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**Defining Sikhism: Boundaries of Religion and Ethnicity Among Sikhs in
the United States**

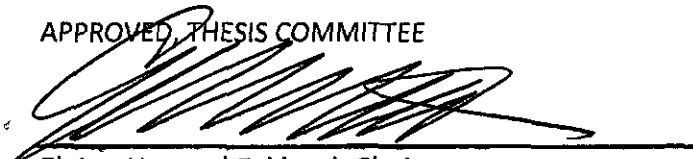
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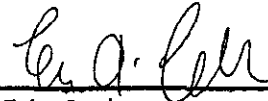
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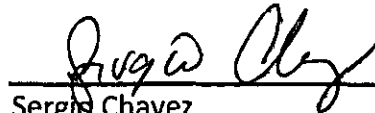
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Defining Sikhism: Boundaries and Ethnicity among Sikhs in the United States

Simranjit Khalsa

Abstract

U.S. immigration has brought rising numbers of non-western religious practitioners whose religious and ethnic identities are linked, and there has been a concurrent rise in white Americans converting to these faiths. Research on religious-ethnic traditions has not addressed how communities of white converts impact religious-ethnic traditions. I study this phenomena among US Sikhs, comparing members of two Sikh communities. I ask how they construct their Sikh identity and what boundaries they draw around this identity. I draw on participant observation and 31 in-depth interviews with both Indian Sikhs in Houston and members of Sikh Dharma, a predominantly white Sikh community. I find that respondents in each community draw on the same elements (symbols, practices, values) to construct Sikh identity, however, they diverge in regards to the specific practices they emphasize. Differences in religious practice become boundaries between respondents, separating Indian Sikhs and members of Sikh Dharma along both religious and ethnic lines. Furthermore, members of Sikh Dharma redefine both Sikh practice and the boundaries around Sikhism, despite the dissent of Indian Sikhs. Thus, my findings suggest that white practitioners of non-white religious-ethnic traditions have outsized agency in defining Sikhism for themselves and the broader American public.

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Introduction

A man dressed entirely in white *bana*¹ (traditional Sikh garb), with a white beard and white turban to match, walks on to Russell Brand's live show, smiling joyfully (Brand 2013). His name is Hari Jiwan Singh Khalsa and he is a prominent member of Sikh Dharma, a community of predominantly white American Sikhs. Although Brand asked him about his garb, Hari Jiwan did not mention Sikhism or any religious explanation of its significance. He doesn't mention Sikhism at all during the interview. Instead, he simply described his clothing as “advanced” and discussed kundalini yoga. In this way, Hari Jiwan conveyed a certain understanding of Sikh religious symbols, such as the turban, to the broader public, a public that has little to no knowledge of Sikhism to begin with (Kaplan 2015; Lewin 2001). Such understandings of Sikh religious symbols, which effectively remove the Sikh element and replace it with yoga, are denounced by Indian Sikhs, the “original” practitioners of the Sikh faith (Dusenbery 2008). In this paper, I study conceptions of Sikhism, examining how members of two Sikh communities, Sikh Dharma and an Indian Sikh community in the Houston area, construct their Sikh identity and the boundaries they draw between themselves and the Sikh “other”.

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion originating in *Punjab*, a northeastern state in India, which emphasizes equality and service. Sikhs had 10 Gurus (spiritual teachers) who were leaders of the faith and after the 10th Guru, the *Adi Granth* (Sikh holy book) was proclaimed to be the 11th and final Guru. The primary goal of Sikhism is to achieve union with God by remembering God's name through constant prayer. Practice is oriented around three “golden rules”: to work hard, serve others, and speak the truth. Living these values is meant to bring the practitioner closer to God. Also important are a set of religious practices, including wearing a turban, waking

¹ All italicized words are defined in parentheses when they are first used and are also listed with definitions in Appendix A.

up early in the morning to pray, and reciting five prayers daily. Defining Sikh identity, however, has been an ongoing project (Oberoi 2008). Since the 1900s, the Sikh community in India has been divided over the relationship between Sikhism and Hinduism, debating whether or not they are truly separate religions or if Sikhism is a subset of Hinduism and what specific practices are “truly” Sikh. In the 1940s the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC, elected officials who manage Gurdwaras and Sikh affairs in three states of India) published a code of conduct called the *Rehat Maryada*, to clearly outline the beliefs and practices of Sikhs and most mainstream Sikhs subscribe to this code.

