haji goes to Kaba. But, thank God, Kaba itself is now coming to Me” (IWGR 5: 361).

This verse not only expresses the superiority of inner understandings over external ones, but also echoes both older Sufi tales and their reappearance in Sikh stories of Guru Nanak’s travels to Mecca. Scolded by a qazi for dishonoring the Kaaba, Nanak moves his poorly pointed feet only to find the shrine itself levitating and following him. Again, the idiom reoccurs in a key passage in Hir-Ranjha qissas.

In this way, Rama Tirtha’s writing repeats something of the literary form of much devotional hagiography. For a standard trope of this literature is the dynamic relationship of poetic citation and the creation of a narrative context in which such verses appear appropriate. The life interprets the poem and the poem interprets the life. In this sense, we can read Rama Tirtha’s autohagiographical writing as just such a story, adding the religious resonance of well-known devotional poems in order to both interpret events and be interpreted by them, making his own life-writing a kind of hagiography. Rama Tirtha’s self-narratives, which literally only describe his own travels and experiences as he wanders higher into the hills and mountains, remain riddled with the presence of (holy) others.

One final citation sums up the features of Rama Tirtha’s self-narratives described thus far. While Rama Tirtha wanders in Kashmir, a verse of sant Kabīr is called to mind that invokes distinctions between three categories of Sufi holy men: “One who crosses the boundary is an auliya, One who crosses boundlessness is a pir / One who crosses both boundaries and boundlessness—He is called a faqir!” The fact that Rama Tirtha is writing from an “Islamic” region is suggestive since Kabir is the fifteenth-century devotional poet who, more than any other bhakti figure, is remembered through both Islamic and Hindu idioms. As such, this citation can be taken to signal the connections between Rama Tirtha’s own repertoire and sense of region. The verse itself ends with the final two words nām faqīr, encoding precisely the ascetic tension I have argued is at the heart of Rama Tirtha’s self-writing: between personal identity, nām, and the generic identity of the faqir. The very anonymity of the faqir suggests his ability to embody the One beyond the bounded and the boundless, but who nevertheless achieves a recognizable preeminence for that very fact. For, as Kabir’s verse ends, it is now God that calls Kabir’s name. What remains to
be seen, however, is whether other holy men play more than literary and devotional roles in Rama Tirtha’s adult life.

Rama Tirtha’s wider body of Urdu-language writings sets his frequent endorsements of spiritual autonomy, so characteristic of his American lectures, in a new context. For here contemporary “God-intoxicated” ascetics play significant roles. His warnings against taking himself (or anyone) as a guru or authority then call for a different interpretation than a mere rejection of South Asian guru-disciple traditions. They are themselves, I suggest, forms of self-denial in his case rather than straightforward comments on the role of all gurus. After all, Rama Tirtha’s earliest formation came through his intense guru-disciple relationship with Dhanna Rama. His letters to his guru are full of the strongest possible language of devotion, often addressing him as the direct manifestation of highest God or Self (sākṣāt paramātma). As discussed above, he believed that his guru was fully God (āp bilkul (pūrn) paramēśvar haiñ) and referred to himself as his slave (gulām) awaiting his guru’s “grace-filled glance” (RP: 32). The turn to Vedanta, however, meant a gradual decrease in the intensity of this relationship. As Rama Tirtha himself explained why he wrote fewer letters to his guru, “Now, when you’ve become yourself, to whom might you write letters?” In a theatrical flourish prescient of his future, Rama Tirtha signed the last of his own letters to Dhanna Rama with his guru’s, rather than his own, name.

Yet turning away from or becoming his own guru also meant turning toward others. Letters from this early Vedantin period indicate that Rama Tirtha was seeking out the “company of holy men.” He describes them in exalted terms:

Nothing in this world (saṁsār) is worthy of faith and trust (aśraya). The unending grace of God (paramēśvar) is on those people who place their faith and trust only in the one highest Self (paramātma)—they are the true sādhus. God’s entire creation serves at the feet of such great men (mahāpuruṣoñ) and remains under their command. (RP: 118, my translation)

Reflections such as these correspond directly with Rama Tirtha’s life during these Lahore years. He organized “meditation sessions” and offered hospitality to poor students and especially renouncers. Early in 1898, he established his own organization, the Society for the Spread of the Nectar of Advaita, which met in his home every Thursday. Describing its members,
he makes special mention of professional ascetics (sādhu-mahātma hī). If he could not be among them in his wanderings, Rama Tirtha would bring them to him, turning his house into an ashram (RP: 213). This context gives evidence of the sociability of Rama Tirtha’s inner transformation, his own inner reality forged within communities of renouncers, the ascetic public in its most immediate sense. His final time in physical isolation, the context of his writings described above, was also a time of interaction with sadhus and faqirs. He would emerge at night to take darshan of local holy men, give an address once a week to a gathering of Brahmans and sannyasis or oversee the feeding of roughly a hundred ascetics over a period of five or six days (RP: 222).

Such interactions culminated in his joining the ranks of renouncers. In January 1901, he stood on the banks of the Ganges to take sannyasa. In addition to the presence of his disciple Narayana, several sannyasis had accepted their invitations to attend. The barber cut off Rama’s brahminical topknot (śikhā); robes, dyed in ochre (gerūā-vastra), had been prepared. Wading out waist-deep into the water, he threw his topknot and his brahminical thread (yajñopavīta) into the river, thereby enacting the death of his social self and abandoning householder dharma. He took the name Rama Tirtha as a sign of his Dasnami lineage and sent word to the Jagadguru of Dwarka. According to Narayana Swami’s account, this self-initiation was undertaken on the authority of the Jagadguru himself, given years earlier.57

If renunciation enables and results from new forms of sociability, so too may enlightenment. Though he does not describe it in the pieces of serial self-writing described above, Rama Tirtha would later tell of his meeting with a “God-intoxicated saint” who played a major role in his own spiritual satisfaction. Referring to himself in the third person, as was his usual practice, Rama Tirtha describes his period of wandering just before his formal renunciation:

He reached Hardwar, and from there he reached Satya Narain temple via Rishikesh. On the way he threw away his watch etc. to have firm dependence on God. He met the ascetics and hermits in the Himalayas, talked to them and held discussions with them. He then realized that theoretically he was quite up to the mark in Vedanta. But ... [t]here was no real peace. He therefore started wandering in the Himalayas, in search of real and lasting peace. One day, early in the morning, he left all his companions
and left the temple, where he was staying . . . Perchance he met a God-intoxicated Sannyasin. He was all naked except for a torn langoti (loin-cloth). One Seth, a capitalist, was on his way to Badri Nath temple. The saint pointing out towards his langoti said, ‘Where are you going? See, here is Badri Nath.” The name of the saint was Badri Deo. When Rama peeped into his eyes, both burst into laughter. When Rama talked to this saint, his heart was changed. All his doubts were cleared and he got the desired peace. From there, Rama went further up the Himalayas to the forest of Brahmapuri. Rama read Upanishads there. While studying the Chhandogya Upanishad with the commentary by Shankaracarya, he was all absorbed in Samadhi, a state of self-forgetfulness. He was all changed. (IWGR 4: 320–321)

This account is noteworthy for several reasons. Unlike the accounts in his self-writing, the Advaitin experience he is in search of comes first through a specific “God-intoxicated Sannyasin,” Badri Deo. His extreme renunciation is signified by the fact that even his loincloth is torn. The Seth, perhaps the quintessential householder in the ascetic imagination, becomes the butt of a joke between two like-minded wanderers. Indeed, Rama Tirtha seems to be casting himself here into roles characteristic of vernacular ascetic storytelling. The point of pilgrimage (Badri Nath), as with Nanak to Mecca, leads to the revelation of the saint (Badri Deo). Encountering a God-intoxicated sannyasi, he has arrived at the goal of his wandering and surpasses theoretical understanding of Advaita through the humor, glance, and conversation of a naked sadhu, making enlightenment itself possible.

The gurus and holy men Rama Tirtha loved were thus even more than memory, citation, or narrative; they were also more than “models,” as some writing on saints and holy men tend to describe them. Indeed, they were not left behind or transcended in any final sense once what they modeled had been achieved. His own childhood guru, Dhanna Rama stayed with him so intensely that Rama Tirtha could be moved to deep silence and tears upon being reminded of him by a verse of Bulleh Shah’s. Thus, rather than the classical model of brahmacarya of brahminical Sanskrit texts, Vaishnava and Sufi contexts help us understand these relationships and disciplines in more lively terms. In Vaishnava devotional practice in general, characters inhabiting religious narrative offer a potential site for the reconfiguration of one’s own identity, especially if approached in the
context of spiritual practice, at the feet of holy men. In the Sufi context of master-disciple relationships, Bulleh Shah’s own story embodies the importance of a disciple’s devotion and the intimacy it enables and reenacts: looking for a way to please his teacher (pir) and knowing of his fondness for dance, the young seeker went to learn dance from courtesans so that he could perform for the master’s pleasure.

Once set more firmly in their ascetic contexts, the autohagiographical quality of Rama Tirtha’s self-writings can be seen as a part of a kind of wider autohagiographical *habitus*. That is, writing itself becomes a part of a set of practices, including not only ascetic austerity but also forms of citation, storytelling, and performance. These practices encourage individuals not so much to cognitively *reconceive* as to narratively, affectively, and socially *reposition* their deepest sense of self. To put this in Rama Tirtha’s own terms, even God needs his gurus.

Thus, in addition to scriptural study, Rama Tirtha endorses “be[ing] in constant company of saints who are spiritually evolved persons and men of wisdom and knowledge who inspire peace and tranquility within you” (IWGR 5: 2). Rama Tirtha could also use hagiography to show the power of holy men, telling the story of Dattatreya’s transformation of a prostitute by his glance: “The very sight of the saint produced a soothing and peaceful effect on the heart of the fallen woman” (IWGR 5: 52). In Mathura in the fall of 1904, he often told the story of a dancing saint, lost in “divine madness.” This “lonely-grass cutter” was so at one with the grass he cut that when his scythe sliced his own flesh, he bled green. Only once this holy man was no longer spurned but invited by the Brahmins to their sacrifice (*yajña*), would the conch shell, the divine sign of the success of the sacrifice itself, sound. The recursivity of the story, that is, the way the story of a dancing holy man, like all such stories, in part reflect back on the holy man telling them is particularly clear in this instance: when admirers gathered to have his *darshan* at Mathura, Rama Tirtha would lead them outside, first, for sessions of physical exercise and, once finished, have them sit to watch as he danced, ecstatic, in front of them.

The connection and contrast between a masculinizing nationalism of physical fitness and an ecstatic performance is striking; one is tempted to suggest that Rama Tirtha used the former to entice his audience into viewing the latter. As his comments about the question of his “idleness” in his self-writing suggest, Rama Tirtha was well aware of the charge that asceticism was frivolous, for example, an economic drain on the country. Once
again, he addresses the emergent Indian middle-class, western-educated “Pundits” who had no use for or interest in ascetic traditions:

Why do you feel embarrassed? The life of these God-intoxicated saints is not unproductive expenditure of capital . . . O you students of Political Economy, do you know who passed this way in ochre-coloured robes, chanting Om with delightful and ecstatic resonance and walking with a royal gait? Please go near him and see. He is the Emperor of the emperors, roaming in disguise with a begging bowl in his hand . . . O you degree holders or foreign educated youth, it will be much better for you that before settling yourself in any employment or vocation, you should go to some God-realized soul . . . (IWGR 5: 234–235)

Again, it is important to note that rather than a vague contrast between the “spiritual” and “material” so often cited in the analysis of Orientalism, the oppositions here are far more specific, local, and colonial. The world of householders (samsara) has been translated into the new forms of education, the authority of “degree holders,” economic logic, and “capital.” In contrast, Rama Tirtha focuses not so much on spirituality in the abstract but on the body of ascetics—the renouncer’s physical proximity, his colorful robes and gait, his resonant chant. The fact that his appearance is described as a “disguise” highlights the theatrical performance and inversions that structure renunciation: drawing on the myth of Śiva’s own mendicant disguise and Sufi inversions of political “theater states,” the beggar is said to be none other than the Emperor of emperors. Yet India’s then-newly-emergent, westernized youth and middle-class pundits were embarrassed by their ascetics, had forgotten their gurus, or so it seemed to Rama Tirtha.

**Contesting and Constructing an Ascetic Public**

In contrast to arguments for a rather straightforward colonial transformation of asceticism into inner-worldly, inwardly sovereign, or nationalist heroic modes, Rama Tirtha’s writings and those of his followers give evidence of the significant tensions that coalesce around the figure of the modern monk. These varieties and contestations become more visible to analysis and make more sense, I argue, if we reconceive renunciation in
terms of long-contested, worldly, and socially enmeshed traditions. As a heterogenous set of practices and shared idioms that themselves diverge from as much as they could be seen to overlap with modern notions of inward religion, ascetic traditions have long been the site of internal variety and debate, the object of ridicule and parody.

Very much at issue, for example, in the context examined here is the question of autonomy and its tensions with teacher-disciple relationships, a tension resolved by Rama Tirtha in America decidedly in favor of individual freedom from authority. This question becomes significantly more complicated in context of his Indian writings and life. To see this clearly, we need to reflect on the ancient institution of the guru in South Asia and what David Smith has called its fundamentally anti-modern quality. It is important to recognize, however, that this tension cannot itself be taken simply to correspond to a modern West/India dichotomy but also deeply informs Rama Tirtha’s reception and his self-presentations in India. The horror of “man worship” prominent in modern Indian religion is far from unknown and is similar to the kind of Indian “embarrassment” over ascetics that Rama Tirtha felt the need to address. Thus, the striking absence of concrete guru figures in Rama Tirtha’s writings described above suggest that even before his trips to America, he was affected by these trends and, more importantly, was experimenting with ways of representing his religious experience and authority that would avoid making such direct appeals.

Puran Singh’s English language hagiography, The Story of Swami Rama: The Poet-Monk of the Punjab (1924), exemplifies these tensions among devotees. By far the most popular work of its kind, Singh’s text systematically edited out or marginalized a variety of guru figures and holy men that were important in Rama Tirtha’s life, criticizing asceticism on a number of points. In the context of Rama Tirtha’s early life, Puran Singh describes his early guru Dhanna Rama only briefly as a “crude” “sort of person” and as one who, if of “some help” to the young boy, was most notable for his greed. This tendency is confirmed and augmented in Shastri’s account, which explicitly invokes modern norms to accuse Dhanna Rama of violating the “religious” value of “democracy” by “enslaving the mind of a pupil.” More surprising still, Puran Singh makes no mention of the Shankaracarya of Rama Tirtha’s monastic order, an omission repeated through the elision of his Dasnami title, Tirtha, in the title of the work.

Puran Singh’s distaste for “ancient Indian asceticism” runs throughout the book. He denies that Rama Tirtha’s inspiration results from any form
of “self-discipline” and further undercuts the formative role that training under his guru or ascetic practices may have had on him. For him, Rama Tirtha was more poet than monk by nature, and had gotten the idea of becoming a professional ascetic in the first place from the “extraneous impulse” introduced by Vivekananda. More specifically, while discussing the patriotic Vedanta that Vivekananda passed on to Rama Tirtha, Puran Singh argues for the ultimate incompatibility between asceticism and patriotism. Monks cannot in fact be fully patriotic since they lack “passionate love for home” and the “deep attachment to woman as mother and sweetheart . . . the spirit of sacrifice for her sake both in labour and in love.” This contrast raises interesting questions about the link between the “inner” worlds of domestic life and modern ascetic “spirituality” argued for by Partha Chatterjee, suggesting instead sites of possible disjunction. Undoubtedly influenced by Puran Singh’s own period as a sannyasi disciple of Rama Tirtha and subsequent return to Sikh householder life, such sentiments echo the generally anti-ascetic reformist Sikhism of Bhai Vīr Singh that he embraced.

Challenged by Narayana Swami, Puran Singh’s manifestly untenable argument about asceticism being “extraneous” to Rama Tirtha’s nature would have to be changed in later editions of the work. As we have seen above, Narayan includes the contemporary ascetics removed in Puran Singh’s account, affirming the relevance of ascetic practice to modern India. Scholars tend to attribute such hagiographical differences to the construction of the saint by devotees. In contrast, the above analysis suggests that they were equally rooted in Rama Tirtha’s own complex autohagiographical habits. That is, particular audiences or individuals might call for him to emphasize or to downplay (though never to deny) the value, meanings, and shapes of asceticism.

Saints Comparing Saints: Reconstructing the Lineage of World Religions

The afterlives of ascetic tensions in the Indian context also offer insight into Rama Tirtha’s American message. As we have seen, in America, Rama Tirtha never spoke of his specific gurus, never quoted the poetry of bhakti or Sufi saints, and never drew directly on the authority that lineage or ascetic status traditionally allowed. While we might assume that this difference resulted mainly from the unfamiliarity of western audiences with
these idioms, the example and western appeal of Theosophy’s “Spiritual Masters” and “Mahatmas” complicates that assumption. In what appears as a significant contrast to his own practices in India, Rama Tirtha repeatedly insisted that true religious life should never condone worship of or submission to authoritative figures, to gurus, prophets, or “saints.” Appeals to the authority of past religious figures, human teachers, or revelatory texts were useless and only served to distract from the crucial element in true religion: living faith in the experience of the Self. As he told one American audience in an implied critique of Thomas Carlyle, “This Hero-worship and Prophet-worship may be widespread and universal but that simply proves it to be, like plague and other maladies, contagious” (IWGR 7: 193).

I argue that, just as dress provided techniques for engaging the power differentials of colonialism in terms of race, so lineage supplied possibilities and capacities that could be set to work in the context of modern constructions of religion. That is, for Rama Tirtha, a neo-Vedantin reworking of lineage enabled a kind of counter-colonization of the “world religions” through their “saints”—through Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha, with the crucial inclusion of Krishna. This lineage of experience can be seen as a form of counter-comparison to the then dominant scholarly understanding of Hinduism as an “ethnic” religion as against the “ethical,” “universal” or “missionary” religions, archetypically modeled on (Protestant) Christianity. At the same time, it can be understood as another, if novel, use of the “charismatic impersonation” common among yogis.

How did this work? In disavowing of the authority of prophets, saints, and their lineages, Rama Tirtha drew on those very traditions as he negotiated Euro-American contexts. He did this in at least two specific ways. First, he constructed himself as a guru by talking consistently about well-known categories of holy men themselves, at times specifically drawing on hagiographical tales in which Indian holy men transcend their own gurus to demonstrate their own realization and authority. Second, he used a novel adaptation of lineage construction to reimagine Hinduism within the emergent, comparative, and universal realm of “world religions” that had positioned it as an “ethnic” religion, inserting Krishna alongside the universal founding figures of the so-called ethical religions. This use of a lineage of world “saints” in many ways draws on and resists world religious discourse but also deeply affected Rama Tirtha’s personal decisions and self-conception during his final years.

Recall, for example, the story Rama Tirtha told early on to his American admirers, in which he describes a master who criticizes his disciple for
bowing to him: in the very act of bowing to another, the disciple shows his weakness. On the surface, the idea of transcending the guru, of being the Master, of course appealed to American individualism and to the anti-hierarchical religious predilections of western Enlightenment, Protestant, and Free Thought devotees more generally. What is more remarkable here, however, is that by telling the story of the need to transcend religious authority figures, Rama Tirtha actually presents himself both as a realized guru, an exemplary authority of Indian spirituality, and as a proponent of individual autonomy. Seen against the background of autohagiography, we can identify the specific dynamic at play here. That is, I argue, Rama Tirtha is drawing on well-known legitimating Indian hagiographical traditions and, in essence, applying them to himself. In such traditions, the story of the disciple who outdoes or supersedes his master is a well-established trope. From stories of the Buddha to those of Guru Nanak, the mark of a true holy man is his close relationship with but, crucially, independence of established religious teachers, rival figures, and deities of devotional and ascetic power.

Usually, however, as a hagiographical tale, this kind of story was told by disciples about their own gurus, precisely to “position [him] in relation to a larger cosmology, within a vision of the pre-eminence of the Guru,” as seen in some gurbilas literature of Punjab.70 While in America, Rama Tirtha tells the story not of a particular guru, or with explicit reference to himself, but in general, ostensibly denying his audience’s need to recognize him or anyone else as their guru. Yet the narrative still functions as a legitimation for him: does not the teller of such a story, one after all robed in “saffron,” imply that he has attained this “master-state,” leaving his audience acutely aware of their lack “God-consciousness”? The answers to such questions, though crucially never stated directly, are obvious. Why else would Rama Tirtha tell no stories of his own gurus? Here was a master of the “master-state” from the land of spiritual masters, a guru’s guru. In this way, Rama Tirtha helped establish what has since become a well-worn trope of Indian gurus in Europe and America: denying the need for a guru is the necessary precondition of becoming one.71 It was and remains an ingenious variation on older South Asian hagiographical constructions of religious authority.

South Asian hagiographical tropes also find their way into Rama Tirtha’s frequent litanies of central religious figures, those he calls both “saints” and “prophets,” at the heart of the “world religions.” In this context, it important to remember that Rama Tirtha was one of the very first
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Hindu representatives of Hinduism in America at a time when Hinduism was largely understood as a limited “ethnic” religion, that is, a religion confined to the “spiritual race” of India rather than one seen to possess a universal history, mission, or ethical code. In contrast, he helped transform Hinduism into a universal religion, free of the constraints of “national nomistic” schema with which European scholarly discourse on “world religions” classed Hinduism “in principle” not only in “fact.”

He accomplished this by simultaneously adopting and resisting the nineteenth-century discourse of world religions. His means of resistance were none other than names and narratives of the world’s great religious figures taken from that discourse but reframed. In short, he recognized that the construction of the category of world religions depended on its model of founders and that this in turn could be redeployed. In other words, as a renouncer, he knew a lineage when he saw one, and he knew what to do with it.

Even as Rama Tirtha denounces the homage given to exemplary figures, he is configuring and reconfiguring their importance within the scheme of “Vedanta”:

Vedanta says, “O Christians, O Mohammadans, you Vaishnavas, ye different sects of the whole world, if you think you are being saved through the name of Christ or Buddha or Krishna or any other saint, remember the real virtue does not lie in Christ, or the Buddha, or the Krishna or any body; the real virtue lies in your own Self; distinguish between creed and faith. . . . It is the living faith which saves and not the creed. (IWGR 1: 210, my emphasis)

The audience here is nothing less than that of the “world” religions, “ye different sects of the whole world.” The particular figures Rama Tirtha uses to represent those traditions includes his oft-repeated triumvirate of “Buddha, Christ or Mohammad,” (IWGR 7: 196) with, however, the crucial addition of Krishna (cf. IWGR 1: 277; IWGR 4: 55; IWGR 3: 148). Importantly, it is the voice of Vedanta that addresses not just India but a global audience.

Rama Tirtha proved himself adept at arranging and subordinating the religions according to his Vedantin scheme, much as the “science” of religion used Christianity as an unacknowledged norm. Indeed, it was precisely this “universal” character of Christian traditions that provided the taxonomy through which religions could be valued as “world” religions.
In response, a Vedantin inclusivism hierarchically ordered religions in a threefold scheme. This not only revealed an essence, but encapsulated the history and types of religions, their founding figures, and central scriptures. On the lowest rung of that ladder, Rama Tirtha placed traditions characterized, as he put it, by the third person, that is, by viewing God as an external “He.” This included Islam and “Churchianity”—the externally focused versions of Christianity. On the next highest rung came the religions of the second person, “you,” that is, traditions that imagined an intimate relationship between the soul and the Divine, still, however, seen as distinct. Here we find Hindu bhakti, Sikhism, and more mystical versions of Christianity and Islam. Finally, the first person—“I”—of course comes out at the top, in recognition of the Vedantin principle of the identity of the self (atman) and the universal (brahman), best seen in the Upanishads.

