

## 1 Representing Violence

For many who have been drawn to the study of Sikhs and Sikhism, the prevalence of external observable violence – whether in the form of its martial tradition, the centrality of the “spiritual warrior” (*sant sipāhī*) motif, the veneration of martyrs and martyrdom, proclivities towards antistate resistance in the form of guerilla warfare well into the late twentieth century, or its associations with terrorism and state insurgency – has provided a powerful source of fascination. Such fascination is not surprising given that Sikh history is replete with instances of violence that begin as early as the period of the later Sikh Gurus, and continue all the way into the last decades of the twentieth century. Ironically, it is the “spectacle” of violence associated with Sikhs and Sikh politics in the 1980s that attracted scholarly attention in the first place and brought Sikhism to world attention.

Notable examples of “spectacular” violence involving Sikh organizations and individuals in high-profile events of political violence, especially during the 1980s, include the following: (i) nonviolent mass protests organized by the main Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, against the ruling Congress Party’s imposition of Emergency in 1975, which proved instrumental in ousting Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from power in 1977; (ii) a spate of bombings, hijackings, and political assassinations of police officials and public notaries linked to Congress or the Hindu right; (iii) from 1980–83, the rise of Sikh militant groups inspired by the charismatic cleric Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, targeting law enforcement agencies and politicians; (iv) in early 1984, the occupation of the Akal Takht building located in the Golden Temple complex, the central pilgrimage site of Sikhism, by Bhindranwale and his supporters; (v) between June 5 and 7 of the same year, under the orders of Prime Minister Gandhi, the Indian Army’s military operation to oust Bhindranwale resulted in the massacre of around 3,000 people, including Indian soldiers, innocent pilgrims, and Bhindranwale himself; (vi) in October 1984, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, followed by three days of anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi and throughout India, resulting in the massacre of over 5,000 Sikhs; (vii) the rise of a major Sikh insurgency in India supported by transnational diasporic networks fighting for the establishment of an independent Sikh state called

Khalistan; (viii) the blowing up of Air India flight 182, killing 336 passengers off the coast of Ireland – an act allegedly perpetrated by Sikh militants, although there has been increasing speculation that the operation may have been orchestrated by Indian intelligence agencies; (ix) a decade of state-sponsored terrorism by Indian paramilitary forces to suppress the Sikh insurgency, resulting in routine disappearances, tortures, and extra-judicial executions of tens of thousands of combatant and noncombatant Sikhs.

The above list represents a few among hundreds of catalogued events of political violence involving Sikhs. Between 1980 and 1992, these instances of violence were closely monitored by news media around the world that, by and large, followed a trend set by Indian state media of profiling turbaned Sikhs as religious fanatics. Further, Sikhism was portrayed as a religious system with a proclivity towards both violence and the disruption of liberal democratic law.

In line with this, some academic scholars reestablished a resilient narrative representing two opposing versions of Sikhism precariously situated between peace and violence. This narrative centered around a “peaceful Sikhism” inclined towards its founding figure Guru Nānak, depicted in this narrative as a pacifist, purely spiritual person who did not get involved in the politics of the day. This is juxtaposed against a “violent Sikhism” that, according to the very same narrative, follows the example of later Gurus who attracted unruly elements into the movement and became involved in worldly politics and violence against the Mughal state.

Since the late 1990s scholars have paid closer attention to the underlying causes of the Sikh–India conflict, resulting in a more nuanced picture of Sikh involvement in violence. In spite of extensive research on this topic, however, the structural dualism of the narrative distinguishing “peaceful” from “violent” Sikhism has not only further embedded itself into contemporary representations of Sikhism, but makes two key assumptions about the nature of violence itself. First, that observable (external) violence is the only kind of violence there is; that violence consists essentially of an empirical, therefore recordable/datable, event in historical time; and that this empirical event is all we need to understand the nature of violence in the study of Sikhism. Second, that violence is essentially a fall or deviation from its originally nonviolent religio-spiritual or devotional state. Reproduced in

encyclopedias, textbooks, academic research, TV documentaries, world religions textbooks, and the Internet, the dualist narrative not only provides a simplistic explanation for the transition from pacifism to violence, but also makes a fundamental distinction between two forms of Sikhism – its “authentic” or properly religious form, versus the “inauthentic” (because deviant) form that involves itself with violence.

