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## Placing Max Arthur Macauliffe in Context/s: Sikh Historiographical Traditions and Colonial Forms of Knowledge<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This article pursues two interconnected inquiries into the work of M.A. Macauliffe. Firstly, the paper examines Macauliffe's work in light of general discussion in the historiography of colonial and modern South Asia regarding the relative influence of colonial forms of knowledge in the formation of South Asian subjectivities and texts in the period. This allows for understanding of the differentials in power imbedded within the 'dialogues' that produced texts like Macauliffe's. The paper explores the specifics of this question by, secondly, demonstrating the ways in which Macauliffe's work—presumably through his interaction with his interlocutors among the Sikhs and/or reading of Sikh texts—reflects existing Sikh historiographical commitments. In this, we attempt to assess the work in relation to a range of existing works in Punjabi and determine the genealogy of its creation, in Sikh historiographical terms. Assessment of these two seemingly contradictory contexts allows us to assess what was new—and what was not—in Macauliffe's representation of the Sikh past, and how we can assess the purportedly dialogical nature of the text within a broader field of power and knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** Macauliffe, Sikh, Historiography, South Asia, colonialism, narrative, translation, religion

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This essay follows two interrelated lines of inquiry that must inform our understanding of the work of M.A. Macauliffe, early Western commentator on the Sikh tradition. In broad terms, we address a longstanding concern in the historiography on modern South Asia: the relative influence of colonial forms of knowledge on the formation of South Asian subjectivities and representations, and the role of South Asians in that knowledge formation (for exemplary discussion, see Raman 2012, 7-8, cf. Wagoner 2003, 783-6). More specifically, we assess this broader question within the differentials in power imbedded within the 'dialogues' that produced texts like Macauliffe's notable work on the Sikhs entitled *The Sikh Religion* and first published in 1909. The goal here is to explore the ways in which Macauliffe's work—through his interactions with particular texts, and with his interlocutors in the Sikh community—both reflects and does not reflect existing Sikh historiographical commitments, *as well as* European historiographical and cultural discourses. Along these lines I will attempt to place the work in preliminary terms in relation to a range of relevant works in Punjabi and determine the foundational forces in its creation, in Sikh terms as well as European ones. Assessment of these two interrelated contexts, which we can understand as the constitutive discursive formations for Macauliffe's work, allows us to discern what was new—and what was not—in Macauliffe's representation of the Sikh past, and how we can locate the purportedly dialogical nature of the text within a broader field of power and knowledge. Within this, we see what space there might have been for 'dialogue'—the conditions of both possibility and impossibility that existed for it—and where Macauliffe and his interlocutors sat in this process.

### *Interactions and Dialogue*

Professor Foley, whose important work is represented in this issue, has noted that 'postcolonial theory finds it difficult to deal with a colonial regime that can celebrate an indigenous system of belief in the interest of its own political and economic ambitions. In the case of the Sikhs, not only was subaltern speech allowed, it was in many cases manifestly encouraged' (2005, 201). Tony Ballantyne has addressed this seeming contradiction as well, with the idea of 'points of recognition', whereby 'perceived commensurabilities between colonizer and a particular colonized community provided discourses and practices where colonial policy could gain purchase, creating new institutions and reshaping cultural patterns with the aim of shoring up imperial authority' (2006, 26). This allows him to identify points of connection, while also calling attention to the ways in which 'exchanges took place within the highly uneven power relations of developing colonialism', such that 'the ultimate outcome of these processes was to empower one group at the expense of the other' (Ballantyne 2006, 28-29).

Such connections should not surprise us: Joseph Cunningham—responsible for an expansive history of the Sikhs in 1849—too was seen as

sympathetic in his views of the Sikhs. Cunningham himself had reservations about this perception. In his 1849 author's preface to the second edition of the book, which was finished in 1851 but did not appear in print until 1853, Cunningham noted that 'some public critics and private friends' had remarked that the author 'leans unduly towards the Sikhs' (1918, xxii-xxiii; on publication history, see vii). Cunningham defends himself against such criticism by noting that he did not feel he needed to continually return 'to the duty or destiny of the English in India' because his readers would 'know the merits and motives of their supremacy in the East, and ... can themselves commonly decide whether the particular acts of a viceroy are in accordance with the general policy of the government' (1918, xxiii). In the end, he claims that 'the Sikhs, moreover, are so inferior to the English in resources and knowledge that there is no equality of comparison between them' (Cunningham 1918, xxiii). Sympathy, here, has its limits.