Importantly, however, while Rama Tirtha categorized and ranked religious traditions in this scheme, he could not ultimately leave the “found ing figures” of Christ, Buddha, and Muhammad outside of the Vedantin experience. That is, he could not follow his own advice of ignoring the importance of such men, instead rehabilitating them as paradigms of Vedantic experience:

[I]n order to understand Christ, you will have to become Christ. In order to understand Krishna you will have to become Krishna, you will have to become Buddha in order to understand Buddha . . . Should you be born in India in order to become a Buddha? No, no. Should you be born in Judea in order to become a Christ? No. Should you be born in Arabia in order to become a Mohammad? No. . . . [I]f you want to become a Christ, a Buddha, a Mohammad or a Krishna, . . . you will have to realize the depth of their realization (IWGR 2: 285–286)

In the end, the great “saints of the world,” unlike their followers, must not remain consigned to the lower rungs of the religions but must be re incorporated within the universal, Vedantin lineage. As scholars and missionaries had made normative claims about the essential qualities of the world religions in order to transcend the level of historical contingency, Rama Tirtha takes up the rhetoric of the relativization of historical accident and particulars, but in reverse: it is the so-called universal figures who first appear here as possibly constrained by their particular cultural and historical contexts: all religious figures central to the standard account
of the more “ethical” and “missionary” religions tending toward universalism are marked by “ethnic” and geographical particularities. Yet Vedantin realization—not the traditions, teachings, or figures as such—allows one to go beyond those particulars. Crucially, the universality represented by these figures however is not located in the standard claims about their “missionary” or “ethical” character. Instead, “the depth of their realization” becomes the trans-historical linking principle. In this way Vedanta becomes the essence not only of Hinduism, but the essence of religion as such. “Vedanta is not confined to India; it is for the Christians as well as for the Hindus” (IWGR 1: 204). Christians are saved by Vedanta, though they, like immature children, attribute it to Christ. It is only logical then that so were all the “saints”—Christ, Buddha, Muhammad, and Krishna.

Claiming Christ, Inserting Krishna

Thus the logic of world religions, combined with a universalizing Vedanta, required that the story of Vedanta also included the stories of the Buddha, Muhammad, and Christ—the late nineteenth century’s three most important personal representatives of universal religions. These three figures in particular needed to be rehabilitated if Rama Tirtha was going to demonstrate that they belonged to his own lineage of nondual experience. Given that Rama Tirtha’s audience was American, it was especially appropriate for him to reinterpret Christ in terms of Vedanta. In this context, crafting a Vedantin lineage for Christ also enabled Rama Tirtha not only to use the Bible and Christ’s life to point to India, but also to go on the offensive, criticizing the idea that salvation came from faith in the person of Christ:

They say, salvation by acts is prescribed in the Old Testament and salvation by faith in the New Testament. But Heaven, [the] true state of Bliss, is reached by knowledge. Acts alone cannot bring salvation. Faith in Jesus, the Christ, cannot bring salvation. Salvation is through your own Self, and you have to understand your own Self; that very moment you are free. (IWGR 1: 175)

It is the atman and the knowledge of it that matters, not the far-off history of religious figures or claims about their saving power. Faith itself is limited by its own contingency, its dependence on a historical figure; nothing short of the unconditioned self can bring realization. Rather than ignoring
Christ, however, this claim led Rama Tirtha to offer an alternative account of his life, as described in Chapter 3. What better way to demonstrate the priority of the Self than by showing that Christ’s own power and salvation in fact came from Vedanta, perhaps even directly from his journey to India? The irony is that to establish a universal vision of Vedanta, Rama Tirtha simultaneously flirts with its particularly Indian lineage.

This universalizing tendency, while certainly related to world religions discourse, can also be compared to historical Indian examples of lineage construction. Thus, much as earlier vernacular Vedantin Punjabis played up similarities between Hindu and Sufi traditions by including figures such as al-Hallaj in their own repertoire, Rama Tirtha’s incorporation of “saints” such as Christ “lent [him] a universalism” to be “relished.”75 In this sense, Rama Tirtha’s approach is akin to hagiographies that elaborate the stories of figures widely separated in space, time, and at times, even religious teaching. By including figures that hardly seemed self-evidently Vaishnava—Kabir, for example—the Bhaktamāla builds a case for its own Vaishnava orientation. Moreover, just as those forms of inclusion could be bolstered by stories that created historical links through tales of the travels and meetings of the saints, so Rama Tirtha further links the figure of Christ to Vedanta and India more specifically. Indeed, in the same lecture in which he presents Christ as an independent example of the universal Vedanta at the heart of religion, he shifts the story so that more and more details of the Gospels take on particularly Indian forms.

The first of these Indian elements consists of the claim that “Christ did not die when he was crucified” but was in fact in samādhi, “a state where all life-functions stop, where the pulse beats not, where the blood apparently leaves the veins, where all signs of life are no more, when the body is, as it were, crucified.” Next, having saved Christ from death on the cross through samadhi, Rama Tirtha elaborates the story of Christ’s journey to India from this yogic link: “Christ threw himself into that state for three days and like a yogi come to life again and made his escape and came back to live in Kashmir. Rama has been there and had found many signs of Christ having lived there.” When Christ arrived in South Asia, he found a medicine there that is now called “Christ ointment” because Jesus used it then to heal his own wounds, and which does, in fact, heal “all sorts of wounds miraculously” (IWGR i: 203). Finally, instead of telling his audience to ignore Christ and look within for the Self, Rama Tirtha ends his retelling of the life of Christ with
an affirmation of Christ as an important example and presence: “Read the life of Christ and just as Christ did, do yourself; depend not upon the body of Christ, but depend on the Spirit of Christ, upon the Spirit within you.” (IWGR 1: 204). To become Christ and to live Vedanta are, of course, the same thing.

If Jesus needed to be included in the lineage of Vedanta, so too did the Buddha and Muhammad. The predominant mode in which they appear, however, is in lists of the great founding figures of the world religions. At times they appear as the personal counterparts to the great scriptures of the Bible, Quran, the Veda, and the Gita (IWGR 2: 283), a formulation that suggests that Rama Tirtha, like Vivekananda, associates the Buddha most closely with Vedanta. The point Rama Tirtha makes with these lists hinges most often on the contrast between an attitude of servile dependence on saints and an attitude of independence inculcated by Vedanta. The common inclusion of Krishna rhetorically positions the particular religion of Hinduism as a full-fledged world religion, even as it demonstrates Vedanta’s universality.

When addressing an Indian audience, Rama Tirtha often also turned to the Buddha and Muhammad as important illustrations of Vedanta and, at times, even corrections to Vedanta itself. Realizing perhaps that in the West, Buddhism and Islam were in fact Christianity’s poor cousins within the family of “ethical” world religions, Rama Tirtha waited until he was addressing an Indian audience to invoke them at length. Thus in India, the Buddha, for example, appears as an example of nonviolence (ahimsa) and the “feeling of oneness with all.” He is compared directly with Jesus, not only in the sense of realization but in terms of a shared ethics based on nonviolent principles (IWGR 5: 213–214). Still, of course, both illustrate the Vedantic truth that “you and your neighbors are one and the same” (IWGR 5: 213). Rama Tirtha claims further that these Vedantic qualities are the source of Christ and Buddha’s world status: “Thousands of years have passed, but even today Lord Buddha is reigning in the hearts of millions of people . . . You know, one-third of the total population of this world consists of his followers” (IWGR 5: 188–189). Jesus is important for the fact that “countries after countries . . . were brought under his sway” (IWGR 5: 213–214).

Similarly, Muhammad can be refashioned within a framework of spiritual knowledge (gyan) that emphasizes its national and global consequences, thus addressing the need to yoke religions and emerging nationalist inspirations and aspirations. In keeping with Rama Tirtha’s emphasis
on global relevance, Muhammad is positioned within the world-expanses of the early Arabian conquests. Rama Tirtha declares:

The spirit of all successful moments is living faith and flaming jñānam . . . So can none of your personal, domestic, social or political undertakings flourish free, except by borrowing grace and glory from the inner reaction, the heart conversion, the mental reformation, the spiritual equation in your very soul, a God-revolution. “Faith is great life-giving,” says Carlyle. The history of a nation becomes fruitful, soul-elevating, great, as it believes. These Arabs, the man, Mohammad and that one century: is it not as if a spark had fallen, one spark on a world of what seemed black, unnoticeable sand? But lo, the sand proves explosive powder, blazes heaven-high from “Delhi to Grenada” Allah-ho-Akbar! There is nothing great but God” (IWGR 3: 207).

Beginning with the affirmation of the priority of spiritual knowledge and proceeding to cite Carlyle’s rehabilitation of Muhammad as a “prophet” and “hero,” Rama Tirtha demonstrates both his awareness of the model of Great Men in Orientalist knowledge and harnesses them for his own nationalist spiritual awakening. From here, he slips seamlessly back to the language of experience, exhorting his audience: “to realize, feel and be the innate Reality in you, which is also the innate reality in Nature, to be the living personification of Tat-tvam-asi” (IWGR 3: 208). It is this same kind of self-knowledge that enabled Muhammad to unite Arabia militarily, and Shankara to conquer the whole of India through debate. Elsewhere, he would, in fact, give Muhammad the edge over Shankara, on the role of textual authority versus experience: “What use was Shankara Acharya’s hiding his own light under a bushel? He always quoted authorities. Well, did Mohammed give the Truth on the authority of his own personal realization? Allah hu Akbar, Mohammed Rasul Allah” (IWGR 5: 314–315).77

Rama Tirtha, too, powered by the knowledge of the Self and his own personal realization, had marshaled forces for a conquest, a conquest of the world religions and a mission of representation. Around him now stood those forces, the whole host of the worlds “saints”—Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and Krishna. They each radiated the same knowledge of the Self that he too preached, that he too radiated. Ultimately, the knowledge of the Self might end up obliterating the idea of world religions itself:

Rama is not like property that he should belong to anything; he is no animal . . . All of you belong to Me, and India also belongs to Me.
Christianity, Mohammedanism, Judaism, Hinduism, Vedanta—all belong to Me. (IWGR 3:112)

Rama Tirtha’s rhetorical rejection and claim to ownership of world religions was made even as he accepted, refashioned, and redeployed those very categories in the service of a newly configured Vedanta. The whole idea of “belonging” to a religion is here named as nothing more than a form of dehumanization, a tendency that diminishes and controls individuals by subsuming them under abstract categories. The limit of this critique of course is that, while claiming independence from any and all religious figures and precedents, Rama Tirtha represented Vedanta through a universalized lineage of self-realized saints. His advocacy of Vedanta as a natural essence within all the religions of the world—a “common path” as he called it—though it rejected what he saw as slavish dependence on the saints of those traditions, in fact depended on a re-description of the “saints” of those religions. Such narrative practices enabled a critical, oppositional stance that was not merely derivative, on the one hand, or self-aggrandizing, on the other hand, but that arose within life circumstances in a colonial situation where reimagining the self according to religious norms and relations with “others” had long carried the potential for varied forms of power.

**Conclusion**

If the autobiography as conceived in much scholarly writing is said to require a coherent, retrospective sense of a “whole” life, Rama Tirtha’s self-writings appear as a kind of deconstruction of that form. They are serialized both literally and figuratively, printed as installments, and reflect a number of significant “transitions” or “conversions”—from householder to renouncer, from urban, middle-class professor to begging jungle-wanderer, from work to holiday, from Vaishnava to Vedantin. The self that appears in these texts is permeable, the ascetic critique of the ego opening the self up to fusion with the landscape and the bhakti and Sufi voices that interrupt the newly fashionable printed prose of the self with the affective force of poetic and oral traditions. At the same time, these very forms of fragmentation can be seen to offer a distinctive form of autobiography, a form of self-writing that attempts to answer the question: what if one writes of the self, not as an individual exposed to an all-seeing God, but with the assumption that, in the very act of writing, the
agency of the One who “is the first person” is revealed, is accomplished? The ascetic paradox of the self, however, suggests that in this ascetic act, in the denial of the self, the self is realized, fulfilled, even asserted. In this sense, reflection on autohagiography confronts us with the possibility that the very metaphysic of Advaita once held responsible for making South Asian autobiography impossible has in fact produced a distinctive sense of a particular individual through the text. For in these texts, Rama Tirtha appears neither as a simple bounded (had) self of the individual, or the boundless (anhad) Self “without a second,” but as one who has gone beyond both bound and boundless.

More prosaically, autohagiography might be seen not only in the context of metaphysical vision or religious experience, but also of Indo-Persian norms of self writing characterized by the powerful presence of others and an emphasis on its affective effects on the reader. The above account has emphasized how Rama Tirtha harnessed these forms for self-representation, evoking and affirming local norms and narratives of holy men and women, most frequently and explicitly in his wider Indian writings and lectures. I have argued in particular that Rama Tirtha’s Orientalizing invocation of Advaita in America should be understood as a novel application of South Asian lineage construction in the comparative context of emergent world religions discourse. In the Indian context, such invocations are infused with the vernacular passions of Sufi and bhakti voices in such a way as to complicate any picture of an “essentialized” Hinduism. In listening for them, we can start to understand how he attracted his audience, how a modern monk summoned an ascetic public.

As we will see in the next chapter, autohagiographical writing and creative lineage constructions could have other applications, as well. In Sundar Singh’s case, the imagining of an indigenous Vedantin lineage of esoteric Christian sannyasis worked not to universalize a supposedly ethnic or national religion, but to provincialize and historicize Christianity itself. Here critiques of missionaries and their institutions can be seen to undermine not just the dominance of missionaries but also the very discourses of universality, translation, and textual agency that authorized them. Of course these were simultaneously the very discourses that authorized comparative religion, supplying many of its unspoken norms, and against which Hinduism could only appear evermore parochial. Until, that is, the saints intervened.
Frail Soldiers of the Cross

LESSE R KNOWN LIVES OF SUNDAR SINGH

The reading of Sundar Singh’s life presented in this chapter recovers long-overlooked Indian writings, primarily the two earliest published sources, Sundar Singh’s own A Collection of Incidents and Alfred Zahir’s Shaidā-i Salīb (Lover of the Cross). Much like the fragmentary autohagiographical writings of Rama Tirtha, these texts could be discounted from scholarly consideration: on the one hand, they are too partial and unusual to count as modern autobiography; on the other hand, as texts by holy men written about themselves they also seem too western to count as traditional. Yet rethinking the limits of autobiography appears all the more urgent if we consider feminist recoveries of marginalized voices through once-discounted self-writing that “try to decipher the indirectly expressed, often subversive messages that they contain.” While the taking up of Orientalist discourse and the use of the ascetic dress offer the particular insights into colonial sainthood explored above, these texts help us trace the ways that imperial encounter goes, as it were, all the way down to the level of the self itself.

The texts examined here demonstrate the importance of subtle forms of the subversive, indirectly, through a model of the self that contrasts with other possible selves. The now-standard story of Sundar Singh’s Pauline conversion, familiar to western audiences for its biblical resonance and autobiographical expectations, is absent in these texts, opening up a wider range of models. Specifically, like Rama Tirtha’s writing, these accounts share Indo-Persian conventions that in turn draw on shared ascetic
There is no particularized individual at the center of the text, tracing his own development, his defiance of convention, or his intense introspection, as in standard western autobiography. Instead, tales of the self are occasioned by sorrows that aim not so much to serve as a model of development, achievement, or self-knowledge, as to affect their audience deeply.

The basic ascetic opposition to householders structures the account, but with yet another critical twist: if Rama Tirtha renounced the emergent world of colonial respectability, Sundar Singh’s account is largely a renunciation of missionary institutions in favor of the “faqir-like” (*faqīrāna*) individual, a select few of whom turn out to be (exceptional) missionaries. The paradigmatic holy man or *faqir* at the absent center of the text, here Sundar Singh, makes no explicit claim to authority but invokes it indirectly in relationship to both landscape and lineage, key features of the vernacular ascetic traditions of Punjab also seen in Rama Tirtha’s writings. These settings and networks create a literary space for the self, its transformations or revelations not easily plotted by a progressive, linear narrative. The upstart holy man undergoes conversions, exchanges, and sufferings, never quite total or final, between self and other, householder and renouncer, traditional and modernizing, rural and urban; he inhabits identities such as Sufi, Sikh, Hindu, Vaishnava, Advaitin, Christian—Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox—each adding or erasing layers of the self that is shaped and reshaped through writing.

What each holy man does with the repertoire at hand, of course, reveals the distinctiveness of these remarkable men as individuals and of their ultimate vision of the self. The indestructible, Advaitin self drives Rama Tirtha to actively fragment the lingering everyday individual, as much with his body as with his writing. He leaps dramatically into the Ganga, wanders enjoying secret intimacies against a backdrop of Krishna-colored clouds, and announces his realizations and tears in bursts of public writing. For Sundar Singh the self is, at it were, always on the edge of a precipice. The individual is ephemeral, persecuted, isolated, in danger, about to slip (or be pushed) from existence but for the intervening hand of the Friend. This chapter explores tales of “sorrow and woe,” miraculous rescue and the deaths of Indian Christian martyrs through which Sundar Singh articulates his own authority and vision, however obliquely.

Thus, while Sundar Singh’s experiences are the center of these works, they appear only as “incidents” in which his own misfortunes, self-doubt, and lack of faith are rehearsed. God’s “friendship” appears through a
pattern of miracle tales rather than as part Sundar Singh’s chronological development. A life of self-denial and suffering offers evidence of the power that repeatedly saves the endangered “true servant” (*saccā banda*). In such incidents, not only Christ, but especially the holy ones (*muqaddasīn*) that embody him appear stronger as Sundar Singh appears weaker. In short, while sharing an ascetic-affective emphasis on sorrow and suffering and Sufi inspiration with Rama Tirtha, Sundar Singh’s lives are marked by the degradation and witness at the heart of Christian martyrdom.

The story of these martyrs and, especially, of the powerful Christian seer (*rishi*) of Kailasha, mark the text with “moments of awe.” I argue that it is precisely at such moments that the narratives of colonial Christianity, in which martyrdom’s ecstatic dimensions had been downplayed in favor of masculinized, heroic models, become hermeneutically porous. Through such openings, Christian themes are realized through and energized by local stories drawn from Sufi and Sikh martyrdom traditions. Though these tropes and tales are usually coded “non-Christian,” it is precisely Sundar Singh’s Christian devotion that makes them so appealing to him and to his audience. In this way, we can see that it is not that a pre-established Christianity is “indigenized” or “clothed” with local forms, but that what Christianity is, what affect it evokes, what kind of selves it creates, takes shape only in such particular, dynamic, and personal contexts. At the same time, and as noted above, such blendings and crossings have deep affinities and specific connections with Roman Catholic, late antique, and Orthodox Christian traditions, each helping to reinforce the local sense that “the West is not one.”

**Autonomy, Conversion, and Modernity**

Rama Tirtha’s vision of an Advaitin autonomy attracted Anglo-American and English-educated Indian audiences alike. Part of the spectacular effect of his performance was of course the combination of his status as an Indian renouncer with his self-consciously modern style and message, a juxtaposition all the more appealing for its surprise effect. Here was a Hindu guru who called others to their destiny as truly free and therefore *modern individuals* beyond the “unthinking masses.” Rama Tirtha’s ability to present himself as a convincingly modern religious individual suggests not only the significant overlap of western autonomy and aspects of Indian renouncer traditions, as Dumont once argued, but also his ability
to modulate and dramatize them. The fragmentary and porous style of his self-writing is effective because it works with and against Rama Tirtha’s clear and confident sense of himself, at once too transcendent to be a mere autonomous individual and too dynamic and audacious to be reduced to a static, absolute identity.

In contrast, the overwhelming importance of God’s agency, miraculous divine intervention, and conversion in most tellings of Sundar Singh’s life story were for many a refutation of the very threat of “modernism.” For the German comparative religionist and admirer of Sundar Singh, Friedrich Heiler, this saintly Indian’s life was proof of the ancient and living reality of the New Testament world, indeed seemed to come straight from the pages of medieval hagiography. In contrast to the humanized figure emerging from nineteenth-century historical Jesus research, Christ remains a figure of divine brilliance who transformed the young Indian boy into a saint: as Sundar Singh put it, the vision of Christ killed his old self and gave birth to a new one. Though Rama Tirtha could have also told such stories of divine appearance, he never spoke publicly of his dramatic visions of Krishna, instead repeatedly stressing that worshiping others—including Krishna, Christ, or any version of a theistic God—was an immature reliance on religious authority and an impediment to full religious realization. In fact, this kind of devotion was of a kind with the slavish submission that formed the basis of colonial exploitation and domination: the white God of British rule was the inevitable reward of dualistic devotion. Not surprisingly then no religious figure dominates Rama Tirtha’s life story as Christ does Sundar Singh’s, underscoring the neo-Vedantin on the human individual’s divine identity.

For this reason alone we might say that Sundar Singh’s life story exhibits less autonomy and is thus less modern than the call to realize the invincible self sounded by the Hindu swami. Even as the hero of missionary tellings of his life, for example, in Rebecca Parker’s earliest book about him, Sundar Singh’s importance lies in his response to God’s call. His achievement is nothing but the result of God’s intervention, not individual choice or personal development. Likewise, Sundar Singh’s “traditional” Indianness appears not as a Christian version of the radically individual path of sannyasa, but as a promise of the future “baptism” of India’s unchanging spiritual culture. The story subordinates Sundar Singh’s personal significance to the global program of conversion, in which he seemed to offer the long-missing key to India’s hidden spiritual heart.
Yet conversion to missionizing Christianity, however much its exponents critiqued “modernism,” is at the same time a “conversion to modernity.” More broadly, while many claimed to move beyond traditional religion in the name of the modern in this period, more established, institutionalized religious traditions such as Anglicanism hardly disappeared. In the historical context of British India, as in the metropole, emerging secularity was enmeshed with and in many ways constituted what would now increasingly be constructed as “religious.” Many Protestant missionaries and colonial administrators understood efforts at Christian conversion to be closely related, if not always equivalent, to a Providential civilizing mission. The rise of religious voluntary associations was a major force in the landscape of labor and capital, arguably creating a suitable workforce amid religious agitation for the end of slavery and other forms of spiritual radicalism. Against this background, it is no surprise Sundar Singh’s life story became known to the modern west through a Pauline conversion narrative. After all, the story of Paul’s conversion not only offered a model for early Christians since Augustine, but also became a dominant trope for the telling of colonial conversion narratives worldwide. By reading this conversion story in terms of instantaneous, dramatic change, missionaries not only sounded the urgent call to conversion, but also, wittingly or unwittingly, echoed the modern, colonial call to the colonized that above all they must change.

Thus, more surprising than the shaping narrative of Paul are the earlier versions of Sundar Singh’s life story that lack the vision of Christ altogether. While exhibiting deep Christian commitments, these stories offer a wider variety of religiously powerful figures, particularly Indian martyrs and ascetic gurus. These very tensions shape Alfred Zahir’s comments on the changes made for his English version of Shaida-i Salib, suggesting the need to shape the story for different audiences. He mentions including “a much fuller and more vivid account of Sunder’s conversion” and “curtail[ing] the account of the Maha Rishi at Kailash,” now to be published as a separate book. The fact that even in this “fuller” and “more vivid” English version of the Urdu original the vision of Christ is absent is especially striking, as is the way the text pushes the story of the Maharishi to the background.