Closer scrutiny reveals several problems with this narrative. Once it is structurally established, it is a very short step to assuming that Sikhs are innately violent or that Sikhism is inherently prone to violent insurrection against the rule of any state. This view was actively propagated by sectors of the Indian media and state apparatus during the 1980s. Second, the dualist narrative is significantly at odds with the philosophical teachings of the Sikh Gurus (*gurmat*) arising from the central textual sources of Sikh tradition, particularly its scripture. These writings present a rich but qualitatively different understanding and conceptualization of violence, which, at the very least, complicates the peace–violence binary. Indeed, modern representations of Sikhism – both academic and traditionalist – tell us little, if anything, either about *the nature of violence* as such, or about the *relationship* between religion and violence, except that violence is secondary to pacifism, a deviation from religion.

The overarching aim of this Element is to present a more holistic understanding of violence in Sikhism. To do this, it is necessary to complicate the conventional modern image of violence as limited to observable, external events, by bringing it into productive conversation with an internal violence that can be gleaned directly from the writings of the Sikh Gurus (Section 2).

The conventional perspective on violence is reflected in a sizeable body of publications in modern Sikh studies that develop an image of violence in the Sikh context based on texts known as the *gurbilās*. These texts (lit. “splendor of the guru”) are basically hagiographical narratives about the heroic military exploits of the sixth and tenth Gurus, stressing their role as warrior-saints. Much of the *gurbilās* literature appeared between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although it draws inspiration from early eighteenth-century works such as Sainapati’s *Gur Sōbha* and *Bachitar Nātak*. To varying degrees, almost all modern

publications on Sikh violence (see Section 3) follow a suggestion by the influential historian of Sikhism, W. H. McLeod, that as “the form and dominant philosophy of the Panth changed, so too did its religious perceptions and the literature which gave them expression” (McLeod, 1984: 11).

At the heart of this thesis, which was developed by McLeod in later publications, yet rarely subjected to critical scrutiny, are two key assumptions. First, that the “dominant philosophy of the Panth” is a pacifist devotionalism supposedly espoused by Guru Nānak’s praxis and teaching. Second, that the engagement in violent conflict on the part of the later Sikh gurus and the evolving Sikh community represents a fundamental deviation from Guru Nānak’s teaching – which is to say that violence has nothing to do with Guru Nānak’s teaching.

This Element challenges this thesis on the grounds that: (i) it fundamentally misinterprets the “dominant philosophy” or teaching of Guru Nānak (and therefore of the Panth); and (ii) that it never questions the *concept* of violence itself. In fact, the thesis propagates a concept of violence drawn less from Sikh tradition than from the modern tradition of liberal secular philosophy, which views the distinction between pacifism (as the essence of religion) and violence (as essentially nonreligious) as normative. I offer a different interpretation in this Element.

While changes in political circumstances led to violent conflict, which has been observed and recorded in memory and history, the “dominant philosophy of the Panth” – whose primary source is *gurbāṇī*, or Sikh scripture, specifically the writings of Guru Nānak – *did not change*. It has remained relatively constant. Indeed, *gurbāṇī* is not only the primary source of inspiration for the later *gurbilās* genre, but the concepts of *gurbāṇī* provide the religio-philosophical premise for the concept of violence in the *gurbilās* texts.

If, as I argue, a liberal image of violence is uncritically adopted by much of the modern scholarship on Sikh violence, is it possible to extract an alternative concept of violence from the Gurus? Indeed, what does this alternative concept of violence tell us about the *nature of violence*, or about relations between Sikhs/Sikhism and the state? And, if a radically different understanding of violence does indeed exist, how do we speak, think, and

write about it in relation to the conventional image of violence? Can both approaches to violence exist side by side?

### *Probing the Pacifism–Violence Binary*

We can start by digging a little more deeply into the origins of the pacifism–violence binary. Scholars in the field of critical religion studies such as William Cavanaugh suggest that it can be traced to two related sources. On the one hand, to the creation myth invented by the modern secular state to justify marginalization of religious loyalties in order for the state to secure a legal “monopoly on the means of violence” (Cavanaugh, 2008: 123). And, on the other hand, to a version of this creation myth that was transplanted into late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial writings about the various “religions” encountered by European administrators, scholars, and travelers (Cavanaugh, 2008: 85–122). The colonial writings on or about Sikhs and Sikhism are exemplary of this trend because the pacifism–violence binary is certainly not to be found in the writings of the Sikh Gurus themselves. Yet it was seamlessly carried over from colonial writings into the modern academic discourse on Sikhism produced in the last decades of the twentieth century.

For example, the dominant narrative about Sikhism and violence first appeared in John Malcolm’s *Sketch of the Sikhs* (Malcolm, 1812). This mainly ethnographic text was composed by a military employee of the East India Company charged with gathering surveillance material on the Sikhs with whom he had direct contact at the height of their power. Malcolm’s thesis on Sikh violence found its way into almost every work on Sikhism over the next two centuries. A more refined version can be found 200 years later in the writings of W. H. McLeod, notably in his lucid text *Sikhism* (McLeod, 1998).