This relates to a larger debate, as Professor Foley suggests, regarding the formations of 'culture' and difference within the imperial imagination, and it is one that has complex forms of resonance with the local context in Ireland. Andrew Sartori has suggested that it is crucial that we historically locate the imperative to 'resort to culture' within the imperial project in complex and historically sensitive terms. Thus, for example, Sartori has described how the allergy to 'custom' (and cultural particularity) evinced by John Stuart Mill in his famous essay 'On Liberty' (and seemingly so typical of British liberal thought) is undermined in Mill's later attitudes towards *Irish custom*, such that, Sartori argues, Mill in later work argues 'that the path to political responsibility in Ireland could travel only through passages demarcated by the logic of Irish agricultural society' (Sartori 2006, 633). In other words, the only relief for the ills in Irish agricultural society was a revision of English forms of land management and a return to particular forms of Irish customary rights (Sartori 2011, 181ff.). This is paralleled in attitudes towards the same issues in India in the same period and later. This implies, in a fundamental way, a place *for culture* and *for cultural difference* within liberal discourse that is occluded if we understand the liberal and imperial mission of the British in singularly universalizing terms.

This complex dance between finding room for difference and the assertion of a universal (that must fit all) is complicated in other ways as well. As David Cannandine (2001) has shown in his book *Ornamentalism*, the British did not govern only through the articulation of absolute difference between ruler and ruled (often set in racial terms). They ruled also through the construction of a set of analogies between the two, based on a pastoral *imaginaire* that meant to bring order to British society as well as Indian in a shared construction of social space around class and privilege. Sartori's work overall challenges our understanding of the imperial foundations of liberalism—assumed to be a product of European/Western culture alone and achieving 'universality through colonial imposition' alone (Sartori 2006, 633). Sartori offers us an understanding of the fractured formations of liberalism within South Asian as well as British contexts, not just in intellectual history,

but in the more material bases for it, to reveal 'the complexity of the British Empire's position within the global economy as an agent of both modernization and traditionalization, of both global integration and regional peripheralization' (Sartori 2006, 642). We can see Macauliffe's interests in the Sikhs, therefore, in similar terms, seeking commonality at the same time as difference.

Such arguments have a broad resonance today. We can see discussion by Amartya Sen along similar lines, as he seeks out South Asian precedents for 'individualism', 'liberalism', and other core ethical values (Sen 2005, 282 ff.) By the logic of colonial liberalism, Sartori tells us, 'the customary principles that regulated Bengali agrarian society [were seen by colonial administrators as] ... themselves intrinsically liberal and political-economic in form' (2011, 191). This is the expression of an impulse we see in Macauliffe: the effort to create analogies and correspondences between British and Indian in a mode that did not undermine the imperial project. Sartori (2014, 5-6) has taken this line of reasoning further, to explore how 'practices in indigenous society constituted the conditions for a reception of liberal ideas in social spaces in which one might not readily expect to find them'. He shows how the influence achieved by liberal concepts and practices in colonial India—detailed recently by Christopher Bayly (2012) in his *Recovering Liberties*, albeit without attention to Sikh forms—is surely because the forms of life that agrarian Bengalis maintained were ones that admitted the plausibility and purchase of liberal concepts, starting most radically with the plausibility and purchase of the abstractions of political economy' (Sartori 2014, 28; see also 32).

I have discussed these ideas in another context in relation to colonial-era Sikh ideas and practices of humanitarianism, and their relation to modern liberal parallels (Murphy forthcoming). Here, this provides us with a broader context for understanding the claims by Macauliffe, as we will see, that he was accurately representing Sikh tradition, *for the sake of the Sikhs*, within this complex interplay where 'culture', 'custom', and difference played various roles in *service* of both liberalism and empire. Therefore, while one might see the embrace of 'culturalist' explanations as a 'part of a general retreat [in the post-Mutiny period] from the universalist belief in the applicability of liberal norms and political-economic reasoning to the colonial governance of India', such a formulation does not accurately represent the ways in which custom in colonial Bengal functioned 'not as the negation of liberty, but as a vehicle of liberal values instituted in usage as an expression of common sense' (Sartori 2011, 168-9). Sartori distinguishes this from the 'custom-driven' context of post-annexation Punjab, but we can see elements of Macauliffe's embrace of Sikhism in a similar light. Empire is not denied, and a set of equivalences is established alongside and through difference to illustrate something 'already there' that is the same.

Gandhi's focus on 'minor narratives of crosscultural collaboration between oppressors and Macauliffe's sympathy with Sikhism might also suggest another genealogy, one that in this context represents a path not taken. It is one however that merits attention as we assess the ways in which his

historiographical practices inscribed imperial forms of knowledge. Leela Gandhi's sensitive recent work on the 'affective communities' that occupied anti-imperial positions within dominant imperializing cultural locations suggests another way of reading Macauliffe's sympathy for and appreciation of Sikh tradition. She describes in detail the 'disaggregated forms of a dissent engaged for its own sake, bearing no practical investment in the telos of the anticolonial nation-state and certainly gaining no apparent material advantage from the economic and political diminution of imperial power' (Gandhi 2006, 2).