These moves mark a shift not only toward a more biblical and missionary model but also toward a more singular account of the life of the individual they focus on, in which conversion keeps the text centered. In contrast, in these earlier texts, we find a vision of the self in which the
individual is enmeshed in relationships not only with Christ but with the broader “network of others” characteristic of South Asian life histories more generally, of the self-in-society. Again, Sufi traditions embody such dimensions in an exemplary way. Barbara Metcalf’s description of a modern Sufi’s life story can also serve as an apt description here: “[He] lived in a dense network of learned and holy men, dead and alive, whose teachings, charisma, and interactions formed the texture of his world.”

**Texts for and with Others**

The introductory section of Sundar Singh’s *A Collection of Incidents* illustrates many of its own typical characteristics and those of Zahir’s texts. The title of the work signals that its main topic is not Sundar Singh’s personal development, psychology, memories, or experiences per se, but a series of events or incidents (*waqiat*) connected with his preaching tours. The subtitle singles out tales of others, of “pathetic martyrs” and the “Maharishi of Kailasha,” pointing out their “profitable” character and their role as models “worthy of imitation.” In other words, the book is about others and aims at the readers’ transformation rather than the author’s self-expression, revelation, or introspection. Sundar Singh himself does appear as the book begins, but only through a reluctant, self-abasing voice. The book itself is only a “poor offering” dedicated with “great respect and humility” to the Bishop of Calcutta, the “gracious, kind patron and helper” of the author. The idea for the book was not Sundar Singh’s own but of “friends [who] pressed [him] to commit [these stories] to writing.” He speaks often of his deficiencies, twice calling himself the “unworthy servant” of Christ, and stresses his personal sufferings in the “flower of youth.”

What some might call the “passive” self that appears here, however, does not imply passivity on Sundar Singh’s part, nor are patterns of local style mere mechanical imitation. As the shift in storytelling modes from 1915 to 1918 itself signals—from local and Indo-Persian to Pauline, biblical, and modern modes—Sundar Singh self-consciously crafted the forms through which he represented himself. In his later writings, he gives evidence of this awareness when describing the spiritual power of the Gospel texts. Their lack of literary polish and organization proves they are the “work of God alone” whose “guidance” (*hukam*) led the writers to artlessly portray their experience of the real (*haqiqat*) in Christ. In other words, for Sundar Singh, there is a close relationship between a particular unstructured, unpolished
style and spiritual power. On a more mundane level, an exaggerated humility is not only an established convention in Urdu and Persian prose style but also deflects criticism of the audacious pride implied in making one’s own life the subject of a book. Zahir’s text directly addresses this suspicion by first acknowledging that some might see the book as an attempt to “draw the world’s attention on this unique life,” but then by rejecting the idea that it is a “tribute—however well deserved.” It is rather a “call for others” through the offering of a “bare biography.”

The majority of stories in both texts do relate Sundar Singh’s own experiences, of course. Yet the stories explore his physical vulnerability and failure to trust God in suffering and, despite this, God’s unfailing care. While these incidents are generally ordered temporally from first to last, they repeat the same themes with little difference between beginning, middle, and end. In fact, an incident included at the end of the Collection is, as the text itself notes, actually from the first tour that is described at the book’s beginning, a seeming feature of disorganization that emphasizes the text’s circular rather than linear character. The interspersing of English hymn verses and Urdu couplets throughout both texts reinforces their appeal to devotional sentiment, signals their performative quality, and calls to mind the fissured surface of Rama Tirtha’s texts. As with kathā and storytelling in South Asia, the telling of tales—often by a swami, guru or pir is a dramatic event in which the audience participates emotionally, vocally, and imaginatively. Zahir directs the reader specifically to become imaginatively absorbed in the stories (mastand tasawwar) and describes the way in which they were heard, “sitting face to face with Swamiji.”

While “timeless” in the sense of their inattention to temporal and narrative development, these texts are clearly marked by their historical moment and make interventions within it, much as the timeless God they imagine simultaneously intervenes in history. As A. K. Ramanujan points out, attention to local convention and even repetition are important means of understanding historical context, creative composition, and contested reception. I demonstrate throughout this chapter that self-assertion, critique, and engagement with colonial realities run throughout these “traditional” accounts of Sundar Singh’s life story, however indirect their style. Of course, it is precisely their indirect style, local conventions, and alternative vision of the self that are their first intervention in a colonial world that was fostering very different subjectivities, whether of evangelical or utilitarian varieties. In fact, these texts were at times read by Sundar Singh’s critics as forms not merely of individual self-assertion, but of an outrageous
self-aggrandizement. Certainly one way of reading this reaction is as a response to the threat experienced by those in positions of greater power.

*The Sufferings of a Frail Soldier of the Cross*

In describing evangelization in Nepal, Sundar Singh speaks of his hope that the country would be “conquered” by “soldiers of the Cross,” phrases echoed repeatedly by Zahir. Such phrases might suggest a manly colonial religion of action, the figure of the stalwart Punjabi soldier with his “martial nature” turned to Gospel service. However, the overall tone and details of these texts subvert many of the period’s links between manliness and missions. Instead, soldiering metaphors are used here as a part of a distinctive theological imaginary that celebrates suffering in ways that find little resonance within colonial rhetorics. As Maureen Moran argues, a “double-gaze” of historical and bodily distancing characterize Victorian martyrdom tales, which serve as tropes for the transformation of religious into secular values and model the value of “stoic” bourgeois suffering. Such shifts silenced the ecstatic, early Christian martyr, whose body takes part in Christ’s own suffering and whose burning bones might exude the smell of baking bread. In contrast, in the graphically embodied and ecstasy-infused tales of contemporary martyrs here, we are closer perhaps to the somatic spirituality of medieval European Christian women’s identification with the bleeding and “grotesque” body of Christ or the ecstatic Sufi martyr al-Hallaj’s dismembered body proclaiming the truth of God. Accordingly, I argue that much of the power of these texts is their ability to evoke both earlier Christian and Punjabi imagery to make martyrdom present rather than a disembodied discourse of the past. In short, they offer spectacular Indian bodies that work to redeem the grotesque, brown body of colonial discourse. A somatic spirituality and local hagiographical memory mingle with the blood of Christ.

According to Sundar Singh, Christ’s call to him was not only to preach the Gospel but to serve God as a *faqir* and “bear hunger, imprisonment, heat and difficulties of every kind.” It was that very suffering that was—in imitation of Christ—the principle instrument of his salvation: Having born “the cross” for ten years, he testifies that the “cross will bear” those who lift it to their “desired end.” The difference from missionary preaching, which stressed the efficacy of Christ’s vicarious sacrifice for the believer’s sin and the benefits of civilization, is striking: rather than receiving the
benefits of Christ’s cross, the Christian is to seek out her own suffering as a means of her salvation. The reader is directly addressed and challenged to suffer: “denying self,” one follows Christ as his “living witness” or martyr (zindā shahīd). Framed thus, the rest of the text then is a collection of crosses. As others have noted, stories of minutely detailed sufferings are commonly also connected with “narratives of displacement” such as pilgrimage and imprisonment and take on new resonance in the colonial period. Displacement and travel are also modes of self-fashioning central to ascetic practices of wandering and pilgrimage, much as in Rama Tirtha’s flight from the plains of Punjab into the heights of Shiva’s home in the Himalayas.

In the first episode of Collection, for example, soaked with rain, exhausted from walking, refused food by cruel villagers, suspected of being a spy, and in danger of being murdered, Sundar Singh spends the night in a dung-filled cowshed. Again, while bearing with trials might be read as a trait of courageous “soldiers of Christ,” the narrative detail and emotional tone emphasize suffering itself. Sundar Singh is continually refused food and shelter, eats the leaves of trees to survive, has his feet twisted “like sticks” from the cold, is nearly killed by robbers, gets imprisoned and tortured, and is nearly bitten by a deadly snake. Even more strikingly, Sundar Singh’s less than “courageous” response to these trials repeatedly enacts his self-description with the term haqīr, stressing his lowly, marginal, vulnerable qualities. The term suggests much more than mere modesty, but carries the sense of being “contemptible, despicable, mean, paltry, abject, base, vile; insignificant, little, thin, weak.” His resolve and faith often falter: “my spirit was often almost overborne with the difficulties,” and the devil’s voice tempts him to doubt God’s friendship for letting him suffer so severely.

Zahir’s account amplifies the sense of frailty and lowliness with physical and bodily imagery, describing Sundar Singh as “spare of body, and supple of limb,” physically vulnerable. Indeed survival of the perilous faqir’s life is all the more miraculous because Sundar Singh, far from being a stalwart, martial Punjabi, is “a delicate and daintily nurtured person.” The text elaborates his vulnerabilities: a “barely clad” figure who “nearly faints,” he is a man of “feeble frame” who suffers from “over-strained nerves.” While miraculously preserved through torture, he is hardly triumphant, instead “reeling as he hobbled away from the spot [of torture] and once or twice falling unconscious on the ground.” This “soldier of the Cross” is so terrified of a snake that he is “ashamed,” wants to “weep” when refused shelter, is “paralyzed with fear” by thieves, and runs “screaming” from a
leopard.\(^{37}\) We might, for example, compare these accounts with stories of Dayananda Sarasvati’s fearless encounters with bears to see how unusual such accounts of frailty are in the manly ascetic and colonial religious world of the time.

God unfailingly protects Sundar Singh despite his doubts and weakness. In his own account, the Afghans who planned to kill him in the first episode are miraculously transformed and invite him to their village as a guest of honor. Even as his eyes “fill with tears” at his imminent death while lost in the jungle, an angel carries him across the threatening river. Disappearing teachers (\textit{gaibī ustād}) disguised as rustic villagers bring him comfort and instruction on humility.\(^{38}\) In the midst of torture—naked, covered with “filth” and “leeches”—he is filled with the peace of divine presence, turning his “prison into paradise.” In Zahir’s text, even greater suffering is met with ever more dramatic divine manifestation. Sentenced to death by a Tibetan lama, his arm broken by his executioners, Sundar Singh is thrown down a well, where he spends three days in extreme pain and depression, waiting to die amid rotted corpses. Yet Christ, in an exception that proves the rule of his general absence from these texts, lifts him from the darkness and heals his arm with a simple touch. The echoes of the Punjabi story of Puran Bhagat, the exemplary devotee of the Nath yogi guru Gorakhnāth, are striking.\(^{39}\)

These divine interventions result not only in a sense of victory but also in self-critique. Having praised God for preserving an insignificant reptile in the midst of a fire, Sundar Singh concludes that God actively places him in suffering so “that I may be purified.”\(^{40}\) In Zahir’s text, after thinking of God as being “so careless” about him, he is typically “overcome with a feeling of great self-abasement” and, at other times, with “terrible pangs of remorse at [his] repeated unbelief.”\(^{41}\) A rhythm of suffering, doubt, failure, deliverance, abasement, and praise and a willingness, even an eagerness, to suffer, emerges throughout the texts, captured in some of the Urdu verses included by Zahir:

\begin{quote}
I am silenced and cannot cover
The monstrous bulk of this ingratitude
With any amount of words.
I will complain yet praise;
I will wail, but glorify:
And all my sour-sweet days
I will lament and love.\(^{42}\)
\end{quote}
Though to a far lesser extent than Rama Tirtha’s self-writing, in which the voices of Sufi and bhakti poets erupt and fracture the prose narrative continuously, this poem is an example of the way that both Sundar Singh’s and Zahir’s texts are also interspersed with such verse citations. Here too they draw on the indigenous hagiographical interplay of poetry and narrative. Specifically, the intermingling of lament and love, of sweet and sour, of complaint and praise in these lines convey an intimate relation between suffering and salvation, a characteristic with ample precedent in Sufi, bhakti poetic, and non-Protestant Christian traditions connecting embodied suffering, love, and the sacred. As Zahir’s title has it, Sundar Singh’s love of Christ’s suffering is a maddening, intoxicating one. It is a very different kind of soldier who marches more to suffer than to conquer.

Tracing Saints in Ascetic Landscapes

Sundar Singh’s unworthiness is also made clear by the many ideal Indian Christians in these texts who he is as yet unworthy of equaling. The Collection, as noted above, speaks of those “worthy of imitation.” In this emphasis, the text’s Indo-Persian features overlap with Buddhist and Hindu biographies, from classical Sanskrit texts to those of vernacular bhakti.

Much as myriad shrines adorn Punjab’s landscape, the Collection evokes the sacred memory of place. In Kashmir, Sundar Singh works among pilgrims to Amarnāth, Shiva embodied in an ice linga, and the very site Rama Tirtha ended his self-writings. He works among pilgrims in Mathura, “the birthplace of Krishna.” In Ayodhya, “where Raja Ram Chandra was born,” Sundar Singh “visited a few Sadhus” and “the Chief of the Monastery, who is a successor in office of Tulsi Das.” These specifics connect Sundar Singh squarely with popular Hinduism, especially the pilgrimage sites connected with gods and ascetics. It is of special interest that he mentions Tulsidas (the ancestor of Rama Tirtha), the author of North India’s most widely popular devotional text, the Rāmacaritamānas, in connection with monastic traditions, reflecting the connection between devotion and asceticism characteristic of the Ramanandis. Sacred history, geography, and ascetics also converge around the Buddha; at Benares, Sundar Singh’s preaching reenacts that of Gautama: “[I] preached by the very stone pillar where Gautama Buddha had preached his first sermon
and where King Ashoka had erected a commemoration column. . . . Then [I] went to Gaya . . . where Gautama Buddha practiced austerities for six years.” Sundar Singh challenges the reader to reflect on the austerities undertaken, especially by Indian royalty:

At a little distance from [Raja Bikramajit’s] palace is a cave in which, when he left his kingdom and became a Sadhu, he performed austerities. . . . People imagine that in kingly splendour and in the possessions of material for sensual pleasure is bliss. Not at all! If this were true then what was it that compelled Raja Bharati and Gautama Buddha to leave all. Praise and glory be to God, who has through Christ given us the true bliss and the everlasting heavenly kingdom.

Of course the passage’s declaration of Christ’s gift gives a Christian frame to South Asian ascetic practice and history. The narrative placement of this passage immediately before his own jungle fast, however, works in the opposition direction, framing his Christian practice in Hindu-Buddhist registers. That is, by asking his reader to reflect on the significance of austerities, he has prepared them to see his own ascetic act in this context. The fact that the text makes no mention of Christ’s paradigmatic forty-day fast suggests a continuation of specifically Indian traditions. Of course, while the period of “forty days” signals Christian precedent tacitly, it can also be read in terms of the specifically Sufi chilla, an austerity also undertaken for that period of time. Likewise, the stated goal of the fast is gaining the “power” he would need for future work, drawing on conceptions of ascetic practice as a technique for generating sacred force. The repeated mention of royal figures and, in the case of Ashoka, royal patronage of ascetic religion, evokes the close relationship between ascetic power and the political realm argued for above. Indeed, the fast’s location in the Kalji Ban, known in Nath yoga as an “alchemical forest,” again echoes the Punjabi Puran Bhagat cycle.

These references are woven subtly through the text, giving texture and depth to the protagonist’s own experiences. Again, their multiplicity seems to be a major part of their power: in layering traditions one on top of another, the text creates a world in which to act and imagine, woven from ascetic memory. Their overall effect, as Sundar Singh’s preaching by the Ashokan pillar suggests, evokes mythic-historical memory within a shared sacred landscape. Slowly, Christianity too comes to inhabit that
same landscape through its holy men: specifically, Sundar Singh claims that both the Mughal Emperor Akbar and Guru Nanak were baptized by a Jesuit missionary. The point here is that Sundar Singh evokes exalted religious figures—mystically inclined emperors, gods, holy men, poets, ascetic exemplars and heroes, founders of religions—and peoples the land with them. This is an undeniably grand stage that asks for acts worthy of it.

Praise God for Pain: Mangled Martyrs and Their Ecstatic Witness

Against this background, the main attractions of these texts emerge in the tales of Indian Christian martyrs and of the Maharishi of Kailasha. Since these figures are presented as contemporaries, they can be seen to evoke the awe and emotional identification of the reader with immediacy. They also reflect directly on the teller of the tale. Again, Metcalf’s description of the life of a modern Sufi is apropos: “[B]y writing about the virtues of those he personally knew, he could indirectly identify himself with their distinctions.” The particular distinctions of these two types of figures Sundar Singh writes about—the martyr and the cave-dwelling sage—embody the depths of suffering and the heights of divine power, providing the light and shadow that give Sundar Singh’s life its liveliness.

The most notable example of an Indian Christian martyr in these tales is that of the Punjabi faqir Kartar Singh, a figure examined in detail below. He is far from alone in either Sundar Singh’s or Zahir’s texts, however, taking his place among a host of similar figures. The function of these martyr tales can be approached on a number of levels. Most obviously, martyrdom is the original model of Christian sainthood, present in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation, and historically as the source of the veneration of saints, for example in the Martyrdom of Polycarp. This link, however, should not be allowed to overdetermine these stories as uniquely “Christian.” For although some scholars have contrasted Christian traditions of sainthood that focus on martyrdom with South Asian traditions, differences should not be overstated. Nor should the centrality of martyrdom in Christianity lead us to ignore the internal, historical variety of martyrdom within Christianity, especially in Protestant and Victorian imaginations. As martyrdom served new purposes in the
civilizing mission, so Indian traditions took on powerful roles in reformist movements in Punjab, reinvigorating the language and biography of martyrdom to stimulate followers’ moral energies.\textsuperscript{51}

In the specific case of Indian Christian converts, tales of contemporary Indian, Afghani, Tibetan, and Nepali Christians’ spectacular sacrifices provided pointed counterexamples to missionary suspicions about the “mixed” motives of their converts.\textsuperscript{52} At a deeper level, we might speculate that the oppositional stance to institutional power and the dramatic focus on redemptive suffering had special resonance in the context of colonial subordination and humiliation, a particular Christian imaginary for responding to the effects of a Christian empire. In offering the spectacle of South Asian bodies wracked with pain, yet ultimately glorious in their suffering, did these texts offer sites of identification for their Indian audiences? Indeed, even in the early phases of Christian martyrrology, Augustine redirected his congregation away from the bodily suffering of the martyr and toward heavenly reward.\textsuperscript{53} In the texts considered here, suffering itself, its bodily details, become a fixation. Again, the contrast becomes sharper when compared with the Victorian aversion for the suffering bodies of its own martyrs, even as it praised them.\textsuperscript{54} The emphasis on somatic identification with Christ would lead the Jesuit critic of Sundar Singh’s life story, Fr. Hosten, to speak contemptuously of the would-be Indian “saint” as guilty of “womanish hysterics,” suggesting that even Roman Catholic modern imaginaries of martyrdom, like Victorian English ones, could serve as a site of hard-gendering and rationalizing religious discourse.\textsuperscript{55}

The extreme deaths catalogued here draw on local hagiographical tales, in which punishments and tortures such as flaying and dismemberment are well-known. The “flies, filth and stench” of the nearly dead, flayed body of the Sufi holy man and master of Rumi, Shams Tabriz, in local narratives is just one such figure that helped set the sacred stage.\textsuperscript{56} In the \textit{Collection}, martyrs’ stories begin as an Afghan refuses to renounce Christ and marry the local maulvi’s daughter; as a result, his hands are cut off and he is dragged through the streets by a rope threaded through a newly pierced hole in his nose. Such stories progress through the tale of Kartar Singh, a child martyr drowned for refusing to steal and Sundar Singh’s own near martyrdom and end—again bookending an opening incident—-with an Afghan Christian first “cut with knives” and then “cut to pieces.” Accounts unique to Zahir’s texts stress similar painful, degrading details; a single Tibetan convert is suffocated in a yak skin, pierced
Frail Soldiers of the Cross

with hot skewers, and dragged “as sweepers do a dead dog”; finally splinters are driven into his fingernails and his mangled corpse flung on a dunghill.\footnote{57}

Though, as expected, each of these rather gothic deaths is crowned with glory, their reward comes not in heavenly realms, but rather precisely at the moment of their greatest suffering. Oblivious to their pain, martyrs typically break into ecstatic songs and prayers that provoke their audience of persecutors to superstitious dread of the God who has possessed such men. The story of Kartar Singh the martyr (shahid) given in the Collection, offers the clearest example of the multiple connection between asceticism, death and drama. His story appears complete with a scripted dialogue that interrupts the prose text, once again reinforcing theatricality. Kartar Singh was a convert from Punjab called to Tibet to preach.\footnote{58} Tension between devotion and married life led to a break in family relations. Challenged to consider his status and wealth by his “beautiful and well-conducted” fiancée, he replies, “[I]n my breast there is but one heart and that I have already given to One (that is Christ).” After his father likewise fails to prevent him from converting,

[he] ordered him to put off all his clothes and to leave the house and to renounce all connection with him from that time. . . . So he took off his clothes and laid them at his father’s feet and said to his father: “I am not ashamed today to divest myself of those clothes, because the righteousness of Jesus Christ has covered all my nakedness and sin.\footnote{59}

Nakedness, enforced as a technique of social humiliation, can be embraced because of a transcendent “re-clothing” in the “righteousness of Jesus Christ.” Social values are inverted, enabling a new state closely connected with ascetic practice: Kartar Singh then underwent two or three days of suffering hunger and cold, naked in the forest, yet throughout “his heart was full of peace.”\footnote{60} Significantly, the details of this story repeat ascetically oriented bhakti hagiographical narratives in which marriage vies with devotion: “When his sister asked him the reason [for refusing marriage], he told her that he only had one heart; should he attach it to Śrī Nāthjī or his daughter?” Indeed, religious refusals of family honor can include public nakedness, as with Mirabai.\footnote{61}

Emerging from the jungle, Kartar Singh re-clothes himself in the “style of a Sadhu” and goes to preach in Tibet, where he undergoes martyrdom.
Again suffering is converted through sacred alchemy, turning death into a
drama complete with singing, poetry, and what appears to the audience as
divine possession. After three days sewn into a wet yak skin left to constrict
in the hot sun, Kartar Singh sings praise and prays for his enemies. That
these details are not mere examples of piety but of supernatural power is
suggested by the fact that those watching speculate that he must be “pos-
sessed by the spirit of one of the gods.” As he prepares to die he scrawls
out a final message: “Are you standing to see the death of a Christian?
Come and gaze attentively, that not a Christian but death itself dies here.”
Invited to re-envision punishment as a miracle on display, the audience is
directed to witness the event as a Sufi appropriation of sati: Kartar Singh
writes in his New Testament a verse attributed to the great, medieval poet
and disciple of Nizam ad-Din Auliya, Amir Khusrao (1253–1325):

That love for him, Khasraw, shall not be less than hers—
The faithful Hindu wife
Who on her burning pyre draws to her heart the Beloved
and lays her life beside him.

Suffering for and in God’s love is at stake here, not simply delivery of the
Christian message. Another poetic line attributed to Kartar Singh reads: “I
will ask from God not one but a hundred thousand lives, That a hun-
dred thousand times I may die for my Friend’s sake.” But we should not
read this affirmation of inward suffering (as opposed to utilitarian com-
munication) as separate from the pleasures of display. As we have seen,
when accused of sullying the simplicity of the ascetic ideal by wearing
luxurious robes, Rama Tirtha likened his dress to the elaborate adornment
of the sati: A bride not only suffers for the Beloved but also offers the
ornaments of her beauty for enjoyment. Again, these gendered images
diverge from common understandings of colonial-era asceticism as mas-
culinizing, instead re-energizing the precolonial male appropriation of the
feminine voice.