Between Malcolm’s “Sketch” (1812) and McLeod’s *Sikhism* (1998), other than the accumulation of more precise facts, what remains unchanged in this narrative are the following assumptions: (i) that Sikhism begins with Guru Nānak who was a pacifist, and whose concerns were “explicitly religious” (McLeod, 1998: 10); (ii) the transition from this pacifist origin towards militant violence is contrary to Nānak’s doctrine and represents a deviation

from authentic/normative Sikhism to a deviant, inauthentic state; and (iii) violence is perpetrated by secondary actors seduced by worldly politics who deviate from the essential religiosity of Guru Nānak's doctrine and thereby cause the Panth to transform its essential identity.

Over the last two centuries, this liberal narrative of violence was internalized by colonial elites and continues to be enunciated by Sikhs today. Two examples of this internalization include the Sikh journalist and historian Khushwant Singh, and contemporary Sikh advocacy groups in the USA. At around the same time that McLeod's *Sikhism* was published (1998), the BBC released a documentary called *The Sikhs* to mark the tercentenary of the creation of the Khālsā – the religious military order of the “warrior-saints.” Among the interviewees in the BBC documentary was Khushwant Singh, who explained the transformation of Sikhism by likening it to the proclivity of Christian Crusaders for militant violence in the name of religion:

It's the same with Sikhism. It began as a pacifist faith [Nānak], . . . changed to a militant faith [Khālsā of Guru Gobind Singh], . . . and we keep the two sides together.

(Singh, 1999)

The militant faith or Khālsā is further described as a “kind of hot-house existence” as opposed to the apparently less excitable version of Guru Nānak.

A rather different example, but one that follows the same pattern, can be gauged from the responses of American Sikhs and especially Sikh advocacy groups in the post-9/11 period. Following the killings of a number of Sikhs by white supremacists, Sikh advocacy groups were given airtime on mainstream American media networks to explain the nature of Sikhism, and who Sikhs are, to an American public influenced by the toxic atmosphere of Islamophobia. Their response started by repeating the customary mantra that Sikhism is a peaceful religion, and that it is essentially akin to the Christianity that Americans understand and are familiar with, that “Sikhism is as American as apple pie!” one advocate mentioned (Singh, 2012). Conveniently downplayed in such enunciations is the long history of Sikh

involvement with violence, not to mention the relatively recent episodes of violent Sikh insurgencies within the modern Indian state (supported by Sikhs in the Western diaspora), and the hijacking of popular Sikh discourse by those on the fringes of the community.

The point here is *not* that such responses are true or false. Rather, it is that both narrative and response echo a modern liberal understanding about the relationship between religion and violence in which the state is assumed to be the arbiter of peace or nonviolence and provides a foundational definition for what counts as violence and equally for what counts as religion (Cavanaugh, 2008, 2017). Far from being a neutral entity the state plays a crucial role in defining not only the *meaning of religion* but in equal measure the *meaning of violence*, even as the defining process remains invisible (Asad, 2007: 7–91). Thus the meaning of violence, far from being objective or universal in essence, is predetermined by a “State-form.”<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, the term State-form refers to any abstract entity characterizable as a state irrespective of historical, cultural, or civilizational differences between actual states. This commonality is best described in terms of key processes that define the state’s functions, such as the establishment of a dominant regime of representation able to control meaning-making by imposing its own system of signification on all forms of social life, thereby controlling the ways individuals connect with one another within a society. In this sense, the State-form is essentially a machine that recodes the way we think, thereby impacting everyday life and capturing the very means by which individuals can form social relations and the way societies interact with one another. As scholars have increasingly recognized, the ideology of liberal secularism as it emerged in modern Europe is exemplary of the State-form’s ability to recode our ways of thinking and living (Fitzgerald, 2015: 248–79). Perhaps the best example is the way in which the modern liberal European state overcoded the signifier “religion” by elevating it to the status of a master signifier. Such recoding of “religion” enabled the

<sup>1</sup> I adopt the term “State-form” from Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Their usage in turn follows Pierre Clastres’ depiction of the state as essentially a means of capture.

emerging modern state to monopolize the meaning and definition of terms such as “violence.”

The upshot of this is clear: if the terms “religion” and “violence” do not have the same meaning at all times and in all cultures, it becomes necessary to adopt a more critical and reflexive stance *towards the mode of thought* in which violence is framed. How, and in what sense, was this conventional meaning of violence framed? What was and continues to be invested in such a framing?