Gandhi's focus on 'minor narratives of crosscultural collaboration between oppressors and oppressed' (2006, 6) reminds us that while (as will be discussed) the idea of translation and dialogue is fraught within highly hierarchical contexts, there are moments for the possibility of dissent that can occur. These moments, however, must be chosen. This is particularly visible, as Gandhi describes, within mystical or spiritual contexts, whereby 'many western seekers assumed an easy continuity between their spiritual attachment to India on the one hand and their disidentification from the spoils and circuits of imperialism on the other' (2006, 115). Macauliffe's appreciation of Sikhism might thus be seen along such lines, as a spiritualized response to the imperial that opened up the possibility of dissent as 'a forgotten variety of hybridity whose refusal of secular rationality and transcendental subjectivity is quintessentially political and anticolonial' (Gandhi 2006, 118). Macauliffe thus could have located his sympathy for Sikhism outside of an imperial frame, or, more accurately, within an imperial frame of dissent. Such a position was already well established in the period, and constituted one, albeit unconventional, form of engagement with dialogue.

### *The Work of Translation and Dialogue*

The work of Tony Ballantyne and Arvind Mandair is helpful in situating our understanding of Macauliffe's work in relation to these issues. Mandair's work has focused on the translation of the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, by Ernest Trumpp, a German Indologist in the late nineteenth century, as a '*language event* that had far-reaching implications for the development of modern Sikh ideology' (Mandair 2009, 29).<sup>2</sup> This translation, and particularly Trumpp's preface on the Sikh religion, evoked a strong rejection by Sikh leaders, but in so doing necessitated a response within the boundaries of Western modes of thought about 'religion', positioning the 'colonial subject as native informant and [ensuring] ... its attunement to the political economy of Empire' (Mandair 2009, 29).

This translation and related interpretation of Sikh tradition was centred on what Mandair calls an 'economy of lack', whereby the scripture had to prove itself in accordance with Western understandings of religion and identity. This

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<sup>2</sup>For more on Trumpp, see Ballantyne 2006, 52ff.

lack was engaged with by Sikh scholars through what Mandair calls a 'dialectical engagement with the colonial translations' (2009, 30). In so doing, he argues, 'they inadvertently accepted the equivalence between the colonial idiom and indigenous concepts, and thus entered into a modernizing dialectic driven by the desire for moral improvement' (2009, 30). This very economy of lack was one that was later entered into by Indologist Max Arthur Macauliffe, Mandair argues, who 'finds exactly the opposite and reverses the lack by fulfilling it' (Mandair 2009, 442, fn. 53). Through its inversion, Macauliffe's work reinscribes Trumpp's conceptualization of Sikhism as a religion, and the economy of lack remains (Mandair 2009, 198).

Ballantyne's work, read productively alongside Mandair's, provides insight into the 'intellectual world of the British ... to understand the function of, and tensions within, their cultural values' (Ballantyne 2006, 37). Placing Macauliffe in this context, Ballantyne reveals how 'Macauliffe manipulated stock orientalist images (of India's timelessness, sloth, and cultural decay) to emphasize the strength and significance of Sikhism' (2006, 55). Such characterizations reflected the representation of India much more broadly in the colonial period, as Ronald Inden (2000) has detailed. Macauliffe's portrayal of Hinduism as a 'boa constrictor', for instance, reflects a much broader set of Orientalizing tropes that Inden describes (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, lvii). Thus we see, as Foley has noted, that 'the celebration of, indeed the complete identification with, a culture (as in Macauliffe's case) is not incompatible with, indeed may well be one of the best modes of achieving political domination. As in the oriental art of judo, the opponents' own strength and weight are used to defeat them' (2005, 201).

This is where the work of dialogue comes in, in this mobilization of Sikh informants within the colonial project: Foley's game of judo. Mandair's work on the development of Sikh theology in the 1920s and 1930s hinges on what he identifies as a response to Trumpp's translation and analysis of Sikhism among Sikh elites, through the alignment of their understanding and experience of Sikh being with European forms of knowledge and being. This re-enactment or repetition of such modes was enacted through the practice of 'dialogue', which he argues 'helped to effect a convergence and eventual concordance of ontologically distinct narratives' (Mandair 2009, 197). We would do well, therefore, to note the negative light in which Macauliffe placed his interlocutors, for their inability to speak English, and his conviction that finding a Sikh conversant in both English and the language and the meaning of the scriptures was an impossibility (Mandair 2009, 198-9). Indeed, as Mandair shows, Macauliffe claimed for himself and others like him the sole ability to render into English, and for Punjabi speakers to assist but not lead in that task. Macauliffe notes that, at the time of writing his book, there were not more than ten 'such men in the world' – such that the interpretation of the Guru Granth Sahib was compromised in general – and that 'of these few or none is capable of giving an English interpretation. They generally construe in tedious paraphrases in their own local dialects' (1909, Vol. 1, vi).