These performative moments build on the semantic range of the word
for martyr in Urdu—shahid. Drawn from Islamic traditions, the term came
to serve a wide array of functions in Sikh and other South Asian com-
munities, but generally retained much of its Islamic sense. In Quranic
texts, the term has the meaning of “witness” in the more common sense
of testimony, in both active and passive senses. That is, Muhammad and
his followers are said to “bear witness” to Allah’s mercy to the rest of
humanity by their faith, but also to give testimony “against” the unfaithful on the Day of Judgment. Eventually, as in Christian traditions, the ultimate “proof” of one’s faith becomes suffering and death, with al-Hallaj serving as the key example in Sufism. For al-Hallaj violated Sufi secrecy by publically proclaiming the divine unity; he was executed as a result of tensions with jurists and scholars. Public memory further connects and circulates these death stories with love: al-Hallaj’s death anniversary, and that of many South Asian Sufi holy men, is celebrated as a marriage (‘urs), as noted above.

This sense of shahid as a witness, that is, both proof of divine presence and evidence given in the context of divine judgment, is surely at work in the texts considered here. At the same time, they emphasize the dramatic potential of the encounter with an audience further. After all, one might die a martyr, or be a saint, in secret. Yet in these texts the situation of the martyr is always a public one, in which the gaze of others is of central importance. As such, the witness given by the martyr, an act which at least in theory implies an audience, comes also to emphasize those who witness—as spectators, as authenticators. Zahir’s account of Sundar Singh’s near death at the bottom of a dry Tibetan well is particularly clear about this. Even as he suffers amid corpses, Sundar Singh is troubled not by death per se, but by a death that lacks onlookers. In other words, a martyr’s death as witness is incomplete without an audience to witness it.

Again, we might speculate on the possible sources for this emphasis on the audience of martyrdom, on the mutuality of witness in a context of vision. Sufi themes of contests between the authority and power of the “powerless” faqir and legal authorities and of death as a publicly-celebrated marriage, Sikh promotion of contemporary identities through tales of saint-soldier (sant-sipāḥī) martyrs (shahid), Hindu notions of the mutuality of sacred vision (darshan), and Christian martyrdom before emperors and coliseum masses all might be invoked. Indeed, the early Christian martyr Polycarp makes a visionary appearance in these very texts, and in his later writings, Sundar Singh mentions the early Christian monk, Telemachus, whose self-sacrificial leap into, and thus dramatic death in, the Roman games single-handedly ended them. Alternatively, Sundar Singh also spoke admiringly of Sikhs willing to “die for religion or revolution,” echoing discourse on Sikh martyrdom of the previous fifty years and more. Isolating any one of these dimensions, however, would obscure the way such tales work with and within multiple registers, offering a polyvalent text for different audiences and shaping shared idioms within new frameworks. As
Flueckiger puts it, “To share a narrative repertoire is not necessarily to imply a shared interpretation of those narratives in the different contexts in which they are performed.” More important, in my view, is the way such intertextual richness suggests that Sundar Singh was self-conscious about himself as an object of the gaze of others, skilled in working with plural idioms and active in creating charismatic effects. While we might read this in terms of a Christian’s cultural heritage or even appropriation of local norms, it may also be that recognition of a dominant religious or even “singular” identity can be a kind of precondition for “take[ing] on multiple meanings for the various constituents.”

_The Black Sage of Shiva’s Mountain: The Perfect Man and Darshan Beyond Death_

The importance of ecstatic martyrdom as an element in Sundar Singh’s life story is clear and compelling. Yet martyrdom, with its roots more firmly, if not exclusively, in a Christian imagination, was paired for him with another kind of divine display that centered not on the dying holy man, but on the living one. Like so many of the narrative layers at work in Sundar Singh and Zahir’s texts, the figure of the living holy man draws on shared idioms that had long transcended religious boundaries, idioms that crossed over into the seemingly sealed realm of Christianity for perhaps the first time. The tradition of visual encounter with a living holy person as a site of divine embodiment, though not without parallels in Christian history, is one of the most characteristic and established practices across South Asian traditions. In Hindu contexts, the holy person, like images of gods in the temple, is a site for devotees’ _darshan_. While this idiom is also used in Sikh and Sufi traditions, each of these add their own distinctive dimensions of direct encounter with holy men, for example by taking _darshan_ of the weapons used by the tenth Sikh Guru or by physically absorbing the power of blessing from objects connected with the saint’s tomb. In all three traditions, such acts depend on and enable relationships of submission, loyalty, and patronage.

Importantly, by offering the reader a living holy man, the texts make clear the possibility that, in contrast to Protestant theologies of universal salvation and British assertions of human equality, people in fact lived at very different levels of spiritual development, as many South Asian traditions recognized. In the context of Indian Christianity, the image of
a powerful local Christian holy man not only conformed to established religious patterns, but also, in its physicality, offered another site for reimagining the Indian body, not this time as mutilated and glorious, but as naked, black skinned, and serene. As texts by and for Indians, I argue, these stories do more than meditate on and redeem the humiliated and defeated body; they offer a glorified body, a body that was paradoxically more than human, even as and because it had, in rejecting its own socially constructed shapes, made itself less than human. In Zahir’s words, Sundar Singh’s life and life stories offered proof that, invoking another Sufi idiom, not only God’s miraculous power, but the miracles of the powerful men of God (qudrat-i kamale kirishme) could still be found in India.

The dramatic appearance of such a figure comes in the naked, cave-dwelling ascetic Sundar Singh met on Shiva’s holy mountain, the Maharishi of Kailasha. As attested in paintings from the Punjab, the association of ascetic legitimacy and stories of ascent to Shiva’s mountainous abode is a well-established one. Though Sundar Singh himself later downplayed this story, it was central to him between 1912 and 1918 and affirmed again in the late 1920s. Sundar Singh tells of meeting this sage (buzurg) on his way back from Tibet near lake Mānasarovar on Kailasha. In this sacred landscape, where one expects to find the triśuls of Shiva, he discovers an ancient stone cross set up by Syrian Christians. Taking this as a divine sign (nishānat), he sets out to look for more, but slipping on the ice, falls and is knocked unconscious. Having regained his senses, Sundar Singh sees a wondrous (‘ajaib) scene: a strange creature (‘ajaib makhlāq) sitting in a cave. The figure’s physical appearance is at first frightening:

He seemed to be a man but his appearance was very terrible. . . . his eyes were closed and he seemed blissfully absorbed in some great meditation (kisī barī dhyān meñ mastīgharak). . . . The hair of his head was so long that it reached the ground and his eyebrows covered most of his face. The hair of the rest of his body was long like the hair of animals and his fingernails, which he used for the work of digging, were extremely long. There wasn’t any kind of garment on his body. Since I had often heard that the dwellings of Hindu rishis were here and there in these regions, I said to myself, whether or not this is even a man, he is definitely some rishi (main ne apne dil meñ kahā ho na ho yah shakhs bhī zarūr ko’i rishi hai.). . . . When he opened his eyes they flashed so brightly that I was frightened, but when this old sage (buzurg) gestured graciously for me to
come and sit down near him, I was comforted and satisfied and my courage increased.(my translation)\textsuperscript{74}

This textualized \textit{darshan} involves multiple layers of imagery. First, the sage’s naked appearance, long hair, and, in another account, “black” coloring—suggest a Shaiva orientation. His creature-like state also recalls \textit{rishi}s who blend animal and human characteristics and ancient Hindu scriptural descriptions of the forest hermit’s (\textit{vanaprastha}) long hair and fingernails.\textsuperscript{75} More generally, as Olivelle describes the ascetic opposition between the forest-dweller and the householder: “He or she leaves social structures and return[s] to a state of nature and to the way of life of wild animals.”\textsuperscript{76} In fact, the \textit{rishi} sleeps in his cave with bears.\textsuperscript{77} Like dress and martyrdom, ascetic isolation in wild spaces places the holy man beyond everyday conventions, physically unmaking social structures through religious practices such as nakedness and uncut hair, simultaneously echoing connections between the saint, the animal, and social distance observed in Christian sainthood studies.\textsuperscript{78} Identities continue to shift as the story progresses, the layering of juxtapositions continuing apace. After Sundar Singh sits before him, the sage prays in Christ’s name and recites from a hand-written Greek manuscript of the Gospel of Matthew.\textsuperscript{79} As this apparently Hindu sacred mountain is marked by the Cross, so this apparently Shaiva \textit{rishi} is revealed as Christian. The Christian \textit{rishi} began his religious life, it turns out, as a Muslim \textit{faqir} in Egypt. As Susan Bayly suggests, “outsider” Islamic figures and Shiva, in his role as ascetic outcast, have close connections.\textsuperscript{80} His conversion at the hands of a Jesuit saint led him to a lifetime of worldwide preaching. Having retired to this Himalayan cave, the sage spends his time in divine remembrance (\textit{yād-i ilāhī}), study of scripture, singing God’s praises, and intercessory prayer (\textit{sifarishi du’a}) in the court of God (\textit{khudā kā dargāh}). In addition, the seer can see the (dead) saints (\textit{muqaddasīn}) and angels (\textit{farište}) who come to him. According to him, this is a particularly “difficult stage” to attain.\textsuperscript{81} Another power (\textit{baraka}) that he has received is leaving his body, so that he may wander about the world learning the conditions of the churches he intercedes for as well as ascending into the heavenly realms.\textsuperscript{82} Lastly, the \textit{rishi} saw Christ replace his sinful heart with a new sinless one and exempt him from death, reflecting key stories from Muhammad’s life.\textsuperscript{83} Visionary association with Christ approaches mystical identification as Sundar Singh asks the sage’s name: “This was his reply, ‘The name is mine and I am now no more. But Christ is living in me and if there is a name, it is Christ’.” As
suggested in Chapter 5, for Sundar Singh, the line between Christ as an object of devotion and as a divine identity to be lived into is a porous one, whether in the American context of the Oriental Christ or now in Sufi and Shaiva registers. Yes, Sundar Singh admitted, the *rishi* had some beliefs perhaps contrary to “God’s Holy Book,” but then the *beliefs* of a holy man are beside the point: “[Y]ou may or may not agree with his thoughts, but if you [meet him], you will come back having acquired a special blessing, because he has passed all those spiritual stages which are yet before us.”

The silencing of the story of the Maharishi, discussed above, was picked up on by the Indian readers of *Nur Afshan*, who saw in the missionary criticism of the tale clear evidence of domineering power. According to one letter to the editor, although Sundar Singh was invited to speak at the important Sialkot convention, missionaries forced him to keep silent about the Maharishi. From the perspective of this reader, there was something powerful and threatening in the public telling of the tale itself. If we read the Maharishi tale as one of the bestial ascetic of colonial discourse ironically inverted into Christ himself, this controversy is not surprising. Much like Shaiva traditions in which the wandering beggar is revealed as the bejeweled deity, here the “moment of awe,” I argue, is produced by the juxtaposition of Shaiva and Sufi imagery, Christian identity and the “bestial” Indian body that miraculously contains all these within itself.

*Rehearsing Recognition, Reversing Orders*

As such tensions and awe make clear, religious storytelling could be much more than didactic or devotional. We can thus see a paradoxical kind of agency at work here, a dialectic of ascetic negation and affirmation. Rather than tracing an individual’s development over time, the individual as such is first denied in these texts and is, in fact, repetitively threatened and humiliated. At the same time, through relations with powerful others, the self is transformed and affirmed as extraordinary. The recurrent use of the adjective “strange/wonderful” (*ajaib*) is a marker of just such a state.

It is important to emphasize, then, that the holy man is more than the self seen through God’s eyes or transformed in the mystical, Advaitin cave of the heart. Rather, the transformation of the self is a fundamentally social act that models for the upstart saint and for the reader the recognition of a holy man and the formation of a community around him. In Rama Tirtha’s self-writing, apostrophic addresses to the world of colonial
respectability, constant recitation of Sufi and bhakti verse, and an imagined landscape of sacred love combine to set, as it were, the saintly stage. The self is thus soaked in the sacred, dyed more deeply with each poetic interruption, each renunciatory outburst, each challenge to the likes of Mill and Hume. In the Collection, as we have seen, Sundar Singh situates his story with reference to the ascetic history of India. Likewise, his resemblance to Punjabi ascetic-hero Puran Bhagat, his own tale of the Punjabi faqir-martyr Kartar Singh, and his darshan of the Christian rishi, each offer Christian figures as contemporary heirs of these traditions, rather than as the products of foreign missions. As I have been arguing, we need to attend to the indirect means by which a religious and imperial situation such as this could be negotiated. In Sundar Singh’s Collection, the text’s opening incident with Afghans provides a good example. Much like Tibet, Sundar Singh’s other major geographical focus outside of India, Afghanistan proved elusive and resistant to British imperial and missionary control, and thus especially exotic. While initially hostile toward Sundar Singh, however, the antagonistic Afghanis are soon transformed. In short, their attempted murder reveals God’s protection of the wandering faqir, and they fall at his feet as God’s “servant.” After supporting him for a week, they present him with a “turban and a coat” of honor.87

In this way, Sundar Singh reenacts his divine commission as a faqir in concrete narrative terms, as he is honored and re-clothed as a holy man, not this time by God, but by non-Christians. Furthermore, it is significant that the text begins specifically with Muslims who share widespread Islamic traditions of honoring faqirs. Indeed, in another variant of this tale, Sundar Singh speaks of the murder plot against him as being inspired not by suspicion of his being a spy, but by villagers’ desire to have the grave of a holy man in their area. Sundar Singh thus begins his self-writing with an incident in which he “passes” as a genuine holy man not only among non-Christians, but among the kind of murderous Afghanis the British Raj and missionaries imagined as their most implacable foes.88

We can now start to see why some non-Indian (and some Indian) readers might find this text less than humble. In answer to such criticism, the English translation of Zahir’s Shaida adds testimonies to Sundar Singh’s power drawn from letters to Nur Afshan. In one letter, Singh’s presence among farmers yields a record crop; the writer entreats him to return to preach, but also to bless their farmland. In another, as discussed in Chapter 5, the writer takes issue with missionary complaints against granting Sundar Singh the titles swami and mahatma. As Eric Sharpe has
suggested, Sundar Singh was far more of a local holy man, a man of power, than evangelical theology allowed. To deny self-aggrandizement is thus not to ignore self-assertion. The very act of writing a text about one’s own life and endorsing others about oneself, all texts filled with signs of divine approval, is, as critics pointed out, rather audacious. Within the text of the Collection Sundar Singh’s real, if subtle, assertiveness at times emerges:

One or two friends... severely criticized my adoption of the Sadhu manner of service and to a certain extent their criticism was just, because true workers are few and those who disgrace the name are more. But it is evident that among us Englishism is creeping in more than Christianity, so that everything “Eastern” in manners and life is becoming strange to us. English modes and ways are not evil, on condition that they do not lead us to neglect Christian love. However I have no right to blame anyone, let everyone do as the Lord leads them.

Characteristically, Sundar Singh stops short of outright accusation, yet his reference to “Englishism” and neglect of “Christian love” suggests a clear tension, not so much between Indian and non-Indian but of Indian self-alienation, on the one hand, and a disconnect between English colonial rule and claims to Christian love, on the other. Given Sundar Singh’s comments about the ironies of black hearts housed in white skins, the racial, political, class, and caste tensions around all things swadeshi in this period are near at hand. They are the unseen edges of Sundar Singh’s rhetoric of restraint.

In addition to advocating the sadhu life and contesting the Englishness of Christianity, the Collection employs subtler means of claiming authority and complicating binaries. For example, Sundar Singh mentions several examples of non-Indians taking up the sadhu lifestyle, the most important being Samuel Stokes. While in his own writings Stokes represents himself as being in control of their relationship, Sundar Singh’s account highlights his own leading role. He persuades Stokes to adopt the life of a faqir, without mention of Stokes’s own Franciscan ideals. Stokes is quoted simply as saying, “I myself desire to serve along with you in the faqir style” (my emphasis). Likewise, another missionary is described whose ideals “Lean to the faqir life,” and who planned to establish a “Christian Sadhu’s Union.” Sundar Singh even uses the language of asceticism to evaluate
both Indians and non-Indians: he describes those he admires as having a “sadhu-like” spirit, even as “a true faqir,” recalling Ganesh Das’s descriptions of “dervish-like” non-ascetics. There is some irony in the fact that the very missionaries who run the institutional, colonial church embrace faqir traditions. The “natural” division between Indian and British, colonized and colonizer is thus unsettled, much as Rama Tirtha’s own histories of India reveal that it was Christianity that introduced idolatry into Hinduism. In another reversal of the accusation of idolatry, the despised, degraded, and bestial faqir of the nineteenth century becomes, in this context, a means of affirmation and evaluation.

Sundar Singh’s status as a modern monk then functions as a dynamic site of reversal, akin to God’s own miraculous validation of the weak, frail, suffering, and at risk, ultimately granting him (and thus the sympathetic reader) access to otherwise inaccessible worlds. The first of these marginal worlds comes through glimpses of other Indian sadhus. Far from the distorted bodies of dominant representations or the disembodied romantic representations of ancient spirituality, these figures appear in the Collection as contemporary “seekers after truth” or, much like the faqir-martyr Kartar Singh and the rishi, as powerful Christians working independently of western missions according to their own methods. The scattered references to secretly Christian faqirs and sadhus in this text were soon elaborated into the fantastic story of the Secret Sannyasi Mission, which appeared in the Urdu missionary journal Nur Afshan beginning in 1916.

This story, described further below, was published through letters exchanged between Sundar Singh and those writing as “swamis” of this esoteric group of outwardly Hindu but inwardly Christian renouncers. This more elaborate and, indeed, much more widely circulated lineage story suggests that sadhus and faqirs are, for Sundar Singh, figures connected with divine secrets. In the Collection, themes of reversal, secrecy, and access emerge as Sundar Singh describes the spiritual revival among the “Khassia hill tribes” of Shillong:

The Christians here, who number several thousands, received great blessing in the days of revival and still work with enthusiasm. One thing I was very surprised to hear, namely that all, great and small, received plentiful blessings, about which I had heard beforehand. Excepting two of them, all hundreds of clergymen and pastors missed the blessings. How true it is that occasionally bakers sell bread to others, but starve themselves.
More than a specifically colonial confrontation of non-Indians and Indians, or of traditional opposition between ascetics and householders, this passage suggests that the religion of the people triumphs over that of the elites. The clergy are left empty-handed while the people reap divine abundance. Sundar Singh thus singles out hill tribes, groups marginal to the orders of caste, civilization, colony, and, in fact, Indianness. In this he echoes Sufi and bhakti precedents in which devotion upsets religious officialdom and status, echoing the long-standing “ideolog[ies] of societal reversal” discussed by Dempsey in a similar Christian-Hindu context of voluntary suffering, service, and assertion. Just as faqirs wander beyond institutional control, so do hill tribes achieve blessings while clerics “starve,” typifying the divine economy. The implicit commentary on recent “mass movements,” in which the role of missionaries was often minimal, was also likely to be clear to readers.

As the Collection nears its end such reversals emerge as thematic. Sundar Singh’s comment on the story of a child-martyr that immediately follows that of the Shillong tribes reads: “O you who pride yourselves upon your knowledge and wisdom, learn from children lessons of practical life and serve your Lord with all strength and mind and wealth.” The logic is clear: suffering and humiliation as the site of exultation and ecstasy, Indians becoming foreigners to themselves, non-Indians embracing Indian traditions, the quintessential myths of Hindu and Muslim holy men revealed to be Christian. If this logic of reversal has not become apparent to the reader yet, Sundar Singh concludes by offering a final series of reversals, a kind of litany of the liminal: “In these tours of mine I have carefully observed and seen that in the poor more than the rich, among the unlearned more than the learned, in simple country people more than in town dwellers, in women more than in men, the love of Christ and the Spirit of service is found.” Writing in a world in which the oppositions between Indian and European—like the orders of class, education, urbanization, and gender named here—had become ever more apparent and explicit, they appear all the more powerfully because they remain unnamed.

An irony of course of the appeal to the powerless is that Sundar Singh frequently details his own colonial credentials. He repeatedly names the missionaries he had worked with and the places he had preached, many of which, such as Forman Christian College of Lahore and St. Stephen’s of Delhi, were among the most prestigious colonial Christian institutions of the time. It is clear that Sundar Singh is a well-connected
figure on the contemporary ecclesial scene. These credentials, as he himself suggested, were all the more necessary given the many less than “worthy” Christian sadhus floating about, not to mention suspicions of wandering ascetics in general. Indeed, he goes so far as to quote a personal letter from the Bishop of Lahore: “Be perfectly assured that we heartily appreciate you and the work you are doing, and as far as possible wish to be also a helper.”

Coming almost immediately after this evidence of high-level patronage, the story of a missionary (whose name is printed) refusing Sundar Singh a place to sleep for the night underscores the point that not all missionaries are such “dear friend[s] and well-wishers of Indian Christians” as the bishop. He couches his description of this incident in terms of sovereignty, “Within the four walls of the Mission, no doubt [the missionary] was the master and could do what he liked.” The wider world, beyond the narrow walls of such institutions, is a very different place in which this missionary is emphatically not the “master.” Indeed, Sundar Singh details other stories of tension with missionaries eager to welcome Hindus but neglectful of Indian converts, singling out some missionaries with the honorific of being “friend[s] of Indians.”

While the idea of the sadhu-beyond-institutions surely is a part of the contrast the text develops, the importance of patronage relationships and their invocation should also not be missed. Furthermore, Sundar Singh is hardly indifferent to questions of status, caste, or claims of civilizational superiority, invoking them in particular ways and benefitting from the prestige associated with them. For example, the *Collection* makes special mention of the fact that the “secret” Christian converts are all landowners (*zamīndārs*) and that many are Brahmins of high learning. More generally, his presentation of Tibetans, Nepalis, and many hill tribes emphasizes both their lack of the Gospel and of civilization. There is also a noteworthy silence about Punjab’s “untouchable” or Dalit converts, who were, in fact, the majority of Punjabi Christians. When a local ruler donates “two horses and a couple of coolies” for Sundar Singh’s evangelical use, no questions are raised.

By amplifying and at times exaggerating them, Zahir confirms both the presence of these themes in Sundar Singh’s life and writings and their appeal to an Indian Christian audience. The sense of competition and tension between Indian Christians and western missionaries that, while present, remains subdued in most of Sundar Singh’s text erupts here in several places. Sundar Singh’s critics are accused of being jealous of his superior ministry. The contrast between Sundar Singh’s self-denial and
The sleepy C. M. S. mission station in Sundar Singh’s favored resting spot, Kotgarh, is stark. Zahir notes the “startling fact” that seventy-five years of work have yielded a paltry thirty-five baptisms. Even the resident missionary is more a “manager of the fruit-farm than an evangelist or even a pastor,” passing time in this “convalescent ward.” Even the type of young, fiery missionaries that Zahir calls for from western missions cannot measure up. While both Zahir and Singh praise ascetic life, then, the latter seems at least to hold out some hope that asceticism might be a meeting ground for Indians and westerners, while for the former, there is only a contrast between Indians and non-Indians:

The life of an Indian *Sadhu* is a life of rigorous and selfless discipline, … of daily hardships, self-sacrifice, and humiliation. It is a life in which both body and brain are exposed to excessive wear and tear such as is beyond the very conception of a Westerner. It is not a life which every strong and healthy man can follow and much less a delicate and daintily nurtured person like Sunder Singh. … Simplicity in the East means almost self-torture and sacrifice of the least of pleasures and comforts, and complete resignation of one’s self to God’s care. And this is the life which Sunder is living. A life of absolute reliance on Divine Providence … Not even an Indian and much less a European of the bluest blood should launch upon the career of a Sadhu at the very first impulse of a moved heart or world-weary soul; nor should the ambition to challenge the gaping admiration of the whole world by some extraordinary action be interpreted as a call from God, as has been done by some foreigners in the past.