In the last two decades, such questions have been vigorously debated by scholars working at the intersection of critical theory and the study of religion. In the next section, I look at how such scholarship has shed light on the ways in which we have been conditioned to think dogmatically about violence. In turn, this dogma about the meaning of violence – the assumption about *what violence is* – has affected how non-Western cultures are represented in a global context. It is this broad caricaturing of violence in non-Western contexts that opens up the central task of this Element, which is to explore the ways in which the philosophical teachings of the Sikh Gurus (*gurmat*) have conceptualized and practiced a sense of violence that is qualitatively different from the way violence is understood by liberal secular moderns. If we can unframe the conventional notion of violence, this might give us a better idea of what is going on, not only in the key textual sources of Sikh tradition (which suggest a very different way of understanding violence), but in the scholarly understanding of religion and violence in general. By unsettling the dogmatic image of violence imposed by secular liberalism, it is possible to explore alternative concepts arising from Sikh textual sources that have a direct and indirect bearing on the practice and understanding of violence. This will be the task of Sections 2 and 3 in the Element.

### *The “Dogmatic Image” of Violence*

In the past two decades, growing numbers of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have noted that something is awry with the way we perceive (and are expected to perceive) violence. The idea that we all know what violence is, especially when we see or experience it directly, is now



beginning to be recognized as a conventional wisdom. Critical thinkers have long suggested that the violence we all assume to be a universal phenomenon, because of its sheer visibility, is based on an uncritical thought process – effectively, an assumption – about *what violence is*, thus creating an “image of thought” that has become *dogmatic* (Deleuze, 1994: 130–8).

Ultimately, this dogmatic form of thought, on the basis of which we make assumptions about what is, or is not, violent, stems from a dualistic mode of knowledge and knowing that divides reality into true versus apparent worlds.<sup>2</sup> The true world corresponds to what is permanent and fixed, while the apparent (and, by implication, *false*) world is the one that is subject to all manner of change. The dogmatic image of thought is therefore one that has an affinity towards permanence as the underpinning condition of what counts as truth or reality. Accordingly, permanence or eternity is assumed to be the ontological condition of peace, which naturally renders any change or becoming as a violation of eternity/permanence. Hence violence per se is associated with change – and this is perfectly plausible because change is supposedly evident to us all. In this way, our perception of violence and judgment of it *in terms of what seems most visible about it*, and the fact that we push to the back of our minds what is *not so visible* about it, constitutes a value judgement.<sup>3</sup>

In his ruminations on violence, Slavoj Žižek shows how to step away from the “fascinating lure” exerted by this dogmatic image of violence (Žižek, 2008: 1). He suggests that the visible violence we identify as empirical violence and which the media bombards us with, is in fact part of a “triumvirate” of different forms of violence. There is, first, the obvious form of violence, which he calls “subjective violence” – the kind that is most easily empirically identifiable – including religious terrorism, international

<sup>2</sup> This is the mode of knowing or epistemology that dominates Western thought from Plato to Kant. It produces the subject–object dichotomy central to “representation,” which is effectively what Deleuze means by the “dogmatic image of thought.”

<sup>3</sup> A version of this can be found in Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, London: Routledge, 2004.

conflict, and civil unrest (Žižek, 2008: 2). This is the violence that fascinates us because it is directly visible and “performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (Žižek, 2008: 1). As critical thinkers, we need to identify the background machinery that generates this visibility and our attraction towards it. By doing this, it is possible to reveal a deeper violence that underpins our very efforts to replace overt visible violence with peacemaking.

Žižek refers to this deeper violence as “objective violence,” of which there are two kinds. There is, in the first place, a “symbolic violence.” By symbolic violence, Žižek refers not only to the more obvious kind of violence that pervades intentionality associated with our everyday and habitual forms of speech, and best illustrated by things such as hate speech, which incites others to enact physical violence with a view to produce social domination. Symbolic violence also includes a more fundamental violence that pertains to language *as such*, to the way that language has the ability to impose a certain “universe of meaning.” Second, apart from symbolic violence, there is what he calls “systemic” violence, which stems from the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek, 2008: 1–2).

The problem is, however, that it is not possible to perceive the dualistic framework – subjective/objective – from the same standpoint. As Žižek maintains, this is because “subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a *non-violent zero level*. It is seen as a *perturbation of the ‘normal’ peaceful state* of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible because it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (Žižek, 2008: 2, emphasis added; see also Mandair, 2011: 62–84).

Žižek’s characterization of “systemic” violence in terms of the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” is perhaps better understood in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s argument for the essential proximity between State-form and the dogmatic image of thought. For Deleuze and Guattari, the State-form is an apparatus of capture. It is a “system which conditions its surroundings so as to perpetuate and enhance its own existence . . . bringing the ‘outside’ to the ‘inside.’” It is, therefore, the form that “appears as pre-accomplished and self-presupposing” (Deleuze &