In this, Mandair argues, we see the figure of the native informant 'who can enunciate properly only insofar as his speech renders into English correct knowledge or information' (Mandair 2009, 201). Even this is an impossibility, in the view of Macauliffe, such that 'it is believed that a work of this nature cannot be accomplished again' (1909, Vol. 1, xxxiii). Such work must be done in India, and requires years of work, and even if persons were willing, 'they would not be able to obtain the requisite assistance, because the principal interpreters of the sacred books of the Sikhs will have passed away with this generation, and, owing to want of patronage, there will be none to supply their place' (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, xxxiii). Indeed, the task of translation was a formidable one, as Professor Kaur Singh's essay in this volume discusses: Macauliffe claims that 'The Granth Sahib thus becomes probably the most difficult work, sacred or profane, that exists' (1909, Vol. 1, vi-vii; on pantheism, as discussed by Mandair, see lxiii).

One aspect of Mandair's critique of Macauliffe bears some scrutiny here. He argues that it is the 'possession of historical origin [that] is linked to the ability of Sikh "subjects" to conceive a particular idea of God' (2009, 203). Historical imagination itself lies at the centre of the new modernist imaginary of being Sikh; this is something I have explored elsewhere (Murphy 2012). That historical imaginary, however, drew on a pre-existing historical imaginary in Punjab and among the Sikhs, at the same time that it developed in conversation with European historiographical traditions. So, we must consider whether Macauliffe's history, too, is born of two, not one, genealogies. How much does his historical practice reflect this existing Sikh historical imaginary, rather than an imperial one? This is key to understanding the nature of Macauliffe's text and its emergence within 'dialogue'.

### *Sikh Historiography and Macauliffe*

Does Macauliffe's work reflect a historiographical encounter between an existing Sikh historiographical tradition and a European one, or is it more singular in its derivation? Consideration of Macauliffe's work in this mode can reveal the scope and possible limitations of Macauliffe's engagement with Sikh tradition. This also places Macauliffe's work within a larger history of historiography that is, itself, deeply imbedded within evolving power relations in colonial Punjab and for the Sikhs. My concern, then, is not with the Guru Granth Sahib itself, and Macauliffe's translations, which do comprise a significant part of his work, but with the understanding of the past of the Sikh tradition that Macauliffe draws upon and projects, and how this reflects European as well as Sikh historical interests.

Macauliffe's six-volume history of the Sikhs is a product of a longer history of English-language and European writing on the Sikhs. As Ballantyne details, 'from the early 1780s, the East India Company built an increasingly dense archive of information on both Punjab itself and on Sikhism' (2006, 39). It is in such texts, Ballantyne asserts, 'that the British formulated a vision of



Sikhism as a self-contained, independent, and coherent religious system' (2006, 39). The first British description of Sikhism by Major James Browne, from the 1780s, 'was born out of British anxieties about Sikh resistance to Mughal imperial hegemony', and drew on a Persian text by Buddh Singh Arora of Lahore (Ballantyne 2006, 39). The way that Sikhism is formulated in this text is important to us again in the Irish context, as it provided a powerful model that has endured: Sikhism was portrayed as a 'Protestant' form of religion in relation to a Catholic-like 'other' (in this case, Hinduism) (Ballantyne 2006, 40).

Ballantyne notes that what is striking about Browne's and other early accounts of the Sikh tradition is the 'deployment of Protestant terminology and explicitly European points of reference to make sense of Sikhism' (2006, 40). This 'recognition' was formed within a British national context in which Protestant identity was increasingly important to the nation-building project in the UK, in opposition to Catholic and Irish identities, as Linda Colley and others have shown so vividly (Ballantyne 2006, 46). Thus, as Ballantyne suggests, we should be wary of seeming affinities: 'the construction of cross-cultural affinities was a power-saturated strategy, one that produced a host of "others" in the drive to delineate the common ground between the colonizer and a particular colonized group' (2006, 48).

Such seeming affinities are available throughout Macauliffe's work as well, in which 'Nanak and his followers were ... represented as a group animated by a newly discovered religious enthusiasm that allowed them to break out of the spiritual lethargy of medieval Hinduism' (Ballantyne 2006, 55). Such comparisons were imagined largely in religious and class terms, rather than purely racial ones (Ballantyne 2006, 58). Thus Macauliffe argues that 'there is a wonderful analogy between the spiritual condition of Europe and India during the dark ages' (1909, Vol. 1, xl.) and '[i]n both continents all learning was in the hands of the priesthood, and this admittedly led to serious abuses. A great cyclic wave of reformation then overspread both continents'. (1909, Vol. 1, xl.) The comparative imaginary at work in Macauliffe is one that provided the grounds for understanding and valorizing the Sikhs as familiar and known already. As Foley rightly states, 'Macauliffe saw the Sikhs as India's indigenous "English"' (2005, 202) — while still simultaneously unknown (and made known through Macauliffe's work). Thus 'a cognate cause is frequently assigned for the establishment of new religions', Macauliffe argues, and one can see parallels between the context for the Gurus' emergence and the 'Judea [which] was smarting from the tyranny and cruelty of Herod when he whom the most advanced races of the world call the Messiah was born' (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, xli). Brahmins elsewhere are described as acting 'with all the deftness of Roman Catholic missionaries in Protestant countries' in their abilities to persuade Sikhs to 'lapse' into Hinduism (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, lvii.).