The claim to the superiority of East to West is framed in terms of self-denial, service, suffering, and, notably, humiliation—virtues made possible by simplicity bordering on “self-torture.” Of course these are many of the features Orientalists and missionaries often used to characterize India’s otherness. Yet suffering, with the important non-Orientalist addition of “humiliation,” is self-imposed rather than inflicted. This is not Vivekananda’s manly ascetic courage, but weakness embraced and alchemically transformed into a site of privilege, a place of divine intimacy. Westerners, as in Sundar Singh’s texts, are irresistibly attracted to Indian asceticism, but, for Zahir, are doomed to fail. Importantly, though characterizing East against West, asceticism is also shown to be far from
“natural” for Indians themselves: Sundar Singh’s asceticism, rather than affirming his innate Indianness, is nothing short of a miracle for such a “delicate and daintily-nurtured” person.

**Provincializing Christianity: The Secret History of an Indian Christian Lineage**

If Rama Tirtha drew on indigenous practices to universalize Hinduism, innovating on, with, and against the modern lineage of the founders of great world religions, Sundar Singh’s association of Christianity with local networks of holy men might be recognized as a similar use of lineage, though working in the opposite direction, enmeshing a universalizing Christianity ever more in the local. That is, his story of a group of esoteric Indian Christian monks who trace their lineage to Christ particularizes the Gospel and undercuts the supposedly “universal” quality of the world religion par excellence, Christianity. Through its fascinating twists and turns, the tale of the secret sannyasis traces an Indian lineage for Christianity that not only parochializes and indigenizes it, but also clarifies multiple sites of contestation. As Sundar Singh told and promoted the tale, these contests can be traced to the Bible, down through Christian history, and into the present missionary efforts to homogenize the meanings at play in scriptural and cultural translation projects.

Much as Rama Tirtha’s Indian self-writings exhibit the importance of the presence of “others” and provide the background for understanding the function of lineage in his western tours, Sundar Singh’s self-writings provide similar insights into his negotiation of western Christianity. The biblical, Pauline, and “Oriental” registers that Sundar Singh evoked on his western tours, outlined in Chapter 5, can be seen as analogous to Rama Tirtha’s insertion of himself and other “saints” into the lineage of world religions. Both demonstrate the context-specific awareness of the need to work with lineage, to link oneself with precedents, personal and textual authorities, as much in Europe and America as in India. Of course, those lineages were neither identical nor unrelated in those wider contexts.

The stories of the Maharishi of Kailasha and scattered secretly Christian sadhus in Sundar Singh’s *Collection* give us the most direct evidence that he thought about his relationship to Christianity broadly and to its particular forms—Protestant, Catholic, missionary, Indian Christian—in terms
of lineage. For these tales were expanded into a full lineage story about a large and ancient order of inwardly Christian but outwardly Hindu monks (sannyasis) just before Sundar Singh went on his western tours. As mentioned, the story was elaborated in a series of letters in Nur Afshan by Sundar Singh and purportedly by the secret swamis of the group themselves. The swamis were prompted to write and reveal their secret society, they said, by Sundar Singh’s discovery of the Maharishi’s existence, for, as Sundar Singh soon affirmed in his letters, the cave-dwelling Himalayan holy man was in fact a key leader of the wider group, the Christian Sannyasi Mission. The connection gained greater narrative force with Sundar Singh’s published account of the Maharishi’s own lineage tale. Though somewhat different from the swamis’ account, this version also creates a picture of an ascetical, brahminical lineage that circumvents not only dependence on Protestant and Catholic missions but also St. Thomas himself, thus tracing Indian Christianity directly back to Christ’s lifetime. Importantly, it also introduces the Bible, not as a Pauline precedent but as a primary site of interpretation, difference, and contestation.

As told by Sundar Singh, the Maharishi revealed that one of the “three Magi” mentioned in the Gospels (Matthew 2:1–12) was a Brahmin pandit from Benares named Viśvāmitra. Having discovered through astrology that the spotless incarnation (niskalank avatara) was about to be born, he journeyed to Palestine and worshiped Christ. He again journeyed to Palestine during Jesus’s ministry, appearing a second time in the New Testament, as the “other disciple” (Luke 9:49–50; Mark 9:38–41). Because of their prejudice, however, Christ’s Jewish disciples criticized the Indian pandit; he was, however, affirmed as an equal “disciple” by the Master. Shunned in Palestine, Vishvamitra returned to Benares where he was fiercely opposed by bigoted Brahmins who insisted that an avatara could only be born in India. He was martyred, but his small group of disciples survived and eventually joined the Apostle Thomas on his mission in India. Their great accomplishment was the production of a Sanskrit Bible by the second century C.E.

This detail about an ancient Sanskrit Bible fills in the background for the swamis’ reference to the Bible used in their lineage, since their letters state that their members are not allowed to read “the Sanskrit translation that has been prepared by the Bible Society.” Sundar Singh’s ancient Sanskrit Bible traceable to a Banarsi Brahmin “magus” gives further scriptural shape to their descriptions of the secret sannyasis’ rituals. What better Bible to play the role of the Christian “Veda” they
mentioned, recited in *puja*-like ceremonies, and chanted in ascetic initia-
tions that took place in Hindu temples and monasteries (*mathas*)? Sundar
Singh’s version of the lineage thus reinforces the earlier claim that these
*mathas* are actually those of Shankaracarya’s Dasnami monastic order
(*sampradāya*), rooting the tradition more deeply in Hindu hagiographical
and Puranic imaginations. In both tales, the importance of ritual helps
explain the problem with the missionaries’ scriptural translations: the
western translation represents Christ following western “rituals” such
as praying while sitting, rather than in full prostration (*sāśtang danḍavat*)
during prayer as described in the sannyasis’ Bible and as imitated in
their practice.

Christ’s prostration is significant as it is the bodily practice in Indian
religious traditions for embodying total surrender (*śaranāgatī*) to the
divine or to one’s guru and is a sign of a wider “ritual grammar” that
resonates with Islamic prostration (*sajda*). 117 Indeed, Nirbhayānanda,
the swami writing most of these letters, claimed that Christ himself was
present in India and founded this *sampradāya* on his “pilgrimage” (*yātra*)
there. Echoing the earlier language of Keshub Chandra Sen, he describes
an “Asian Christ,” “the King of Glory . . . in the form of a Yogi.”118 Christ
lived according to Indian religious patterns: upon completing the phase
of studentship (*brahmacarya*), he entered the renunciant stage (*sannyāsa
avasthā*). Moreover, like vernacular holy men (*faqir*), Christ had the power
to leave his body and make visionary appearances, even after his physical
pilgrimage. His special title too—*Nāsrī Nāth* (the Lord of Nazareth)—
carries vernacular yogic resonance: as a “Nath” Christ evokes the Shaiva
traditions of Gorakhnathis so prevalent in Punjab.

To make sense of these claims, I suggest that we must attend specifi-
cally not only to the importance of a culturally Indian Christianity but also
to the power of imagining an esoteric, empowering institution outside
missionary control, founded in a prestigious lineage. The established tech-
nique of lineage creation allows for reconfigurations of identity, including
Christianity, but also for the exclusion of those who deemed themselves
in charge of it. The refusal to be baptized as members of the Christian
church by the secret sannyasis mirrors Punjab’s holy man traditions, in
which outward conversion is not necessary when becoming a disciple
of a Sufi such as Baba Farid.119 More specifically, through the reworking
of the biblical text by Sundar Singh, lineage aligns foreign missionaries
with biblical yet narrow-minded figures. In other words, difference and
contestation infect the very text offered by Protestant mission as the basis of the global spread of Protestantism. This link enables us to discern a more original and broader critique of Protestant universalism and linguistic ideology at the heart of missionary Christianity.

**Contesting Translation**

As Lamin Sanneh has argued, there is a close connection between translation in the textual and cultural senses. Missionary history in Punjab certainly bears this link out: prodigious missionary Bible translation was closely linked to significant enthusiasm for a culturally, philosophically, and institutionally Indian forms of Christianity. As noted above, numerous discourses from Henry Venn’s missions theory to scholarly models of world religions based Christianity’s universality on its ability to foster and transcend cultural plurality. However, the substantial debates among Protestants about the very act of translating the Bible into Indian languages at all, as Robert Yelle has recently shown, suggest that the universal text aimed at by missionaries was threatened by the contingency and instability of translation. It was this sense of Christianity in a contested context, rather than a taken-for-granted universality or singular textual meaning, that, I argue, these lineage tales highlighted and engaged.

Yet even granting a strong missionary commitment to textual and cultural translation, the transformation of its mission institutions into genuinely Indian ones, that is, an Indian Church run, led, and funded by Indian Christians, seemed ever more distant. Ironically, the longstanding institutional imbalance of power had often played itself out along the lines of textual and cultural translation, not with Indians succumbing to or resisting a missionary-imposed westernization, but with missionaries at times insisting that Indian Christians behave in more “traditional” Indian ways. In fact, while missionaries often wanted their converts to prefer Indian-language scriptures and prayer books or to sit on the ground like “traditional” Indians, Indian Christians themselves often preferred English, western dress, and sitting in pews instead of on the floor, not to mention full prostration. It is thus hardly fair to characterize foreign missionaries as lacking in enthusiasm for an “Indian Christianity.” Yet it was precisely the desire to create and control Indianness, I argue, that
is the proper context in which to set the “hyper-Indian,” ascetic form of Christianity created in the lineage story.

From the beginning of the missionary enterprise in India, of course, missionaries’ Hindu interlocutors pointed out the problems with many of their claims: there was, for example, for the Bengali leader and religious reformer Rammohun Roy, a clear parallel between Protestant use of the Bible to control their converts and the “priestcraft” of Brahmans. Protestant textualism, much like its Orientalist parallels, tended to obscure the personal and the particular in translation and transculturation processes. In Punjab, for example, missionaries attributed agency not to the Indian pandits that produced biblical translations, the Punjabi songwriters and singers of local Christian hymnody, or the Indians responsible for mass conversions, but to the Holy Spirit. Read in this way, the specifically ascetic context of the secret sannyasi tale seems a direct response to the surprising number of foreign missionaries in Punjab who had impersonated and appropriated local traditions of ascetic symbolism and practice as “fakirs” as a means of evangelization or who tried to shape Indian converts into what they imagined as the ideal “Christian yogi.” The stories re-imagined biblical translation, the authority of holy men, and the institutions they inhabited and resituated them in the context of negotiations between powerful persons with the power to conceal and exclude from both sides.

By marginalizing the greatest symbol of missionary support for and practice of Indianization—the Bible translation—the lineage tale problematized the universalizing claims that surrounded the text and grounded missionary authority. At a deeper level, the idea that any two Sanskrit Bibles are fundamentally different suggests that translation itself, rather than the transparent and liberating process missionaries and Orientalists often represented it to be, is necessarily enmeshed in culture and history in ways that complicate the idea of open, unmediated access to the “plain” text. That is, rather than seeing the Bible as the universal source of truth, translatable in any language, the Bible remains untranslatable across particular lineages. Much as South Asian seamen would resist conversion by demanding to see the “original” Greek Bible, Indian Christians asserted themselves by materializing the processes of translation that missionary semiotic ideologies obscured. The missionaries’ Sanskrit Bible and wider translation projects fail to cross the boundary, not so much of language, not even of culture, but of the body as a “staging of insided/
outsidedness.” The letters connected Indian Christian suffering with past intra-Christian persecution suffered by the Quakers and Salvation Army and the inability of missions to allow for the text’s multivalence. As one swami put it, they were the “worms” of “seminary education” and “Church History.” Sundar Singh himself could even write of preparing for Christian martyrdom, not at the hands of Hindus or Tibetan Buddhists, but by missionaries at a missionary convention, again using biblical text as a framing precedent. More than a text, then, the Bible itself can be seen as a charismatic object that exists within the institutional networks of a lineage, endowed with the particular power of the lineage and transmitted, at times violently, from particular pasts to particular presents.

**Conclusion**

Early versions of Sundar Singh’s life story reveal several historical and comparative conclusions. First, the texts considered here are strikingly different from his dominant life story, a difference clearest in the lack of the Pauline conversion narrative. I have argued that this shift itself should be interpreted as signaling both the importance of particular biblical models and of their specific modern significations in the context of colonial change. In contrast, the Indo-Persian conventions that characterize earlier texts—the “givenness” of the self, their nonlinearity, the self’s embeddedness in a network of others and the centrality of wayfaring and woe as generative sites of self-writing—would gradually fade from the public memory of the Indian Christian saint.

Recovering these layers of Sundar Singh’s life story restores important indigenous elements that were at times ironically obscured by representations of the “Indian” Apostle Paul. In uncovering the tense world in which Sundar Singh first presented himself as an upstart saint, we are a good distance from the rapture that often surrounded him after 1918, especially during his Euro-American tours. In one 1916 letter, Sundar Singh himself notes the start of a marked shift in his own status and treatment, another sign of his self-conscious role in these processes. I hope, too, to have shown something of the precariousness of what it means and thus what it takes to become a holy man. For as I have argued, charisma in this context—if we choose to retain this term at all—is not the divine gift of both the Pauline epistles and Weberian sociology, but a force generated
through norms, narratives, and models, a physical blessing or “charge” housed in clothing, amulets, and bodies, and, most of all, a fire fueled by the strivings of those who have left society in order to enact new forms of practice and life.

Thus the interpretation of the early life story of Sundar Singh given above offers several ways to avoid reading these texts as testaments to the dominance of western modes and discourses, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to the “passivity” of the South Asian self or the simple persistence of traditional tropes and forms. First, and foremost, Sundar Singh’s self-writing—even in its earliest phases—needs to be placed in the context of the presence and power of emergent print culture and its norms. When seen in this context, Sundar Singh’s self-writing represents both ascetic and wider cultures of South Asian subjectivity and the emerging public sphere of print. In both, these texts are notable for their creative use of older forms to new ends. The power of these texts comes from the way in which they draw on many sources, from their ability to adopt and adapt new cultural forms in ways that simultaneously echo and activate local sensibilities and imaginations. More particularly, the specific choices of martyrdom and beast-like gurus evident here intersect not only with the narrative tropes long-known and long-sung in the region—for example, of al-Hallaj, Gorakhnath or Nanak—but with Indian experiences of colonial domination. The willing and ecstatic suffering of Indian martyrs—elaborate in violent detail and vibrantly and self-consciously offered to their audiences—can be read as a powerful reclamation of the colonized Indian body, a narrative means of turning prosaic suffering into sacred pain.132 Much as medieval women turned to the body of Christ and to the somatic language of suffering, South Asian colonial subjects can be said to develop their own appropriations of the wracked Christian body. As shown in previous chapters, since the South Asian ascetic was fixed with particular reference to his degraded, “monstrous,” and “black” body and to the intentional self-infliction of pain, this link appears to be a response to specific features of colonial discourse as much as it is an affirmation of ascetic traditions. Or rather, we see the capacities of ascetic practice and religious imagination to deconstruct and re-construct bodies thus degraded.

My reading is thus not simply that Indian colonial subjects adopt and adapt the religion of empire to their own ends, but that the imperial religion itself—Christianity—offered resources, however downplayed in its missionary modes, capable of a powerful appeal to marginal groups in
situations of subordination. Put differently, South Asian asceticism and Christianity shared idioms of social critique that put the transformation of the self and the public this could create at the heart of religious life. Colonial subjects did not “use” Christianity to express something about their political situation, for this would presume the ability to separate something called “Christianity” from converts’ own political and social contexts. Rather, Christian narrative, ascetic practice, and narratives of converts’ experience—as embodied here in Sundar Singh’s own life—are intertwined such that each is enmeshed in the other in a fusion of hermeneutical horizons.

The meaning of agency in life stories in this and other contexts must admit a variety of culturally located selves and textual forms over against the idea of South Asia’s lack of an “individual” and to call attention to the ascetic practices and ideologies that help shape these selves. As noted above, to fashion a self that does not altogether conform to a modern, evangelical subjecthood is in itself an important response to dominant norms and genres. The self presented in these texts represents a unique intermingling of local genres of life story, indigenous and Christian religious narratives, and the power of emerging print culture in Punjab. That it was, on Sundar Singh’s part, a self-conscious choice to present this particular kind of self seems evident in his later shift in the narrative mode of his life story. At a deeper level, the relation of self-denial, submission, and suffering to agency becomes important, offering alternative models to “triumphalist” accounts, as Asad has suggested. In addition to the idea that self-denial and submission lend themselves well to the transformation of pain into sacred pain, these texts offer other features that suggest complex forms of agency. The inscribing of the self into sacred Indian history and landscape, the implicit affirmation of the self through its present relationships with powerful and exemplary others, and the rehearsal of the self’s recognition by God and devotees all suggest ways in which the self becomes central quite apart from modes of direct self-assertion and defiance, character development, or introspection. The staging of the self ultimately becomes ever more historical. That is, by situating Indian Christianity and mission within esoteric lineage tales of secret sannyasis, Sundar Singh ultimately contested universal missions, Church history, and translation projects at the heart of colonial constructions of religion.
Conclusion

Losing and Finding Religion

One can begin in a fog and try to clear it.
Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed

In his classic study Islam Observed, Clifford Geertz describes his approach to studying religion as starting “in a fog.” That is, what religion is and does can be sought in the everyday and untidy ways it is lived within particular contexts, rather than by prioritizing theological or scholarly definitions and typologies. Geertz’s book marked a major shift in the way Islamic traditions were studied, foreshadowing a world in which local and multiple Islams, anti-essentialism, and challenges to the very notion of culture would become common academic coinage. To begin from such a position is in itself unsettling, however, for it requires a certain renunciation of the privilege of the academy and, of course, as Asad has pointed out, exists in tension with concepts of and methods for studying religion, including Geertz’s well-known definition of religion itself. In this study I have explored just this tension, acknowledging the need to loosen one’s grasp on and, at the same time, the impossibility of simply forgoing tools and concepts long used to imagine the object of study. Seen against this broader background, the instability of sainthood is another symptom of religion’s murkiness.

Yet, in this book—at its heart a comparative, historicized study of South Asian sainthood focusing on Hindu and Christian figures—I have not only attempted to interpret and contextualize Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s lives within the complex intercultural discourses of sainthood, but also especially to highlight the heat generated therein. Indeed, in this case, smoke might be a better metaphor than fog for suggesting the assertions and accusations generated by religious exemplarity in colonial worlds.
I have thus not chosen to approach sainthood phenomenologically, for example, as an Eliadian hierophany of the sacred or through a Jamesian typology of the qualities of saintliness. I have likewise been moderately suspicious of tradition-specific studies and the broadly comparative works that often rely on them. Most academic works on sainthood, like their theological counterparts, present saints, whether Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu, as ideal exemplars of particular religions, significantly dehistoricized or abstracted, even as they at times search for their function within the social processes of religion. In contrast, even as I draw on these studies, I have resituated holy men and women within the search for religion in the realm of the local and observed, a kind of holiness lived out in lives worthy of the density of detail called for by “thick description.” What I have found in those details is significantly more dynamic, multiple and contested than ideas of whole cultures or religions tend to suggest.

This is of course not to say that I claim to be free of starting points, for indeed sainthood is just one such intellectual origin. In fact, I hope to have demonstrated in this book that saints, or better, holy men and women, if not always clearly definable, are one of the most concrete examples one can lay hands on once we have entered the fog, spark, and fire of religion. They are figures, moreover, that while not easily equated with a reified “religion” should also not be turned into its opposite, imagined everywhere and always in the mold of the “mystic,” the “rebel[s] who undermine the religious establishment.”

More importantly, as Robert Orsi puts it, saints or holy people—personal figures of special power embroiled in relationships with devotees—are pervasive (if not universal or essential) across religious traditions, and are thus central to what religious traditions come to mean and do in the individual contexts of human lives. Seen in this way, sainthood can be reconceived through the lens of the human agency: saints are those “in whose company humans work on the world and themselves.”

My approach has also differed from most studies of sainthood, including Orsi’s, however, by focusing on living, that is, would-be holy men or, better, upstart saints. Reflecting the dynamic, interactive, and unsettled qualities of the lives and roles of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh, I have found it most helpful to think of sainthood as a cumulative process, a performance that emerges from particular moments and sites. As Stanley Tambiah points out of Hindu and Buddhist saints, Max Weber’s prohibition on inquiry into the sources of “charisma” is decidedly unhelpful for forms of sainthood conceived of, not as the pure result of divine gift
(charism) or the attribution of such by followers or institutions, but as the achieved effect of ascetic practice (tapasya), the performance of tradition, and the attraction of religion’s material forms.\(^4\)

As seen throughout the study, a number of factors have contributed to a lack of sustained interest in monks as monks in the modern period. Etic and emic models of degradation have suggested that modern religious specialists are somehow less authentic than their ancient predecessors. Modernization theory has argued that modern religion was, at best, a disappearing “survival” not worthy of academic analysis, of a piece with the failure of modern Hindus to become fully autonomous selves. Similarly, if ironically, postcolonial notions of rupture and models of an “invented” modern Hinduism have tended to problematize rather than engage modern religious subjectivities in their own right. Even in South Asian contexts focusing on sainthood, many studies have concentrated on the shrine-based cults of dead saints and their varied devotees, rather than on living holy men and women themselves. In my view, the overall effect of these approaches is that the holy man or woman as performer, whether fictional or historical, active in constructing traditions of sainthood themselves, tends to be underemphasized. For example, though she argues for the shared piety of saint veneration, Farina Mir’s focus on devotees rather than the faqir him or herself may be what keeps her from examining a key qissa of Punjabi saint culture, Puran Bhagat, or the elaborate descriptions of Punjabi holy men in Ganesh Das Vadhera’s Char Bagh-i Punjab. We might ask then, to what extent the study of sainthood remains constrained by various kinds of morbidity; as van der Leeuw put it, for most of western history, up into the present, European and comparative “saints” have been nothing but the “power of the dead.”\(^5\)

Beyond the lack of attention to modern monks themselves, few studies to date have asked how modern South Asian religion was grounded, not in the “invented” tradition, in transcendent states of consciousness or salvation, or in devotees’ devotion, but in specific longstanding capacities, practices, and logics. Thus, modern guru and yoga studies, while producing important genealogical or other kinds of insights into the lives of individual saints or historical trends, seldom narrow in on the saint as “practitioner” in the sense explored here. As suggested above, Corrine Dempsey’s study, Kerala Christian Sainthood, is extremely helpful in this way; yet even here, places where the saint herself has “her say” remain somewhat marginal and connections to larger processes within specifically modern Hinduism are not fully explored.\(^6\) The lives of modern monks are rich
examples of such openings, confluences, and the code-switching endemic to them. In particular, this book has explored: the contest of missionaries and ascetics over the relations of bodies and texts; the pull of personality and asceticism in Orientalism and Hindu saintly resurrections in the present; iconic, sartorial, and visual modes of resistance to the colonial codings of race through the embodied sacredness of saffron; and the practical powers of literary modes of self-transformation and autohagiographical writing that poured forth from Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh themselves. These are some of the key means through which we can start to discern the ways individuals make sainthood happen, to practice an historiography of “attentive listening.”

I want to conclude by asking how these lives and examples might also be seen as clues for rethinking colonial religion and religion as a modern construct. Is a broader account of the sacred possible through reimagined forms of comparison and models of performance, for example? Most fundamentally, the comparative study of sainthood suggests that the agency of upstart saints appears not so much in the inner intentions, religious revelations, or transcendent significance of individuals, but in and through the norms, modes, and intimacies through which modern monks made their presence irresistibly attractive.

That their presence was at times unsettling for Indian and non-Indian, local and global, friends, followers, patrons, and audiences helps us avoid, on the one hand, overly hagiographical accounts. That the pull of the sacred worked in ways still powerful and observable to historical and anthropological analyses offers, on the other hand, a way to think about the irreducibility of religion that avoids claims to the sui generis. That is, religion can be rethought, not in terms of the sheer transcendence of historical context, but in terms of the histories, persistence, and historically describable technologies of transcendence. In fact, it is precisely the post–printing press, colonial world that provides rich and reliable texts documenting figures for whom such technologies intersect, interact with, and interpret varied and unstable, emergent notions of religion itself. Rather than being at best only pale reflections of their premodern pasts or, at worst, mere politically motivated wielders of derivative discourses of religion, modern monks are enmeshed in a key period for the rethinking and reshaping of religious concepts, practices, and experiences. As such, they may offer access into the older and less reliably documented sacred stories, genres, and practices that colonial men and women were shaped by, invoked, and creatively drew on.
A Postcolonial Comparative Religion

Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion* offers an important starting point for understanding the complex dynamics of comparison, religious encounter, and colonial politics that were in many ways the contexts for the claims and representations explored throughout this book. Religion, as King portrays it, is both the *product* of western imperial knowledge in colonial situations and a form of power that demands its own continued, distinctive forms of scholarly attention. That is, since King’s work not only argues for connecting religion to power, but also challenges reductionism, it not only confirms the broader post-Eliadian twists and turns of religious studies, but also simultaneously reinforces recent calls to make religion once again “visible.” Despite its oft-noted neglect of religion, such calls are increasingly emanating from within postcolonial studies itself. As Elizabeth Castelli has pointed out, however, there is a certain irony in secular academics noting the “return” of religion, since religious studies scholars have long been aware that religion, however produced or ignored by scholars, had never disappeared.

As the tensions that surrounded Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s sainthood suggest, the very idea of a postcolonial comparativism, crucial to this study’s choice of a Christian and a Hindu saint at its center, and a turn to “religion,” however, appear first as a problem. Comparison, after all, was the very methodology through which Orientalism and world religions discourse constructed India as an “other” and preserved Christian universalism. However, King argues comparison can still function productively and, more strongly, insists that the refusal to compare across cultures, traditions, and histories risks a new ethnocentricism, however hermeneutically sophisticated. In his view, in addition to raising awareness of comparison’s imperial pasts, we might actively redeploy comparison, first to explore the interactive colonial history of religion and, second, to expose the heterogeneity of the so-called West and its others. That is, whereas comparison once constructed the “East” as a homogenous, mystical, and feminine essence against the “West’s” essential “active” and masculine one, for example, comparison can now reveal the “mutual imbrication of colonizer and colonized” in the production of the mystical, including the diverse history of Christian mystical discourses, their shaping role in western scholarship, and of course, Indian anti-colonial engagement of these categories. In other words, comparison itself can become a method of the colonizer now turned against itself, contributing to the project of, in
By reviving such memories, a postcolonial comparison also opens up thinking about Indian resistance, which critics of Said’s early work have seen as a weakness resulting from his insistence on limiting his discussion to the imagined Orient. As the role of mysticism in King’s work suggests, this point has direct relevance to the study of sainthood and asceticism: citing Sengupta, King locates Indian resistance in the figure of the sannyasi who appropriated Orientalist discourse about the “spiritual East” in a heroic, nationalist context. In this, he represents a much wider call to recognize forms of local struggle in the face of colonization. Ultimately, however, as King himself wonders about Homi Bhabha’s model of mimicry, it must be asked if the kind of derivative agency described in much discourse analysis allows for an adequate recognition of the self-consciousness and indigenous knowledge of South Asians in the colonial situation. In other words, as argued in Chapter 3, Indians’ role in “encounter” cannot be adequately described in terms of appropriating, inverting, or mimicking the terms, categories, and styles that the more powerful side produces. For does not such a view come too close to the idea that Europeans “invented” Hinduism, a view that Pennington among others has effectively critiqued for maintaining the place of “the west” at the center of the colonial story? Indeed, while King gives Gandhi credit for appropriating the Orientalist ideal of the “otherworldly sannyāsin” to subversive ends, he shows little appreciation of the “traditional sources of [Gandhi’s] charisma” long ago explored by the Rudolphs or, in a very different mode, in the work of Shahid Amin. Likewise, Vivekananda is somewhat patronizingly described as doing “wonders” for Hindu “self-worth” but ultimately reinforcing colonial stereotypes and usurping the voice of the “nation,” another western invention. In both cases, the role of ascetic practice, along with its local ethics, narratives, and histories, remain strangely irrelevant.

This omission stands in tension with King’s affirmation that comparison must engage indigenous knowledge, practice, and precolonial history. In making this turn, King in fact parts ways with much postcolonialist scholarship, which stresses the rupture occasioned by colonial knowledge, and its incommensurabilities, and thus has little interest in the precolonial past. The work of historians such as Richard Eaton, Christopher Bayly, and William Pinch, all of whom have questioned postcolonialism on this score, thus becomes especially relevant for a
comparison that sets colonial discourse itself within a thicker account of its others. We need richer studies of what came before colony and what remained into the colonial period, in an important sense, alive, without presuming either absolute accounts of similarity or difference, continuity or rupture.21

The turn to indigenous knowledge and history thus leaves us with fresh possibilities for comparison, for challenging essentialized cultural and religious differences. At least two paths are opened, the postcolonial dedication to tracing an essentially if somewhat ironically and curiously holistic western knowledge as it imposed itself—a model in which to admit commonality between colonizer and colonized appears as scholarly collusion—or the attempt of some to focus on the longue durée to see colonialism as internally complex and open to western and Indian similarity and intimacy.22 In both approaches, religion looms large, either as imposed colonial knowledge or through specific categories that invite comparison, for example, the similar ritual cults of the monarch in Elizabethan England and Mughal India alike.23 Spaces outside such proto-national institutions might also come into focus through wider lenses, for example, the popular shrines (deras) of Punjab where Dalits have lived their own “continuous histories.”24

Recent discussions in the wider field of (non-postcolonial) religious studies add an important set of voices to those of postcolonial religion and history, sharing with them the recognition of the particularity, if not always the imperialism, of western knowledges and the need for diachronic context. Importantly, however, much of this work reminds us that similarity too has its dangers, especially for religion.25 J. Z. Smith’s recommendations for comparison focus not only on the broadly diachronic, but especially on the specific historical context that deeply situates the “data.” This move renders the politics of myth and ritual amenable to scholarly analysis, and, as it were, decenters the Eliadian “Center” in favor of sacred chaos and peripheries.26 Put simply then, in Smith’s view, comparison should work with examples contiguous in time and space, recognize difference as an anthropological rather than ontological category, and look for the ways the meaning, practice, and uses of myth and ritual change with history itself.

A similar narrowing of focus to situate comparison in a tighter sense of context in South Asian religious studies is John Cort’s important volume Open Boundaries. As Cort explains, the contributors to this volume attempt to place Jains in a
more dynamic, reciprocal, and interactive relation to South Asian society. We view Jains as active contestants and participants in socio-religious debates, struggles, and movements, not as either marginal outsiders or passive subjects to the will of others. Accordingly, we are interested in the shapes and stratagems of Jain polemic and Hindu counter-arguments, representations of Jains by others and others by Jains, the social placement of Jain authors and individuals, and the like. . . . We focus on instances of Jain interaction with non-Jains in which the specifics of who, what, when, and where can be filled out with the sort of specificity usually lacking in studies of influence and interaction in South Asia.  

Methodologically, focusing on such “highly specific contexts” within spheres of “wider interaction” suggests the need for, in “ethnographic par- lance, thick descriptions” and in historiographic terms, the development of “micro-histories.” Additionally, specific categories—yoga, varna, and jāti, the terms of aesthetic debate, the role of religious mendicants, specific architectural forms, the genre of sāstra—help emphasize the multiplicity of “Jainisms” and trace shared and contested discourse. In much the same way, it has been my contention in this study that attention to sainthood discourse and practice, as they were taken up in the context of a variety of selves and others—Indian Christians, foreign missionaries, modern Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and, indeed, “saints” themselves—reveals both common and contested terms and practices and the heterogeneity of selves and others in the colonial religious context. In particular, we are reminded that the colonizer-colonized dialectic is but one axis of encounter, power, and exchange among myriad others.  

To Smith’s proposals for contextualized comparison as a means of scholarly “redescription” and “rectification” of categories, the comparative study of colonial sainthood, I argue, shows that we also need a wider “relocation.” Indeed, the study of South Asian sainthood, especially in terms of recent guru traditions, confronts us with a sense of the mutual and historical entanglements of scholars and practitioners in ways largely unaddressed by Smith’s work. Thus, I want to highlight the ways the situatedness of the scholar in his or her metropolitan study overlaps with peripheral sites of religious practice, focusing on the ways western constructions of religion have affected such sites themselves. To take a relevant example from the history of Sri Lankan “Protestant Buddhism”: what do we make of the local Buddhist embrace of Olcott’s catechetical Buddhism, itself intimately
connected to the Orientalist scholarship of Rhys Davids, and continued "Protestant" Buddhist relic veneration, including of Olcott’s photograph. In the case of Hinduism, can we account for Max Müller’s textual project as a gift given to dignitaries by the Prince of Wales or his body honored with the shawl of pandits and blessed with *prasādam* sent from India? At a minimum, we can remind ourselves of the historical tensions that shaped the very origins of academic fields such as comparative religion, caught between “the desire for a renewed ritual splendor that empire made possible” and “an old allegiance to rationalism free of frivolity” that tended to obscure the “ornamental lords” of many contexts. While not likely to settle the differences between scholars in history and postcolonial studies, such discussions show the relevance of these wider debates for religious studies, as Richard King, Peter van der Veer, and David Chidester have suggested. They also demonstrate how we might craft self-reflexive comparisons that acknowledge the constructed nature of intellectual categories and, more importantly, locate their continued salience in relationship to the history of encounter and practice on the ground.

In this study’s comparison of the Hindu and Christian modern monks Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh, I have tried to work out the beginnings of such a method. On the one hand, by focusing on one shared historical and regional context, the study is a kind of counterweight to the ahistorical tendencies of much comparative religion. By comparing a convert to the imperial religion and a figure who dramatically resisted conversion this study makes issues of power, conversion, and identity central and takes the play of difference and similarity as its starting point. On the other hand, I have consistently woven the account given here across and between metropole and periphery, attempting to demonstrate that our sense of historical “context” itself needs to be rethought in ways that unsettle the lines drawn by modern nation-states, colonial history, and scholarly, disciplinary boundaries. More than a second-order act of scholarly imagination, comparison is itself resituated amid the on-the-ground variety of western and Indian voices that contributed to and contested wider cultural and scholarly comparisons. The selection of Sundar Singh as a Protestant Christian figure and of Rama Tirtha as a modern, a.k.a. “Protestant,” Hindu together redresses the tendency for Christian studies, as Winnifred Sullivan points out, to be “set apart” from broader comparisons and the “proxy” study of Roman Catholicism in “primitive” and “idolatrous” non-Christian traditions. These problematics are especially evident in the construction of colonial and scholarly knowledge of South
Asian “saints” and ascetic practice, since these highlight key differences between Protestantism, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy, and, as such, serve as important sites of both “western” heterogeneity and scholars’ “drudgery divine.” This book’s contribution lies then not only in rethinking sainthood in connection with modern monks and the history of South Asian asceticism and imperialism, but also in attending to the “history and problematics of the very categories and tools we use to discuss” holy men and women within, across, and outside of religious traditions.

Thus, while the specific comparison undertaken in this study relocates comparison “on-the-ground” in terms of a single historical moment, I do not mean to suggest that wide-ranging cross-cultural and cross-historical comparison is irredeemable or somehow essentially imperial. As noted above, for example, Flood’s work in and across Christian, Buddhist, Hindu contexts informs my recognition of Protestant anti-asceticism and my effort to rethink the relationship of self and tradition in a wider context. Likewise, comparative work highlighting similarities across contexts once seen as irreconcilably “Eastern” and “Western” is productive and postcolonial in important ways. In this new world of comparison, the imagined religion of the “scholar’s study” becomes a multi-sourced, global, constructive conversation. The modern western scholar of religion, so seemingly ensconced in his or her imagination, turns out to share something with premodern Sikh hagiographers, who imagined their own Sikh tradition and the religion of Islam as “of a kind: comparable.” The study of specific, embodied forms of Christianity, then, as Robert Orsi argues, need not be seen as the antithesis of the postcolonial, but as an important site from which to question the modern, global “antipathy” to “sacred presence.” We can see this kind of connection in action within the anthropology of Global Christianity, for example, in the surprising juxatpositions of Matthew Engelke’s work. He argues that central figures from the history of religious studies and theology such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and African Christian prophets who suggest the Bible is best used as “toilet paper” actually have quite a bit to say to each other.

Holy Men, Religion, and Performance Studies

The above discussion of postcolonial, historiographical, and religious studies contexts requires not only critical suspicion, but also a more constructive engagement with South Asian religious traditions, histories, and
subjectivities. In addition to exploring the need for a postcolonial comparative religion, I want to suggest that performance studies offers a number of important resources for fleshing out this project. For, as a range of practices, asceticism itself should remind us that religion is often more about action than meaning, complementing and challenging the intellectualist, hermeneutic, and, to some extent, semiotic approaches that still largely inform wider discussions.

Performance, is, on the face of it, an especially appealing category for thinking about sainthood in South Asia, for the renouncer in South Asia is “a magnificent, even theatrical figure,” especially because of his or her striking difference from the workaday world of householders. More subtly and more literally, however, performance is a relevant category because ascetic difference manifests in a wide range of literal performance contexts. Specifically, ascetics play key narrative roles in South Asian literature, are themselves skilled epic reciters and dramatic performers, and inhabit and enliven the worlds of music, dance, and martial entertainment. Such roles often go hand in hand with other forms of even more dramatic performance: that of miracles, bodily and psychological healings, and other forms of religious spectacle. The exaggerated, colonial misperceptions of the “popular” performances that fixated on bodily contortions, snake-charming, and other “tricks” of fakirs are thus more than a simple result of colonial discourse and disruption of ascetic revenue networks. They are an important clue for us today, foreshadowing however obliquely the need to connect ascetics with the wider turn to the arts in Hinduism and religious studies more broadly.

The indigenous rhetorical and scholarly oppositions between bhakti saints and the arrogant yogi or elite sannyasi, explored in the Introduction, however, continue to inform even those scholars of Hinduism interested in the arts, contributing to the neglect of what I term the ascetic arts. Fortunately, ethnographic studies seem less constrained by the standard tropes of the field. Anthropology has brought lived dimensions of ascetic performance traditions to light and, relatedly, performance studies has broadened the theoretical space for the arts within religion and ritual. In particular, Catherine Bell’s work brings three key areas into focus: suspicion of universalizing categories in favor of localized, flexible, and dynamic ones; attention to “action as action;” and an emphasis on the individual that neither neglects wider social norms nor cedes all space for agency to them.

As noted above, postcolonialism and wider religious studies debates have led to the questioning of “world” religions conceived of as singular,
fixed entities or religion as a universal essence. How to make such critiques productive, however, has perhaps been less clear. In my view, Bell’s critique of “ritual” as a universal category and her proposal for a shift toward more dynamic and localized analysis of what she terms “ritualization” makes important steps in this direction. While this shift includes a major critique of Geertz’s approach to religion as a “cultural system,” I read this critique itself as being in the spirit of Geertz’s search for religion in the fog, that is, as still haunted by him. Of course, Bell pushes the idea of an inductive religious studies further, eschewing categories that use the material studied mostly as illustrations, endorse culture as a whole based on “scope,” and view ritual as the instantiation of pre-settled symbolic meanings. Instead, performance analysis aims to disclose “holistic dynamics of the phenomenon in its own terms as much as possible . . . [and] attempts to let the activities under scrutiny have ontological and analytical priority . . . inform[ing] and modify[ing] the scholar’s own] notions of religion and ritual.” The challenge then is to articulate how the observed dynamic processes of sainthood reveal not only local dimension of culture, but how they change our own working concepts and models.

Giving priority to the “activities” of and around saints and modern monks “in their own terms” is of course no simple matter, as we have seen. At the basic level of the very terminology, we are confronted with a dizzying mix drawn from a host of Euro-American and South Asian religious imaginations. More than the attention to the diversity of terms and their specific contexts, however, studying sainthood as a performance in Bell’s sense begins with, in her words, “the holistic dynamics of the phenomenon”—and stresses the “activities under scrutiny” as basic sources for describing and even naming what is observed. Using this framework to shift from a sense of the holy man as a static phenomenon to a greater sense of process, this study has aimed to understand what can be thought of “sadhuization” or, better, “faqirization”—that is, the dynamic and interactive processes of perception, representation, and practice at play in the lives of Britons, Americans, and Indians devoted to, critical of, and identified with and as saints. As such, faqirization highlights the shifting and multivocal possibilities inherent in terms and traditions, the actors involved in continuing and interpreting those traditions, and the charged and value-laden uses these are put to, including the work they accomplish for saints themselves and for religious studies scholarship. How were specific vocabularies, images, and embodied capacities used in on-the-ground comparisons, inter- and intra-religious exchange, and second-order acts,
understood as “organic events that emerge from human needs and lived experiences”?

The event or process-like aspects of sainthood, as a set of negotiations between upstart saint and audience, leads to the second aspect of Bell’s performance analysis, beyond categorization toward “action as action” or practice—religion as *doing*. In relationship to religious studies, this shift calls into question the field’s characteristic focus on meaning, doctrine, and normative text—more specifically religious studies as hermeneutics—and pushes us toward anthropology. Put simply, performance analysis hopes to understand what is written or said in terms not only of its content but also in terms of its style, sites, and substances—how it is written, printed, distributed, or spoken—and its relationship with the work done by bodies in the spaces they inhabit and construct.

Far from rejecting interpretation, however, performance perspectives ultimately open up a far greater range of hermeneutical possibilities, leading us to ask new questions: what can we make of moments when what is said differs from what is done, when what is done remains substantially the same but its interpretation changes or differs according to reception contexts or individuals? Can ritual say what cannot be said, as in Combs-Shilling’s study of Islamic ritual in which the Moroccan prince is equated with Muhammad and Abraham? Who is doing the speaking for a religion or for religion as such, to whom and in what context? Can ritual performance reveal the “limits of sincerity,” the blind spots of “post-Protestant or post-Enlightenment vision”? What of esoteric traditions that purposefully conceal meanings or actions from certain audiences, such as in Tantric *sandhyabhāṣa* or Shia traditions of *taqiyya*? Do we focus on the radically new interpretations given by insiders to older practices in modernizing contexts or highlight the *continuity* of practices, now legitimated in new idioms or rhetoric? Such questions are doubly pressing in situations of extreme power imbalance, where the actions and speech of subaltern groups may conceal “hidden transcripts” and marginal voices may literally be deleted from the written record, only to resurface in song. To ask such questions is not to ignore meanings on the ground or in the academy but, as Asad has argued, to set them more firmly within the diverse “processes by which meanings are constructed.”

While focusing on action, process, and power might seem to prioritize wider social forces or structures, Bell instead emphasizes the “fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural continuity and change rather than as passive inheritors of a system.” Thus, on the
broadest scale, I have set Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh within that larger context of nineteenth-century sainthood by arguing for a greater appreciation of the creativity of leading figures such as Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda and Dayananda Sarasvati. By reaffirming and redeploying brightly colored, embodied ascetic practices and personae in the face of Protestant and Enlightenment models of inward and textual religion, such saintly figures entered the colonial public sphere in new ways. If they simultaneously deployed rhetorics of modern religion and Orientalist reimaginings of India’s golden ages, convergence, code-switching, and multilingualism offer us models that take us beyond dependence or discursive inversion. Of course, modern monks also contested or claimed to outdo aspects of modernity and in and through their actions drew on older resources and generated new ascetic publics. Thus, the rise of the holy man in the period of high imperialism, far from a mere affirmation of static ascetic tradition, on the one hand, or a Protestantization or unidirectional modernization of Hindu forms on the other hand, might be better thought of as a dramatic rewiring of the sacred. Far from creating a purely “spiritual” world-fleeing version of the yogi, the *bhadralok* intersection with asceticism opened up conduits between vernacular asceticism and modern claims to a secular public realm designed to reposition Hindu “religion” on its margins or in the past. The fact that modern invocations of the ascetic often involved claims of sovereignty and real or threatened saffron-tinged violence, as in the case of Brahmabandab Upadhyaya, Sri Aurobindo, or Lokmanya Tilak, just as *Anandamath* had suggested, should point us toward such connections, but generally has not. In Punjab, these trends and the local spread of the Arya Samaj fostered the proliferation of patriotic swamis that the British saw as supposedly contradictory “political sannyasis,” even as they moved to incorporate gurus, swamis, holy men, and pirs in macro-level ritual state theater and in micro-level management of local populations, as seen in Chapter 3.

In the case of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh, sovereign “spirituality” took shape through categories and border-crossings of East and West. They recognized, invoked and shifted between but also unsettled the western codes of Christ, Christianity, and civilization, the color codes of race and processes of self-transformation and autobiographical norms. Though more muted, both figures also suggested more direct political and even military conflict: for Rama Tirtha, mystical absorption in the self was akin to the state reached by a warrior in battle, an association apparently taken literally by his devotee Amir Chand and preserved in poetry by Rāmprasād Bismīl, both executed by the British
for terrorism. For Sundar Singh, his own Sikh community was admirable for their readiness to die for “religion and revolution,” a comment more meaningful when seen in relationship to his private approval of Gandhi’s seditious reclamation of sovereignty through the “right” to die. Just as ascetic arms were a part of many older forms of vernacular ascetic dress, however, so ascetic dress was its own kind of weapon in the colonial and transnational context. As shown in Chapters 4 and 5, the deconstructive and creative capacities long fostered in ascetic traditions were a key part of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s self-presentation and success as “saints” of “the most spiritual race” when on tour in Europe and America. More than a simple awareness or manipulation of the emerging visual cultures and tropes of modernity, however, modern monks negotiated racialized perceptions through ascetic practice, drawing specifically on religious meanings as (de/re)constructed through the body, whether the illusory bodies of a neo-Vedantin maya or the “double-vision” made possible through the Oriental Bible and a physical theosis.

If the global crossings and costumes of Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s Euro-American tours help us reinterpret the better known networks of modern ascetic travel, dress, and performance, so the fragmentary and obscure texts they wrote reveal similar adoptations and adaptations of ascetic subjectivities in, through, and against modern contexts and forms. In Chapters 6 and 7, I argued that Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s autohagiographical writings can themselves be seen as ascetic reworkings of the self through the textual presence of powerful others, from the eruption of the vernacular voices of bhakti and Sufi poets to the awe-inducing bodies of Indian martyrs and occulted Christian rishis. The agency at work in these texts operates at a number of levels, not only demonstrating the way upstart saints themselves are creators of both continuity and change, as Bell suggests, but also exploring religious logics of reversal and self-denial that simultaneously work to fulfill, authorize, and advertise the self at their center. As noted, that authority often erupted for both in direct challenge to or reclamation of key signifiers of the modern, for Rama Tirtha best embodied in the Himalaya-piercing gaze of Mill and Hume and for Sundar Singh the orders of urban, male, institutional religion and wealth that sacred logic miraculously upset.

The claims to authority at work in these autohagiographical instances led us to consider a final set of comparative examples involving lineage construction. In this way, I aimed to flesh out a bit further the potential of a postcolonial comparative religion grounded
in a sense of performance, explored here as it worked specifically in the context of constructions of “world” religion as such. The basic disregard for history in earlier comparative religion, much like Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s own a/historical reformulations, has parallels in Indian religious traditions and a variety of contemporary uses. Operating free of modern historiography, hagiographical narratives have characteristically placed exemplary religious figures in relationship to each other, introducing them to each other in story, often for the first time, much as emergent comparative scholarship on Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, and Krishna, among others, would do. Through the specific narrative arcs and incidents related in each case, a current religious identity or theory of religion gains in status through the persona of a founding figure and through association with other well-established figures.