Macauliffe's text, then, is haunted by anti-Catholic polemic. This shapes his construction of the history of the Sikh tradition, which is modelled upon a triumphalist history of the Protestant tradition that is re-enacted within his historical construction of the Sikhs. Interestingly, however, this is grafted upon an account of the Sikh past that is clearly also drawn from existing Sikh sources.

According to Macauliffe, he received a letter from the Singh Sabha of Amritsar that exhorted him to consider just this historiographical tradition:

We desire, now that you have become thoroughly acquainted with our customs, our sacred books, and the tenets of our religion, that you fulfil the promise made in your Circular letter to the Sikhs, in which you stated that you would write nothing prejudicial to their religion. In the lives of the Gurus which you are going to write, we desire you to consult the Gur Bilas, the Suraj Prakash, and such other works as have been compiled from ancient writings, not corrupted by the Handalis, the followers of Kabir, and the poets who infused foreign elements into our religion. (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, xiii-xiv.).

In referencing these traditions and representing them, Macauliffe claims he made liberal changes to the *janam-sākhīs*—‘to revise the Gurus’ travels and render them consistent with scientific Indian geography’ (1909, Vol. 1, xxvi). This effort places Macauliffe’s history of the Sikh tradition within Sikh intellectual history, as well: the *janam-sākhīs* are one of the two major genres of representation of the Sikh past; the other is known as the *gurbilās* (which is referenced by Macauliffe in his account of the later tradition and particularly of the life of the Tenth Guru, such as in Vol. 5). These are the primary sources Macauliffe utilizes for his study. The life of Guru Nanak is based on his reading of the *janam-sākhīs*, and his biography of the Tenth Guru, for instance, follows the traditional histories: the *Bachitar Nāṭak* by Guru Gobind Singh (from the Dasam Granth), the *Gurbilās* by Sukha Singh (generally dated to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century *Sūraj Prakāsh* by Bhai Santokh Singh (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 5, 1). These works are directly cited in the text on occasion (Vol. 5, 22, 32, 39-40, 65, etc.). He invokes the compositions of Bhai Gurdas, contemporary of the early Gurus, to describe the time of Sikhism’s emergence (1909, Vol. 1, 191 ff.)

Macauliffe’s work was published in 1909, in the intervening period between Trumpp’s infamous translation (explored extensively by Mandair) and the proliferation of Sikh reformist texts in modern Punjabi in the 1910s and 1920s, and before the beginning of Sikh political mobilization on a larger scale in the late 1910s. It can be seen to reflect at least in part, therefore, through Macauliffe’s interlocutors, an incipient form of Sikh intellectual production that blossoms in subsequent decades. We can see this, for instance, in the pointed remarks regarding the worship of Sakhi Sarwar and Gugga, put into the mouth of the Guru—this was a particular preoccupation of modern reformers (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 5, 158; Murphy 2015). At the same time, the historiographical traditions it invokes are far older. The two are intimately intertwined and difficult to disentangle. Macauliffe found the material available to him on history lacking—just as he had found ‘so-called gyanis’ deficient in their interpretation of the Granth Sahib (1909, Vol. 1, xiv). ‘On perusing the current lives and accounts of the Gurus I found them overladen with puerile, heterodox, or repulsive details’, he tells us in his introduction, and ‘it required further years of study and consultation with learned Sikhs to

complete biographies of the founders of their religion, which were not inconsistent with their sacred writings' (1909, Vol. 1, xv).

We are very close here to the rhetoric of William Jones, whose interest in reading Sanskrit legal material was inspired by his doubts in untrustworthy native informants (Rocher 1993, 234), and to the complex combination of reliance and doubt that characterized colonial dependence on South Asian interlocutors and collaborators overall. As Bhavani Raman notes, '[t]he persistent anxiety over false evidence in official correspondence expressed as cultural alterity – "native" duplicity – sustained the universal claim of the rule of law and its application by force' (2012, 137-8; see also 200). W.H. McLeod early on credited Macauliffe with an overall misreading of the *janam-sākhīs* as a form of biography: 'in this sense', he wrote, Macauliffe's 'ghost is still very much with us' (1980, 12). Macauliffe sought – wrongly, McLeod argues – to apply his idea of biography to the *janam-sākhīs*, misreading their historical value and the historical imaginary that informed them, which did not map to his: this explains his dissatisfaction with them as sources. In his view, the history that he found had to be made 'consistent' with the 'sacred writings'. It must be noted that this was a general approach also taken by McLeod (1968) in his earliest work on the *janam-sākhīs*.