Reflecting both western attention to the Veda and their own Indian vernacular traditions, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s tales suggest the polyvalence and multiple uses of modern religion. For Rama Tirtha the saints, prophets and founders are transformed into Vedantin exemplars, becoming the means of a new conquest (digvijaya) not only of western and Christian superiority but also intervening in the parochialization of Hinduism. That this is more than a philosophical appeal or turn to “experience” can be seen all the more clearly when compared with Sundar Singh’s lineage tale. For his claim is not so much to the philosophy of Vedanta or the texts of the Upanishads but to Shankaracharya’s Dasnami order (sampradaya). A Vedantin lineage becomes a means of revealing both the Christian secret in the history of Hinduism and the limits of universalizing practices of scriptural/textual translation. Taken together, Rama Tirtha’s Vedantin-Carlylean Muhammad or the Muhammad-like sinless heart of Sundar Singh’s Christian Maharishi suggest the continuing presence of Islam among Punjab’s and modernity’s “shared idioms.” For scholars of religious studies, this means “the Islamic third side of the vital triangle” does indeed deserve greater attention than the more common emphasis on Hindu and Christian allows.53

This book has thus come full circle, having begun by noting and questioning early perceptions of Indian holy men in the emergent contexts of comparative religion, Orientalism, and Christian mission as “saints” and now ending by suggesting how these two men were in some ways prophetic of and relevant to the current state of the field. Prefiguring the approach taken in this study, Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh themselves offered comparisons that challenged the abstractions that undergirded
comparison, resisting the very views of truth, translation and textuality that have, only in the recent past, been so roundly criticized. Of course, they did so through indigenous, vernacular idioms familiar to ascetics, for example, lineage construction. In this way, these final reflections aim to contribute to an understanding of religion as “not only as the object of theorization but also as the embodiment of the practice of critique itself.”

As argued throughout, such moves can be seen as distinctive adoptions of hagiographical habits and ascetic practice in their wider vernacular modes. Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh were upstart saints who imagined and pursued religious perfection according to local norms, living out a vernacular asceticism that was justified and altered when necessary through Orientalizing models. More importantly, they made western rhetorics affectively powerful for particular publics and moments through their capacities and practices. Attention to the material nature and contexts of these practices shows the common, often embodied substrata of both supposedly inward, modern religion and its other, tradition. The crowds that gathered around both men are thus not the theological confirmation of an abstract sacred, but the powerful continuation of sacred presence as nothing other than the spectacular, performative, and plural dimensions of vernacular faqir traditions themselves.

In all these ways, the aim of this book has been to highlight Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh’s self-conscious and creative use of older norms and resources, particularly those I have characterized as vernacular, and their engagement of colonial contexts and varied claims to the modern. In relating my analysis of Rama Tirtha’s and Sundar Singh’s autohagiographies in the Indian context to their work in and with western contexts, I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of thinking within and across boundaries, including the boundaries of academe. Just as the intensely individual turn inward at the heart of renunciation makes use of traditions, norms, and most of all relationships with others, so lineages run through South Asian hagiography, the emergent field of comparative religion, and its relations with Christian missions.

By keeping practice and performance at the center of comparison, I have attempted to capture some of the powerful religious visions that both Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh pursued. In some ways this focus helps pluralize the patterns commonly understood to be available in religious traditions themselves, most obviously via asceticism. More specifically, my analysis articulates some of the capacities that helped these holy men convince others that they deserve to be counted among
the saints, even as that term itself came to mean and do many things for the many who used it. The ethical dimensions of faqir traditions, too, suggesting as they do a sense of individual poverty, self-denial, and reliance on exemplary others, might also make contributions to our own moment and conversations. It might not be too much to imagine that some who theorize, study, and construct religion can count Rama Tirtha and Sundar Singh, and others like them, as conversation partners in comparison, too, rather than only as exempla. For some, they will, however, remain fakirs, wandering suspiciously in the forests at the edges of the field.
Notes

Chapter 1

1. Followers of Ānandamayī Mā, for example, firmly reject her categorization as a “saint”; for them, she was God. Lisa Lassell Hallstrom, Mother of Bliss: Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix. Similarly Agehananda Bharati stresses that the general comfort of sannyasis with their exalted status contrasts with Christianity’s emphasis on humility for saints; see his The Ochre Robe (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1980).


4. The Indian churches include the Sundar Singh Memorial Chapel in Dalhousie, his family home, now turned church and pilgrimage site, in the village of Rampur, and another church in Doraha, some fifteen minutes away. The Swami Rama Tirtha Mission, with centers in New Delhi and an ashram near Dehradun, along with the publishing-focused Swami Rama Tirtha Pratishthtan in Lucknow, are the main relevant institutions.


17. For a summary of this debate, see Sharpe, *Riddle of Sundar Singh*, 127–131.
19. Throughout this study I use the Anglicized fakir in order to indicate the largely negative evaluations of South Asian ascetic traditions by missionaries and others in contrast to the indigenous contexts signified by the term *faqir*. The Urdu writings of Sundar Singh include his letters to the missionary journal *Nūr Afshān*, which began in 1911, his short self-narrative *A Collection of Incidents* (Saharanpur: Jaina Lal Machine Printing Press, 1915), and his eight short devotional works. The Urdu works of Rama Tirtha and several about him were gathered together by his disciple, R. S. Nārāyana, in the three-volume work, *Ḳhumḳhāna Rām, γ’anī Kulliyāt-e Rām*. [The Tavern of Ram or the Complete Works of Ram] (Lucknow: Śrī Rāma Tīrtha Publication League, 1922). The majority of the writings in *Kulliyāt-e Rām* have been translated into English in the seven-volume collection, *In the Woods of God-Realization* (Lucknow: Swāmī Rāma Pratīṣṭhān, 2002), hereafter (IWGR).


29. See Cox, drawing on the 1903 “Hobson-Johnson” glossary of Anglo-Indian words and phrases, for example, *Imperial Fault Lines*, notes 22, 320. To give just one example of greater complexities, the yogi, though a “Hindu” figure, is a stock character in Sufi romance epics such as the *Madhumālati* and the Sufi-oriented Punjabi qissa tradition.


34. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7. The influence of Nāth concepts and narratives on bhakti saints, such as Kabir and Nanak, are noted elsewhere in the text and suggests some of the complexity highlighted here.


38. This bifurcation is reinforced, for example, in Jessica Frazier’s recent discussion of the turn to the arts in Hindu studies, which, in her account, generally pits bhakti against asceticism to the neglect of their rich connections. See Jessica Frazier, “Art and Aesthetics in Hindu Studies,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 2010): 1–11.


45. “[F]ew saints have a better claim to the title than Buddha; and no one in either the Greek or Roman Church need to be ashamed of having paid to his memory the honor that was intended for St. Josaphat, the prince, the hermit, and the saint.” Max Müller qtd. in K. S. MacDonald and John Morrison, eds. *The Story of Barlaam and Josaph: Buddhism and Christianity* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1895), liii. On Vishnu in the Buddhist pantheon, see John Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).


47. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*.


is the gurmukh, a person oriented toward the Guru, in the sense of both God as Satguru and the tradition’s founding figures. The idea that Nanak is part of the sant tradition is often viewed by Sikhs as problematic because, for example, it does not recognize the important distinctions between gurus and bhagats. See Pashaura Singh, *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).


60. Ibid., 120.


64. Or not. See, for example, Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Ricci’s work on vernacularized Arabic retains the close association of Islamic culture and textuality: “... Islamic culture ... was, by
definition, a culture of the Book” (19) rather than foregrounding an Islamic culture of the “holy man” often described, for example by Richard Eaton, in South Asian contexts.


66. Ibid., 166.


70. Ibid., 472.


72. The Quranic phrase, “let them do your work and you do yours,” for example, is used by Islamic shrine keepers in Punjab to account for and include different Islamic and Hindu ritual practices, seen as varied but valid means of maintaining relationship with the saint. See Bigelow, *Sharing the Sacred*, 188–189. For the non-exclusivity of indigenous and western scientific frameworks, see Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw, eds. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 5.


78. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*.


82. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 204.

83. See, for example, Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).


93. Freiberger, *Asceticism and Its Critics*.


96. Ibid., 8.


98. Personal Letter, Amy Turton to Sundar Singh, 4.23.1925, Depositum Heiller.


102. Following sainthood studies’ focus on medieval Catholicism, Lloyd’s and Bassett’s “Introduction” speaks of this type of saint as the “classical” model and presents it as the first, most apparent, form of sainthood studies, referred to as the “contextual” approach centered on canonized saints.


Notes

106. Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

5. On gender and materiality in Indian missions, see Eliza Kent, *Converting Women* (New York: Oxford, 2004). As Brian Pennington points out, much of the early ethnographic and popular literary record centered on descriptions of “face to face” meetings not, of course, with texts, but with “Hindu idols and priests,” an obsession also noted by Kent (105).


17. In contrast, Amiya Sen speaks of the earlier figure Rammohun Roy (d. 1833) as “perhaps the last great bastion” of Indo-Islamic culture in that region. See his *Explorations in Modern Bengal* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), 26.


20. Though he was born and retained the name Tirtha Rama in his pre-renunciant life, I refer to him throughout by his better-known, post-sannyasa name, Rama Tirtha, in order to avoid confusion.


24. Rama Tirtha, *Guru ke śrī caraṇoñ meñ Rāma Patra* [Rāma’s Letters at the Feet of the Guru], ed. R. S. Narayana (Lucknow: Swami Rama Pratishthān, 1997), viii. Subsequent references given as RP. Narayana Swami himself met Dhanna Rama when he traveled to Gujranwala in 1911 to recover the roughly one thousand letters that Rama Tirtha wrote between 1886 and 1900. Translations from RP here are mine.

25. Swami Venkatesananda, tr., *The Concise Śrimad Bhāgavatam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 173. These include, for example, divine remembrance (*ṣmṛṇa*), chanting Krishna’s holy name (*nāmjap*) and devout listening (*śravaṇa*) to the stories of the Lord’s deeds.


27. “Only when they are purified by bathing themselves in the dust of the feet of holy men does devotion arise in their hearts.” Venkatesananda tr., *Concise Śrimad Bhāgavata*, 173.


35. See, for example, Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698–1858* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012).

36. This was an important change from the situation in Bengal, for example, where the pioneering British missionary William Carey was forced to set up his Bible-translation “factory” among the more welcoming Danish. According to one colonial official in Bengal, the Gospel of Matthew “was likely to produce another Mahratta war.” Quoted in C. H. Loehlin, “The History of Christianity in the Punjab,” in *The Singh Sabha and Other Socio-Religious Movements in the Punjab (1850–1925)*, ed. Gandhi Singh (Patiala, India: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1997), 185. On Major Martin and other “Christian heroes” see Robert Clark, *The Missions of the Church Missionary Society and the Church

38. Clark, Missions of the Church Missionary Society, 3.
42. Cox, Imperial Fault Lines, 7.
43. This dominance should not mask the substantial diversity of missions organizations: “[During the] early twentieth century (the heyday of foreign mission work in India) more than thirty societies were at work alongside innumerable private individuals and small groups of locally based philanthropists and missionaries.” Ibid., 3.
45. Pinch, Peasants and Monks in British India, 25.
47. Quoted in Oman, Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India, 98.
49. Butler, Land of the Veda, 205–206. Nor were such roles new; Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra, a fourth-century-C.E. Sanskrit handbook on government, instructs spies to pose as ascetics while traveling, advice later adopted by the Mughal court historian Abu Fazl, in his own treatise on statecraft Ain-i Akbari. See Pinch, Warrior Ascetics, 46.
50. A legislated “daily roll-call of [ascetics]” and the restructuring of militant, non-brahminical Naga ascetic orders under new forms of elite, brahminical authority were some of the ways in which religion was actively reshaped. See Katherine Ewing, Arguing Sainthood, 55. For ascetics’ own awareness of the saffronization of their own robes, see G. S. Ghurye, Indian Sadhus (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1953), 123. For the colonial display of “idols” and heathen artifacts, see David Morgan, The Sacred Gaze (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 125–129 and 166–169.
52. Ibid., 402.
53. For example, see Bhairavānanda Yogī, 1950, quoted in White, Sinister Yogis.
54. On the asceticism as social critique see Romila Thapar, “Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?” in Cultural Pasts (New Delhi: Oxford, 2007), 876–913. For the largely overlooked connections between ancient asceticism and


58. Yelle, Language of Disenchantment, chs. 1, 2.


61. Ibid., 212.

62. Carl Ernst, Sufism, 3.

63. Butler, Land of the Veda, 191–192. Stories of corrupt Hindu “saints” exploiting the faith of naïve and vulnerable Hindu women in missionary reports and in Katherine Mayo’s Mother India echo and amplify such anti-Catholic anxieties well into the early twentieth century.

64. Butler, Land of the Veda, 195.

65. On the missionary link between idolatry and ascetic practice, see Kirin Narayan, “Refractions of the Field at Home,” 475.


67. Ibid., 191.

68. Ibid., 202.

69. Ibid., 225.

70. Ibid., 201.


73. Ibid., 198. Pinch, Warrior Ascetics, records a similar incident (239).


75. Ibid., 116.

76. Butler, Land of the Veda, 38.

77. Ibid., 38.


79. Oman, Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India, 95.

80. R. C. Zaehner, Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (London: Athlone Press, 1960). For the Islamic nature of Sufism, see Annemarie Schimmel, “Sufism and
81. Theologians of this tradition are Archibald Alexander of Princeton (d. 1851), his student, colleague, and then successor, Charles Hodge (d. 1878), and his son and successor Archibald Alexander Hodge.
82. John C. B. Webster, Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India (Delhi: MacMillan Co of India, 1976), 32.
83. Ibid., 31.
84. Butler, Land of the Veda, 224.
85. Ibid., 23.
86. Webster, Christian Community and Change, 94.
87. Samuel A. Kellogg, a student from Princeton of Charles Hodge and missionary in Landour, India, composed The Antagonism between Hinduism and Christianity in 1883. Ibid., 94.
89. Jones, Arya Dharma, 6.
90. Webster, Christian Community and Change, 34.
91. Joanne Waghorne, Raja’s Magic Clothes, 3.
92. Ibid., 6.
93. By 1832 Carey’s press in Serampore had produced religious materials in forty-four languages and dialects. In Punjab, the Rev. Newton prepared a Gurmukhi Punjabi Grammar, helped compile the Gurmukhi Punjabi Dictionary (1854), and revised part of Carey’s incomplete Gurmukhi Bible (1868). The Punjabi Church songbook is mainly the metrical arrangements of the Book of Psalms by the Rev. Imam ud-Din Shahbaz of Gurdaspur. The earliest Presbyterian missionaries sent to Punjab, John C. Lowrie and William Reed, arrived in Calcutta in 1833 and met with the famed Alexander Duff, “whose ideas and example so greatly influenced their own educational work.” See Webster, Christian Community and Change, 13.
94. Ibid., 16.
95. Quoted in Cox, Imperial Fault Lines, 1.
96. Masuzawa, Invention of World Religions, 23.
97. Ibid., 3–4, 78, 224–228.
98. Narayan, “Refractions from the Field at Home,” 486, overlooks theological ambivalence and indigenous creativity in the complicated convergences of colonial Christianity and living asceticism.
Kali Charan Chatterjee (d. 1916), was a Bengali Kulin Brahmin convert. In 1864, he was invited by Golak Nath to run the Jullunder mission school and served as President of the Board of Governors of Forman Christian College in Lahore (1886–1915). See Webster, *Christian Community and Change*, 52–53.

Ibid., 125.


*Report of the Punjab Missionary Conference held at Lahore in December and January, 1862–1863* (Lodiana, 1863), 166: “If the missionary, renouncing his refinement, and coming down from his social position, would adopt the life of a Hindoo *fukeer*, retire from his family and friends, and live in a Dhurmsala with his converts, sympathy could easily be secured.”


Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 64.


Kent, *Converting Women*, ch. 6.

Ganesh Das Vadhera, *Chār Bāgh-e-Punjāb*, tr. Gandhi Singh (Patiala: Punjabi Book Depository, 1975). Ganesh Das was a Hindu Khatri official in the Sikh empire that ended in 1849; he composed this regional history at the request of the conquering English in 1855.


Ibid., 122. When the term *faqir* appears alone, it indicates Islamic traditions, related to the terms *pir*, *wali*, *darvesh*, *sayyid*, and *abdul*. So fundamental is this Islamic idiom to this Hindu author that the *faqir* model can become adjectival, the praiseworthy quality of the “dervishness” of non-ascetics. This usage will be echoed specifically in Sundar Singh’s first Urdu text, discussed in Chapter 7. Also noteworthy here is the near absence of terms that, in the twentieth century, dominated representations of Indian saints of brahminical and bhakti streams, sannyasi and *sant*.

See Richard Eaton, “The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid,” in *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 207–209. Bābā Farīd (d. 1265), a figure who appears in the *janam-sakhis* and in the Guru Granth, settled in Pakpattan, southwestern Punjab. Farid is the third *pir* in the pre-eminent Indian *silsila* of the Chistīs, the only indigenous order among the four major ones in the region.

See Simon Digby, “Tabarrukāt and Succession Among the Great Chishti Shaykhs of the Delhi Sultanate,” in *Delhi Through the Ages: Essays in Urban*

115. Quoted in White, Sinister Yogi's, 228.

116. Ernst, Sufism, 61. Similarly, Delhi’s most famous Chisti saint, Nizam ad-Din Auliya, despite his aversion for associating with sultans, made frequent comments on recent political events and the “kings and nobles” on whom the saint himself bestowed the patched Sufi frock, a material sign of submission to the authority of the shaykh.


120. For Sufi parallels on the faqir’s role in military victories in Punjab, see Anna Bigelow, Sharing the Sacred (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 38–45.

121. See Simon Digby, Wonder Tales of South Asia (Jersey, Channell Islands: Orient Monographs, 2000).

122. McLeod, Sikhs and Sikhism, 254.

123. Ibid., 253.


125. Ganesh Das Vadhera, Char Bagh-e-Punjab, 120.


130. Puran Singh, Story of Swami Rama, 96.


**Chapter 3**

1. See, for example, Sanjay Joshi’s critique of Partha Chatterjee’s notion of an “inner” and “alternative” Indian modernity, in “Republicizing Religiousity: Modernity, Religion and the Middle Class,” in *The Invention of Religion*, ed. Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 80–81.

2. David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis*.


5. Susan Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, “The Coffee House and the Ashram Revisited,” in *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 140–176. As noted in this essay (162), ascetic ashrams and certain bhakti groups were perhaps the main social sites in which voluntarism was well established in premodern India.


23. For the role of secular literature in producing Englishness in the colonies, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.
27. Ibid., 90–91.
28. Ibid., 91.
29. Ibid., 93.
36. Quoted in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 102. Schelling was also critical of oversimplifications of the ideas of the Upanishads, such as Rammohun Roy’s attempt to uncover a “pure theism” and “rational religion.” As an Idealist and a Romantic, philosophy and religion were never merely rational for Schelling.
40. Ibid., 63.
43. Quoted in Cromwell Crawford, “Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s Attitude,” in *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 40–41. Though Roy is often described as kind of Hindu “Unitarian,” his many Unitarian contacts in England and America were the result of rather than the cause of his own work in Bengal.
52. Ibid., 225.
53. Ibid., 222.
56. Ibid., ch. 5.


62. Ibid., 91–92.

63. Ibid., 79.


66. Ibid., 250.


72. One contemporary missionary description suggests this tension and the feminine-gendering of the ascetic: “In recent years a marked growth of devotional fervor, solitary contemplation, ascetic austerities, and sweetness of prayer is evident. … But unfortunately there is no corresponding elevation of moral character. … [Amid] the development of softer emotions, the sterner virtues seem to have been neglected, such as frankness, justice, forgiveness, veracity, and self-surrender. On the other hand, there has been an increase in mutual jealousy, pride, vanity and selfishness.” Quoted in Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 24.

73. Sen, *Keshub Chandra Sen*, 64.

74. Ibid., 216.

75. Ibid., 216.

76. Ibid., 217.

77. The Eurocentric Christ died hard “even among Unitarian Christians,” making Keshub’s ascetic and Indianized Jesus a genuine departure from the earlier Brahmo phase. See Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 114.


89. Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, 268. Cf. Sawhney, “Bhagat Singh,” in Malhotra and Mir, *Punjab Reconsidered*, 384, who points out that: “This West was not perceived as monolithic . . . The figure of a fissured European, divided not only by intra-state wars, but more crucially, by radically different visions of a European and world future—enabled Bhagat Singh and his comrades to conceive their own cosmopolitanism and historical significance in terms that may no longer be available to youth in the third world.”
90. Amiya Sen, *Rammohan Roy*.
92. See Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, 286. Before Calcutta, Dayananda’s approach was situational and haphazard, “very much in the manner of the wandering sannyāśī.”
93. The “wonderful” effect of this encounter is described in Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, 109. Brahmo preference for the vernacular over Sanskrit, adoption of colonial print culture, engagement with Christianity and Islam, organizational strategies and innovations in dress help explain Dayananda’s new adoption of Hindi, penning of his famous *Satyārtha Prakāśa* (1874), polemic against non-Aryan faiths, and abandonment of ascetic nakedness.
94. Ibid., 109.
95. For Jones, the Punjabi Dev Samaj, founded by Satyananda Agnihotri, broke with the Brahmos and created a new Hinduism centered around the “guru,” in contrast to Dayananda’s attempt to “modernize with the book.” Jones, *Arya Dharma*, 115.
96. On other modernizing tendencies, see Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, 203–206.
100. Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*.
103. For a recent call for more attention to embodiment in this context, see Kirin Narayan, “Refractions of the Field at Home,” 500): “[O]ne aspect of this study that invites further reflection is why negative images were fixated on the holy man’s body, while positive, romantic representations bypassed corporeal issues and, instead, focused on the holy man as a disembodied locus of Hindu spirituality. … The disembodied positive image also paved the way for flesh and blood gurus to attract audiences in America, even though, on arrival, the men regained bodies, as in the case of Vivekananda, whose corporeality had to be negotiated between negative and positive poles of imagery.”
105. White, *Sinister Yogis*, 244. White’s interpretation here seems especially peculiar since the “sages of vedic lore,” far from being purely “spiritual renouncers,” were precisely those who provided access to the heavenly weapons through their knowledge of mantras and accumulated tapas.
109. As Sawhney argues, ideas of martyrdom in revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh “oddly converged with the spiritual leanings of some of his friends in emphasizing the relative insignificance of the individual.” See Sawhney, “Bhagat Singh,” in ibid., 398.
111. Farquhar’s classic account associates “vigorous reform” with Rammohan Roy and others, who, he points out, were importantly not sannyasi; in contrast to
those whose approach was more “traditional,” ascetics such as Vivekananda and Dayananda and stood against the dual tide of modernizing and Christian conversion. See Farquhar, Modern Religious Movements in India, 29.


113. Hatcher, Eclecticism, 18.


115. Copley, Gurus and Their Followers, 9.


119. King, Orientalism and Religion, 68.

120. Hansen, Saffron Wave, 67.

121. Ashis Nandy, Intimate Enemy, 25. See also, 45. “[H]e tried to turn Hinduism into an organized monotheism (albeit a goddess-centered one), complete with The Book (the Vedas and the Gita), priests (order of monks), and even missionaries.”


126. Ibid., 79.

127. Ibid., 84.

128. For work that continues to move this debate forward, see, for example, Arvind Mandair, Religion and the Specter of the West (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).


130. Farina Mir, The Social Space of Language, 124. My three questions are based loosely on and directly incorporate some of the language of Mir’s similar challenge to settled norms of South Asian historiography. Her work focuses on the continuity of Punjab’s literary formation as a counter to the emphasis on colonial hegemony, the unit of the region as a counter-territory to the space of the nation, and the category of gender as key to locating neglected forms
of agency and a counter to the story of newly hardened gender norms within Indian socioreligious reform movements.