What then does Macauliffe take from the historiography of the Sikhs, the historical imaginary that animated Sikh cultural production prior to the colonial period? (Murphy 2012). This is a question of particular interest, because it speaks to the question of dialogue in specific terms; the degree to which 'Indian intellectuals provided not merely raw data, but a key analytical framework that led to the formulation of the new form of knowledge' (Wagoner 2003, 786). Or, as Raman more recently put it, 'whether nominally subordinate agents substantively ran the colonial show or whether colonial interpellation meant the violent imposition of cultural difference as the very frame of governance and modernity' (Raman 2012, 7).

There are in fact striking parallels between the historical vision of Macauliffe and that of these so-called 'traditional' histories. Let us look, for the sake of this discussion, to the portrayal of the life of Guru Nanak. It is dependent on the *janam-sākhīs* that Macauliffe draws upon, yet simultaneously reflects some of the imperial vision that Macauliffe exhibits in his introductory comments. There are several caveats that first must be stated. My own understanding of Macauliffe's sources is, first of all, still evolving. It is challenging to know exactly what source he is using at a given time, because he is not precise about his sources and often refers to the *janam-sākhīs* as a broad category. The *janam-sākhī* most strongly associated with Macauliffe is the one he had lithographed, the Hafizabad manuscript, which he describes in detail in his work and extols as the best extant example of this genre of text, an example of the Puratan tradition, as it is known in scholarly circles (Singh 2016, 126ff.).

I'll focus for the sake of brevity on the opening of Macauliffe's work, in relation to the *janam-sākhī* tradition. We see strong parallels among the various versions in their opening – as one might expect – with reference to the early life of Guru Nanak. What immediately emerges is the great extent to which

Macauliffe's work, too, parallels these existing *janam-sākhīs* in his presentation of the life of Guru Nanak. He follows their trajectory and outline of content. We see the anecdote of Guru Nanak's birth and the auspicious omens that accompanied it, his instruction by a pandit and the debate that ensues, and the story of a ruined crop restored (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, 15). He includes a hymn that seems to have been common among manuscript traditions (Macauliffe, 1909 Vol. 1, 8; see McLeod, ed. 1980, 8-9). Overall, Macauliffe follows the narrative structure that generally governs the *janam-sākhīs*: he presents hymns in relation to the circumstances or associations of their composition, such as when Guru Nanak wrote an acrostic on his tablet, and composed a related hymn (Macauliffe 1909, Vol.1, 3-8). Macauliffe provides a translation of the verse in full. This is a pattern maintained throughout Volume 1 of his work: short narratives about the Guru and his interactions and travels, followed by translations of verses attributed to the Guru.

Macauliffe's use of language is itself revealing. His language in the introduction features a marked difference from that which he uses in his translations, but also in his narration of the Guru's life. For the latter, he writes in a modern but also fanciful story-telling mode. For example, here is a description of an exchange between Nanak and his instructor, in school:

Nanak appears to have continued to attend school for some time. One day he was observed to remain silent, and not apply himself to his books. The schoolmaster asked him why he was not reading. Nanak inquired, 'Art thou sufficiently learned to teach me?' The schoolmaster replied that he had read everything. He knew the Veds and Shastars, and he had learned to cast up accounts, post ledgers and daybooks, and strike balances. Upon this Nanak said, 'To your accomplishments I prefer the study of divine knowledge'. He then composed the following hymn. (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, 8).

Macauliffe then continues with the translation of a hymn attributed to Nanak.

Several things are notable about this passage. Firstly, in broad terms, it speaks to the social position of Nanak as a Khatri, and the role of the scribe as administrator that speaks to the collaborations and relationships that concern Raman (2012) and Subrahmanyam (2010), cited elsewhere in this essay. But that is a subject for another time (see Syan 2013, 4). For the purposes of this essay, we see particular narratological features employed by Macauliffe that enhance the reading of the text as a story. Nanak's act of speech is distinguished by his mode of address, in a highly formal English that does not match the style/tone of the narration overall. In so doing, Macauliffe distinguishes direct speech, but also provides a sense of Nanak as a highly refined and polite person, engaging in respectful dialogue with his teacher. Most importantly, this is given as an anecdote, a story. His tone and approach mirror the *janam-sākhī* form in this way, setting up this portrayal of Nanak as *narrative*. To engage with the *janam-sākhī* is to engage with story-telling, and this is of course the important role that the texts have continued to play in the community, a 'portrayal of Guru Nanak's life through an idiom and style reminiscent of

allegory and myth', as described by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1992, 329). According to Kaur Singh, 'the 'truth' of the myths is to be found in the history and the life of the religious community' (1992, 343)—not in the biography of Nanak itself, but instead in the ways that the stories are told and re-told within the community, and are made meaningful within it.

Here we see a strong correspondence between Macauliffe's work and the existing Punjabi-language tradition. Rarely, a different historical voice emerges amongst *janam-sākhī* based material that Macauliffe presents. This usually occurs in footnotes, where Macauliffe inserts information and clarification (for example, Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, 83). At rare points, this explanatory voice intrudes on the text itself. Just after the anecdote mentioned above, for example, he notes in a general omniscient voice quite distinct in tone from the story-telling tone that immediately precedes it that '[t]he scholastic ignorance of the founders of great religions has been made the object of many a boast on the part of their followers. The object, of course, is that the acquirements and utterances of the religious teachers may be attributed solely to divine inspiration' (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, 9-10). He then goes on to refute such a claim, describing Nanak's interactions with those 'ascetics and anchorets' who 'sought the extreme retirement of the locality for the combined objects of undisturbed prayer and escape from the persecution of bigoted Muslem [sic] rulers' (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, 10).

What is so striking about this statement is its independence from the story-telling mode, its different narrative register and tone. Afterwards, however, he returns to his story-telling voice until the latter half of Volume 1, when the compositions of Bhai Gurdas are first invoked (and through which Macauliffe makes a series of general claims about Sikh belief and the state of the world at the time of Sikhism's emergence). This section functions again almost like his own voice—with a series of general declarations—but it is presented as a representation of the compositions of Bhai Gurdas (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, 191ff.). Volume 1 then ends with translations of compositions by Guru Nanak (1909, Vol. 1, 195ff. to the end). While rare, this omniscient narrator's intrusion, however, does indicate something larger: the interweaving of the *janam-sākhī* and other narratives with re-formulations of the past that are imbricated with a colonial politics of religious difference and conflict. This is seen in his invocation of 'the persecution of bigoted Muslem [sic] rulers' (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, 10).

Such intrusions are not found throughout the text. Examination of the material in Volume 5, for example, which relies on the *gurbilās* literature, reveals the extended maintenance of a storytelling mode of narration, without the intrusion of an alternative, authoritative voice (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 5, 1-67). Macauliffe suspends his narration of the life of Guru Gobind Singh at one point to assert what the 'Guru really thought of idolatry or the worship of inanimate objects' (1909, Vol. 5, 67). Here, the alternative voice he employs is that of the Guru, with specific citations: he quotes generously from compositions attributed to Guru Gobind Singh (or, as Macauliffe puts it 'sanctioned by himself') to assert the Guru's message, not stepping in to speak

for him (1909, Vol. 5, 68). He then continues with his narration of the life of Guru Gobind Singh, followed by the stories of the Guru's disciple and rebel Banda Bahadur and the wives of the Guru, and then a section on the compositions of the tenth Guru, also without the intrusion of the omniscient narrator, to the end of the volume. Although we do not see repetition of the omniscient narrator that intruded (albeit minimally) on the *janam-sākhī* voice, we do see, however, the recurrence of some of the overarching historical logic articulated by Macauliffe in his introduction, regarding the portrayal of conflict in religious terms (e.g. the Guru's forces arrayed against 'the Muhammadans' writ large (1909, Vol. 5, 56-7, 90, etc.), and a generally negative portrayal of brahmins (1909, Vol. 5, 61 ff.)).

Early on in his work, Macauliffe designates aspects of the 'traditional' accounts that he was clearly indebted to as 'repulsive' and 'puerile'. He describes his main source as 'deformed by mythological matter which Baba Nanak himself would have been the first to repudiate' (1909, Vol. 1, lxxxvii) and speaks of his general rejection of 'the debased superstitions and heterodox social customs of the Sikhs who have been led astray from their faith by external influences' (1909, Vol. 1, xvi). Yet, strikingly, while he claims to have attempted to rationalize existing accounts of the Guru's life, he embraces and presents alleged prophecies that attest to the loyalty of the Sikhs to the British, including placing in the mouth of Guru Gobind Singh the declaration that the English would come and 'joined by the Khalsa, rule as well in the East as in the West ... The combined armies of the English and the Sikhs shall be very powerful, as long as they rule with united councils' (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, xix; within the text, see Vol. 5, 108). His representation of the unending cruelties of the Mughals upon the populace is colonialist mythology at its most vivid (Macauliffe, 1909, Vol. 1, xli-xlix). We see here the tropes and themes that animated British historiography in the period, its own form of 'debased superstition', one might say. In this, we return to the earlier tropes that have been defined: of the great comparative endeavour that Macauliffe engaged in in his 'history' of the Sikhs, where what was at stake, in the end, was a relation within European culture itself, and between Europe and India, transposed and transfigured onto India, itself.