132. Quoted in ibid., 78.

133. By 1881 converts in Punjab numbered 3,912 and were located mostly in Lahore, Amritsar, and Sialkot, and Delhi to Southeast. Within ten years this number expanded to 19,750, an increase of 410 percent. By 1901 there were 37,980 and by 1911, 163,994. While these figures remain a very small percentage of overall population, the rapid increase in rate proved alarming to many Indians. See Jones, *Arya Dharma*, 10. Overall, as Jones puts it, the “juggernaut” (13) of Christian mission in Punjab produced an exaggerated and more extreme image than elsewhere in the subcontinent.

134. Ibid., 1.

135. The murder of one of Dayananda’s followers, Lekh Rām, in the late 1890s was a symptom of these larger tensions.


141. Ibid., 25.

142. Ibid., 26.

143. In *Warrior Ascetics*, 56, Pinch describes the popular story told to John Marshall, an East India Company trader living in Patna in 1670, and recorded in his notebook under the title “Jougee Eckbar.”


3. Ibid., 11.
4. Ibid., xii.
12. Ibid., 6.
13. Older images of Sai Baba of Sirdi, for example, who was brought up by Sufis, show him dressed in white in the style of a faqir, i.e., in a kafni robe and head-dress, but have given way to “Hindu” saffron. See Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 94. On the visual saffronization of Ramakrishna, see Sumit Sarkar, “Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti,” 286.
15. For a discussion of Roland Barthes’s views of image and text in the emergence of photography, see Andy Stafford, *Photo-texts: Contemporary French Writing of the Photographic Image* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 44–46. While the “caption” attempts to “imprison” or pin-down the image, Barthes’s notion of “relay” expresses the unfixed possibilities in the text-image dialectic.
21. Pramod K. Nayar, *English Writing and India*
26. A telegram of April 15, 1924 reads: “Viceroy desires that confiscation of yellow clothes should not take place. He considers that any gain which may result from confiscation is incommensurate with risk of providing sure ground for plausible agitation on religious aspect.” From the Political Secretary to the Government of India, Shimla to Administration, Nabha Jaitu (PPSF).
33. Philip Deslippes, “The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic,” *Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 42. “Third based his eligibility upon a claim to whiteness through ‘the sole fact that he is of high-caste Hindu stock, born in Punjab, one of the extreme northwestern districts of India, and classified by certain scientific authorities as of the Caucasian or Aryan race.’”
37. The first section in one 1922 tract of Rama Tirtha’s sayings is organized under the heading of “India” with saying such as, “To realize God, have the Sannyasa spirit, i.e., entire renunciation of self-interest, making the little self absolutely at one with the great self of Mother India.” Rama Tirtha, *Heart of Rama, or, a Collection of the Instructive Teachings of Swami Rama Tirtha* (Lucknow: The Rama Tirtha Publication League, 1922), 2.

43. Many of Rama Tirtha’s American lectures were recorded verbatim and later typed by Pauline Whitman, an ardent admirer, and discovered among his few possessions after his death.

44. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*.


47. Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, 81.


53. Although Theosophy proposed a similar union of the Orient and science, and could thus be seen as a western source for Rama Tirtha’s appeal, Theosophical rhetoric typically spoke positively of esoteric phenomena such as magic, hypnosis, and mediums, all of which Rama Tirtha ignored or rejected, and treated “conventional” science as incomplete or even “misleading.” See Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2004), 220–221.


55. Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, ch. 3.


57. For an example of western scientific recoil at Theosophical, Indian scientific hybrids connected with yogic and “fakir” breathing techniques, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 81–82.


62. “My religion is not Hinduism, Mohammedanism, Christianity, Catholicism, or Protestantism, but it is antagonistic to none. The overlapping area covered by
the light, the sun, the stars, the rivers, gravity, mind and body, this is the field of my religion. Are there any Presbyterian lilies?” quoted in Puran Singh, *Story of Swami Rama*, 140.


64. Of course, not all western narratives of progress relied on Christianity as a key factor; however, in the colonial context in which Rama Tirtha lived and worked, Christianity was generally united with the benign civilizing influence of the England. In *Modern Religious Movements in India*, for example, J. N. Farquhar’s description of the changes in modern forms of Hinduism located the source in two factors working in tandem: the impact of modern education and the presence of Christian mission.


68. Ibid., 256, 273.

69. Ibid., 421.

70. Rama Tirtha, *Kulliyāt-e Rām*, 351.


72. Other pairs used include the Sanskrit, *karm aur upāsana* (works and worship) followed in Arabic with *shariat aur tariqat* (law and spiritual techniques); similarly, the Bhagavad Gita’s path of works, *karma mārga*, is linked with the Arabic *jadah-i amāl*, the path of good works.

73. Tirtha, “Tamassuk,” 312.


75. Rama Tirtha, “Tamassuk,” 312.

76. While this phrase could be taken to mean “colored in the color of his own self,” in the sense of inwardly colored like the atman, the phrase “colorfully adorned” suggests attention to the actual dress of the ascetic, connecting the inner and outer colors of the faqir’s identity.

77. See Olivelle, *Renunciation in Hinduism*, 18. Shankara, in his commentary on Bhagavad Gita 2.10, suggests that physical renunciation is only for Brahmins, not Kshatriyas; thus, the reason for Krishna’s advice to Arjuna that he should fight had more to do with *varna* than any other factor.


79. On the role of experience in neo-Hinduism, including mention of Sundar Singh as an important Indian Christian comparative example, see Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 379–387; for contextualist approaches to mysticism, see Steven Katz, ed. *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); on
the role of scripture and experience in neo- and classical Advaitin Hindu traditions, see Rambachan, *Limits of Scripture*.


84. Faisal Devji, *Impossible Indian*, ch. 3. In Rama Tirtha’s model, based on neither fraternity nor friendship, but on recognition, confronting the constructive play and malleability of perception itself is the precondition to unsettling the “false fixities” of sameness and difference. Arguably, this approach goes beyond the usual nature(choice dichotomies in discussions of equality.

### Chapter 5

1. In contrast, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907), the Roman Catholic Bengali convert and self-proclaimed Hindu sannyasi, for example, lectured extensively on Vedanta during his visit to England.

2. David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*.


5. Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self*.


11. The work of the comparative religion scholar Friedrich Heiler represents this strain of interest and adulation well. His 1927 book, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, addresses all these questions, situating Sundar Singh amid an august range of Christian heroes and saints and, offering a Christian alternative to the near contemporary *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.


13. Ibid., 16.

18. I am indebted to Eric Sharpe’s *The Riddle of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, for noting the absence of this dramatic conversion story in earlier texts, an absence my own research confirms and amplifies.
24. Ibid., 52.
27. Beckerlegge, “Śvāmī Vivekānanda’s Iconic Presence.”
34. Morgan, *Sacred Gaze*, 130. Morgan broadens the Orthodox sense of the “icon” to suggest the felt sacred presence in and through any (even “secular”) images’ “iconic” status: “seeing them means encountering their referents in a powerful way.” It is important to point out, however, that the reciprocal sense of darshan, in which the viewer both sees and is seen by the sacred persona in the image, sacred material form or person is missing from the concept of iconicity, rooted perhaps in the context of two-dimensional art from Orthodox icons to modern photography and press images.
37. Goodwin, *Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland*, 5. For similar passages invoking an Oriental biblical imagination see 8, 12.
39. One Indian Christian writing to the Madras publication *The Christian Patriot* (May 13, 1922, no. 19), argues, for example, that the Christian “apotheosis” of Gandhi as Christ went too far, but that the Mahatma could legitimately be recognized as a “jeevanmukta” (NSC). P. W. Wilson’s “The Things that Are Caesar’s” (April 9, 1922) in the *The New York Times*, ends its unfavorable comparison between the “non-cooperation of Christ” and that of Gandhi, with the claim that Sundar Singh’s suffering as an “untouchable” because of his Christian conversion far surpasses any of Gandhi’s sufferings in prison, proving the former is Christ’s true “humble servant.”


43. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 86.


47. Kalmar, “Jesus Did Not Wear a Turban,” 23.


51. Ibid., 15.


54. Letter of Vincent David, August, 1918, (VPC-SSS). At Sufi shrines (*dargahs*), scarves and cloths (*chādar*) are especially emphasized as a material of sacred exchange and blessing (*baraka*), and often carry powerful scriptural language on them.


56. Ibid., 107.


62. Ibid., 34.
67. Ibid., 13.
68. Ibid., 22, 29.
69. Quoted in Heiler, Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh, 53. Cf. Goodwin, Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland, 31. Also compare, for example, Rama Tirtha’s saying: “Europeans and Americans exult to clothe their bright skin in dark or brownish clothes. The black apparel does not signify a dark body. So, the Hindus prefer dark skin to clothe a bright glorious Soul” (IWGR 5: 94).
71. Goodwin, Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland, 30.
73. For a discussion of the general western perception of Indian converts and their “mixed motives” as inferior to the “spiritual” motives of missionaries, see Jeffrey Cox, Imperial Fault Lines.
76. Prothero, American Jesus, 119.
78. Ibid., 500.
79. Appasamy, Sundar Singh, 173.
80. Jeffrey Cox is right to point out this continuity, but does not account for the differentials of Sundar Singh’s “Eastern”/colonial identity and the particularity of his historical, post-WWI moment. See Imperial Fault Lines, 231.
81. Goodwin, Sadhu Sundar Singh in Switzerland, 56.
83. Streeter, for example, represents Sundar Singh as being totally uninterested in “Home Rule” because the sadhu is more interested in spiritual things, such as his true “Home” in heaven (The Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh, 78).


88. Appasamy, Sundar Singh, 181.

89. Lloyd and Bassett, “Introduction,” in Sainthood and Race, 6.


91. Flood, Ascetic Self.

92. Although Flood mentions “ritual” as an important part of tradition and transmission in asceticism (ibid., 214), his treatment of ascetic dress is scant.


95. Ghurye, Indian Sadhus, 106.


97. The Sikh janamsakhis, for example, record verbal descriptions and include paintings of Guru Nanak’s hybrid forms of ascetic dress and the shifting sartorial displays that shaped his reception history. North India Sufi hagiographies and narratives multiply the spiritual functions of dress, including its role as ascetic discipline, charismatic object of lineage transfer, and revealer and concealer of “true” identities.

98. W. L. Smith, Patterns in North Indian Hagiography (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 2000), 74.

99. Waghorne, Raja’s Magic Clothes, 256.

100. Bhāratī, The Ochre Robe, 184.

101. In Ramayana, for example, Rama’s exile is marked as ascetic through dress made from tree bark.

102. The illustrated B40 janamsakhi manuscript of 1733, for example, represents Sufi faqirs dressed in blue robes. As Nanak travels among them on the way to Mecca, he too is dressed in blue. Surjit Hans, ed., B-40 Janamsakhi: Guru Baba
Notes


103. Cohn, “Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism,” 117.

104. Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room*, 203–204.

105. Aditya Behl, email message to author, May 22, 2007. This takes place at the Chisti shrine at Ajmer.

106. “On one foot he wore a shoe and on the other a wooden sandal. Over the lower part of his body he wrapped a length of yellow cloth and over the upper part a length of ochre cloth. On his head he wore a hat (top) covering his ears and the back of his head, and on his forehead a tilak” (*B40 Janamsākhī*, 109); quoted in Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, 81.


108. Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, 80.


115. Ibid., 8–9.

116. Commenting on this passage Cox concludes, “As a potential leader in an Indian Christian community faced with growing anxieties about their political status, Sundar Singh had little to offer beyond prayer and personal holiness” (*Imperial Fault Lines*, 232).


118. “[S]tudy the lives of the Gurus from Nanak to Gobind Singh, and you will find that they were saints that renounced the world, but when such men draw sword [sic] for the protection of the oppressed, it is the spirit of the nation and its yearning. . . . [Shivaji’s] reins were in the hands of Sadhus and Sannyasis, whose spirit was working in the heart of the whole nation,” writes one Punjabi seditious period. Ibid., 90.


123. The popular association of Sufis and criminals is common. See, for example, Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood*, 209.


127. Discussing the meaning of *tark-al duniya*, Nizam ad-Din Awliya says: “Rejection of the world does not mean that one should strip oneself of clothes or put on a loin cloth and sit idle. Instead ‘rejection of the world’ means that one may put on clothes and take food. What comes (unasked) should be accepted but not hoarded. One should not place one’s heart on anything. Only this is rejection of the world.” Nizam ad-Din Awliya, *Morals for the Heart*, 12–13.


129. Ibid., 20–21.


**Chapter 6**

1. As discussed in more detail below, I use the term “autobiography” inclusively, to refer to any writing by an individual that is mainly about his or her own life and that is written for a wider audience than forms such as the diary.


15. Ibid., 158.
16. Ibid., 153.
20. Ibid., xxi.
24. Openshaw, *Writing the Self*, also observes a strong link between renunciation and self-writing.
25. Anne Murphy, “*Gurbilās,*” in Malhotra and Mir, *Punjab Reconsidered*, 100. Murphy writes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “the narration of the Guru’s life constitutes the means for the formation of the Sikh community.” Bhai Vir Singh’s story was actually first published serially in the *Khālsā Samācār* starting in 1907; see Denis Matringe, “The Re-enactment of Gurū Nānak’s Charisma in an Early-twentieth-century Panjabi Narrative,” in Dalmia, Malinar and Christof, *Charisma and Canon*, 205–222.
30. Ibid., 583.
31. Ibid., 583.
32. K. Narayan’s *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, 47–56, for example, relates the life history of the author’s family guru and focus of her ethnography. On learning she wanted to record his life story, Swamiji “promptly sat me down to tape what he had to say.”
37. Ibid., xl.
39. Openshaw, *Writing the Self*, 124; Sumit Sarkar, “Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti.”. Compare Puran Singh’s description of the “stone wall which usually meets the Indian graduates after. … College. … To rise to an Extra Assistant Commissionership, a low, stupid Government post, was the height of the ambition of the Punjabi young man then, and is perhaps the same even now.” (*Story of Swami Rama*, xii).
40. Again, Hatcher’s “Sanskrit Pandits Recall Their Youth” helpfully reminds us that the model of “laicization” sometimes invoked to describe modern Hinduism is far too simple.
42. E. Valentine Daniel quoted in Farina Mir, *Social Space of Language*, 137.
43. See Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives*, 70–84.
44. He practiced Vaishnava devotionalism into the late 1890s, including a rosary (*mālā*) for remembrance of the holy name of Krishna (*nāmjap*), listening to the Lord’s deeds, and devotional song: “At present my mind demands Bhajan at any price” (RP: 6).
46. See Rama Tirtha’s story of *sant* Namdev, which at times elides the saint’s story and his own (IWGR 4: 117–120).
48. The story of Laila Majnun is recited, for example, at the shrine of Shāh Husain in Lahore. See Mir, *Social Space of Language*, 122.
49. Ibid., 157.
50. Quoted in ibid., 158.
55. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 71–75.
56. *Hadd ropa so auliyā, behadd ropa so pīr hadd-behadd donoṅ ropa ākā nām fāqīr*.
57. The above account is based on Narayana Swami’s “A Short Life of Rama Tirtha,” in *Kulliyāt-e-Rām*, 228.
58. See Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, for the customary significance of the *laṅgoṛī* and the Seth in ascetic storytelling traditions, especially chapters 5 and 7.
61. David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 173. “In complete contrast to the watchword of the Enlightenment ‘Dare to reason for yourself’, the guru requires submission from the disciple, whose own limited power of reason might inhibit understanding of superior truths. In the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for example, King Janaka is accused of stating the patently obvious thusly: ‘Why, that’s like someone saying that he has a father, a mother, or a teacher (guru)!’” Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53. The guru is a fact as natural as birth itself.
62. Describing the *puja* carried out before the guru of the Dev Samāj Agnihotri, Ruchi Rāma writes, “Frankly had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would have refused to believe that, of all the men in the world, Agnihotri would allow himself to be worshipped with lights and scents and flowers all in a thal (plate), or that well educated men, including graduates would so far forget themselves as to perform what I certainly consider a degrading act of human worship.” Quoted in Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm*, 118.
67. Ibid., 97. Narayana Swami protested this element of Puran Singh’s first version of the text, and Puran Singh removed it in later editions. However, the suggestion that Rama Tirtha never was meant to be a monk, still less a Vedantin, and his critique of traditional Indian asceticism remained in later versions, if less explicit. See ibid., 230–231. Though now admitting Rama had “not forced himself into the ochre robe of a Sannyasin” as he had earlier stated, Puran Singh could still assert, “But he was too poetic and too emotional to have been at all comfortable in this garb.” *Story of Swami Ram*, 243.
modern Sikhism’s aversion to asceticism that Dulai equates Puran Singh’s taking sannyasa with his abandonment of Sikhism and his return to householder life as his return to Sikhism.

70. Anne Murphy, “Gurbilās,” in Malhotra and Mir, Punjab Reconsidered, 100.
71. The contemporary mockumentary film Kumare (2011) by Vikram Gandhi centers on just this idea.
72. Masuzawa, Invention of World Religions, ch. 3.
73. Ibid.,115–116.
74. It seems that Rama Tirtha anticipated Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian,” with this anonymous Vedantins framework.
75. Anshu Malhotra, “Panths and Piety,” in Malhotra and Mir, Punjab Reconsidered, 211.
76. King, Orientalism and Religion, 136. See IWGR 4: 314 for Rama Tirtha’s contrast of Buddha with Buddhism.
77. Rama Tirtha is thus aware of the difference between the neo-Vedantin emphasis on experience (anubhava) and the epistemic privilege of scripture (shruti) in classical Advaita, explored by Rambachan, Limits of Scripture.
78. I am indebted to conversations with Aditya Behl for the initial formulation of this comparison.

Chapter 7

3. Barbara Metcalf, Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79. The features are the innately given nature of the self, the nonlinear quality of the narrative, a focus on key moments in life as divine intervention, and the idea that one’s life as a whole functions as the memorial of key figures of the past.
7. Louis Dumont, “World Renunciation in Indian Religions.”


11. For the theological dimensions of Augustine’s reading of Paul’s conversion in contrast to other less “instant” ascetic versions, see Paula Fredricksen, “Augustine’s Early Interpretation of Paul” (Ph.D. dissertation: University Microfilms, 1986).


22. Sufi malfūzāt literature offers historical examples. See also Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*.


Notes

35. Ibid., 44–48.
36. Ibid., 76.
37. Ibid., 77.
42. Ibid., 39.
45. Ibid., 28.
46. Ibid., 15.
47. Ibid., 18.
54. While noting the macabre and the gruesome in some strains of Victorian writing, Moran shows how theological vision, literary decorum, and modernizing sensibilities transform bodily detail, rendering the martyr’s visible body “invisible” and her voice “silent” (486–487). See Moran, “Art of Looking Dangerously,” 486–487, 489–490.
Notes

58. Ibid., 41. The story of Kartar Singh appears first in Sundar Singh’s letter to Nur Afshan published on March 18, 1912.
59. Ibid., 42.
60. Ibid., 42.
61. For bhakti precedents for holy nakedness in Mirabai’s life, see W. L. Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, 86.
63. Ibid., 75.
68. See Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*.
72. For example, see Streeter, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 33.
73. In the absence of the Urdu original of Sundar Singh’s letter in Nur Afshan, I translate from Zahir’s Urdu version of this story, told to him and endorsed by Sundar Singh himself, as given in *Shaida-i Salib*, 50–59. The substantial agreement between English translations of letters written by Sundar Singh and this Urdu version suggests that Zahir’s Urdu likely largely follows Sundar Singh’s own. The earliest account of the Maharishi appears in *Nur Afshan*, November 7, 1913.
76. Olivelle, “Deconstruction of the Body in Indian Asceticism,” 204.
79. For contemporary Urdu usage of *buzurg* in a Sufi context, see Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood*, 123.
82. *Munis* in Rig Veda (10.136), Gorakhnath, and Guru Nanak are among the many examples of flying South Asian holy men. See Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, 92.
83. Muhammad’s sinless heart is traced to Sura 94, his “ascent” to Sura 17, and both are elaborated in the hadith literature. See Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 67–69 and 159–175.


89. Sharpe, *Riddle of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 56.


91. While the Raj’s policy of religious toleration might seem a “secular” feature, no less a document than the declaration of that policy itself by the Queen Empress upon the Crown’s takeover of India from the East India Company in 1858 made clear that British and Christian identity were one and the same.

92. Though Sundar Singh actually first met Stokes in 1904 and Stokes was instrumental in his baptism in 1905, the *Collection* makes no mention of him until 1906.


94. Ibid., 29.

95. Ibid., 10, 14, 16.

96. For an example of scholarship on colonial India that engages Irigaray’s notion of abjection, see Rebecca M. Brown, “Abject to Object: Colonialism Preserved through the Imagery of Muharram,” 203–217.


98. Dobe, “Flaunting the Secret.”

99. Singh, *Collection of Incidents*, 23. Sundar Singh’s sermons from this trip have been collected in J. H. Rowlands and H. R. Ghose, eds. *Sermons and Sayings of Sadhu Sundar Singh during His Visit to the Khasi Hills*. (Syhlet, 1924).


103. Ibid., 31.

104. Ibid., 14.

105. Ibid., 14–15.

106. Ibid., 16–17.

107. As Narayan (*Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, 30) points out, the imagery of groups beyond the pale of social order is hardly unique to colonial discourse but has long structured Hindu folk narrative: “The jungle, where indigenous tribal people live, is a ‘heart of darkness’ for the caste Hindu imagination: here, *adharma*, the forces of chaos opposing the ordered social world, holds sway.”

110. Ibid., 40.
111. Ibid., 41.
112. Ibid., 2–4.
113. Dobe, “Flaunting the Secret.”
114. Nur Afshan. 10.27.1916: 5.
115. Nur Afshan 7.27.1917: 6. This is the name of the ancient sage, or rishi, and one of the seven seers (saptarṣi) in the Puranic paradigm. Viśvāmitra is an attendee of key mythic sacrifices, such as that of Bali in the story of the dwarf avatara, Vāmana, and is a central character in the story of King Hariścandra. In Ramayana, he is guru to Rama and Lakshman. Appropriately, though he is identified in the present story as a Brahmin, is the only Puranic seer who is, in fact, a Kshatriya—a hybrid precursor of a Christian Brahmin.
117. For the Hindu context, see Antonio Rigopolous, The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 131.
121. John Webster, The Christian Community and Change, 16.
123. Cox, Imperial Fault Lines, chs. 3 and 4.
127. Ibid., 224–225. On Imad ud Din, see Powell, “Pillar of a New Faith,” 238–239.
131. Simon Digby, “Tabarrukāṭ.”

**CONCLUSION**

1. Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion.
3. Robert Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth, 2.
13. Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions.
15. Ibid., 215.
17. Pennington, Was Hinduism Invented?, 4–5, 11.
20. Ibid., ch. 9.
21. William Pinch, “Same Difference in India and Europe,” History & Theory 38, no. 3 (1999): 389–407. Pinch cites Christopher Bayly’s criticism of some uses of Foucault for “sometimes serv[ing] to marginalize Indians and their knowledge as thoroughly as the most hidebound colonial administrative history.” See also
Richard Eaton’s critique of postcolonialism’s fixation with “discourse” as a new kind of myopic structuralism in Essays on Islam and Indian History (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).


23. Pinch, “Same Difference.”


31. Ibid., 6.


34. Hatcher, Eclecticism, 5.


37. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth, 12.


40. Singleton, Yoga Body, 21.


44. Catherine Bell, “Performance,” in Mark C. Taylor, Critical Terms for Religious Studies, 211.


49. Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 43.


52. Devji, Impossible Indian, ch. 1.


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