At the same time that Macauliffe articulated an imperial vision of Sikh tradition, we see the resonances of that tradition through his work. This in part explains why the work has been, for the most part, generally well received among Sikhs. The other major reason for its continuing relevance relates to the larger context, in which it made real political sense to argue for the distinctiveness of the Sikh community. Macauliffe notes that he hoped that 'my work would be at least of political advantage' to the Sikhs (1909, Vol. 1, vii). Within the administrative framework provided by British governance, religious identity was politically relevant in the drawing up of representational structures and was drawn into a colonial narrative of religious conflict and Protestant enlightenment. As a result, Macauliffe's contribution to public understanding of the Sikh tradition could not help but be politically salient, drawn as it was from prevailing colonial assumptions and fitting the

expectations of the logic of colonial governance. This account was needed, to fit the needs of this moment, drawn from tradition but moulded in an imperial frame. We can therefore only understand Macauliffe's work within the context of a broader political and social field in which religious identity was directly tied to political representation. Macauliffe then was right about the potential political benefit of his history and exposition of Sikh religion; it was a political necessity within the context of the Raj, with its religiously inflected forms of representational governance. Indeed, this is a particularly troubling aspect of the text; the intimate relation between Macauliffe's imperial orientation and colonial context, and the traditional basis of the text.

### *Conclusion*

Consideration of this case has implications far beyond the Sikh tradition. As Mandair has argued, 'the interactionist thesis has relatively limited purchase' (2009, 79). Indeed, as he further explains, 'behind the assumption of 'dialogue', or free interaction, is the assumption of intersubjective and therefore *unhindered* communication between colonizer and colonized, which in turn is linked to a predetermination of translation as an apolitical process of exchange of speech and ideas' (Mandair 2009, 79). Never is there freedom from the power dynamics that inform the conditions of possibility for any interaction. At the same time, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has recently reminded us, translation, accommodation, and interaction are inherent to historical process and incommensurability is an implausible analytic for understanding such interactions. Most arguments for cultural incommensurability, he argues, are located in 'structuralist understandings of culture itself' (Subrahmanyam 2012, 23), and thus cannot account for historical change. History, instead, provides example after example of where 'the twain could meet, if only for a time' (Subrahmanyam 2012, 27). Instead, he shows, 'what usually happened was approximation, improvisation, and eventually a shift in the relative positions of all concerned. The British, once they had conquered India, did not remain – even a single generation afterward – the same British who had conquered it' (Subrahmanyam 2012, 29-30). So change occurs, on both sides: Macauliffe shows us this. However, as Mandair reminds us, we can never disassociate such change from the power differentials that form it.

The reliance of Macauliffe's text on existing Sikh historiographical representations is significant, but it is enframed within a logic not derived from them and reflective of the political foundations of empire. In the end, this reflects personal choice and commitment. Whereas Colin Mackenzie, whose Brahmin interlocutors were explored by Wagoner, may have 'acknowledged his intellectual debt to his Indian collaborators' (Wagoner 2003, 791), and as Gandhi (2006) has shown, there were anti-imperial positions available to those who could have accepted an imperial position through the appreciation of Indian religious/spiritual traditions, these positions were not the norm. As Raman (2012) has shown, the role of collaborator and informant in broad terms was one with little room for independence and agency (Raman 2012, Intro.). 'In

contrast to a number of studies that detail the collaborative nature of colonial knowledge' she argues, her work 'excavates how an insatiable appetite for knowledge to aid good governance and for ensuring accountability through writing made for a range of subtle official interventions in textual practice' (Raman 2012, 8).<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, we see that Macauliffe *stands in* for Sikh interpreters to better represent their Gurus' ideas. He appointed himself as the guardian of Sikh religion in its intended form. Orthodox Sikhs, he believes, will, 'perhaps, be grateful to me for the manner in which I have presented their religion according to the desires and teachings of their Gurus' (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, xv). This role was his alone: even a future Sikh, who might become capable of translation into English, would be 'incapable of producing an authoritative and exhaustive work in our language on his religion', due to the passing of scholars able to interpret (Macauliffe 1909, Vol. 1, xxxii). He also sought out an image of Europe itself in Sikh tradition, imposing European models of religious difference and conflict upon its history. As Foley has put it beautifully, '(e)mbracing the other, as in Oscar Wilde's prose poem on the subject of Narcissus, "The Disciple", Macauliffe had the great pleasure of embracing himself' (2005, 208).

The recognition of correspondences or connections between European culture and South Asian culture therefore cannot itself be taken as an objective indication of a shared ethos and equality. Such correspondences can as easily be configured in terms of domination. Macauliffe's account of the Sikhs was fundamentally a discourse of power, intimate and with possible but unrealized alternative paths within it. Macauliffe himself was preoccupied not only with discursively prioritizing Protestant forms of religiosity, but also in the idea of the 'originality' he saw in Sikhism: 'Now there is here presented a religion totally unaffected by Semitic or Christian influences' (1909, Vol. 1, liv). Sadly, it was his own inability to embrace that originality – and to let go of his own religious and imperial forms of 'influence' – that limited his appreciation of it.

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<sup>3</sup> Raman (2012, Intro.) provides valuable discussion of the relevant literature on Indian 'collaborators' more broadly.



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