Sikhs have always been a minority in the U.S. but they first migrated to America about a decade ago in the early 1900s. Most early Indian Sikh migrants were male laborers, unable to bring their families with them when they immigrated (Leonard 1992). The passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which removed immigration quotas from countries in Asia and South America, brought about increased diversity in the U.S. (Connor 2014; Yang and Ebaugh 2014). Immigrants from Asia and South America brought with them ethnic cultures and religious traditions such as Sikhism that are relatively unknown in the U.S., a primarily Christian country. Since then, the number of Sikhs in the U.S. has continued to grow. We lack an accurate count of Sikhs in the U.S. but estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 (Pew Research Center 2012). These Sikhs are scattered across the U.S., with especially large populations of along the east and west coasts and in large U.S. cities.

As immigration increased, conversion of white Americans to non-western religions has as well (Cadge 2005). Many of these non-Western religions, such as Sikhism and Buddhism, are associated with an ethnic identity. Thus, there are a growing number of religious communities that do not share the ethnic background these non-western religious traditions are rooted in

(Cadge 2005; Siegler 2010). Sikh Dharma is one such community. It is small, started 40 years ago in the 1960s by a Punjabi man known as Yogi Bhajan or Siri Singh Sahib (Khalsa 2012). The 1960s was marked by a sharp increase in new religious movements (Dawson 2003; Dusenbery 2008). This increase was shaped by secularization and the rise of counter cultures (Hammond and Machacek 1993) as well as globalization and immigration (Berg and Kniss 2008). Since the 1960s, Sikh Dharma has grown modestly in size and spread across the globe, although it remains fairly small. There is a large concentration of members in Los Angeles, where the community first began, and in New Mexico, where the headquarters of the organization are now located. Until Sikh Dharma, Sikhs were almost exclusively Indian, and most had roots in Punjab, a region of India. With Sikh Dharma, there was an unprecedented increase in people who claimed a Sikh identity without a Punjabi identity.

There are several key differences between Indian Sikhs and members of Sikh Dharma. One central example is the practice of yoga. While members of Sikh Dharma practice yoga, very few Indian Sikhs do. In fact, many Indian Sikhs explicitly distance themselves from yoga because it is viewed as a Hindu practice. There are also clear differences in terms of appearance. Members of Sikh Dharma often wear all white, while Indian Sikhs have no such restriction. Furthermore, both male and female members of Sikh Dharma wear turbans but it is rare for Indian Sikh women to do so. There are also differences in terms of the way religious services are conducted, where Sikh Dharma musicians incorporate western instruments into their services, which is almost never played in Indian Sikh *Gurdwaras* (Sikh temples). Overall this movement was met with approval from Indian Sikhs, however, as Sikh Dharma grew, so too did tension with the broader Indian Sikh community.

The first tension between these communities was the incorporation of yoga in Sikh

practice, with each community claiming that the other did not understand Sikhism and pointing to writings in the *Adi Granth* (Sikh holy book) to support their views (Stoeber 2012). Many Indian Sikhs believe the practice of yoga runs counter to Sikhism, while members of Sikh Dharma believe that yoga is not only an excellent form of physical exercise, it is actually a Sikh practice (Khalsa 2012). A second tension emerged around adherence to practice. Members of Sikh Dharma criticized Indian Sikhs for not keeping up certain practices, such as leaving hair uncut, arguing that simply being Punjabi was not enough to be considered Sikh (Khalsa 2012). By defining specific practices as necessary in order to claim a Sikh identity, members of Sikh Dharma contested the notion of a hereditary Sikh identity, and in doing so, contested the link between religion and ethnicity. A third tension arose when Indian Sikhs became concerned that Yogi Bajan, the leader of the Sikh Dharma community, was being treated like a *Guru* (spiritual teacher), a violation of the belief that the *Adi Granth* is the current and only *Guru* for Sikhs. Finally, Sikh Dharma has been highly visible in the national spotlight, often representing Sikhism as a whole (Brand 2013; Dusenbery 2008). The power of Sikh Dharma to set the terms of Sikh identity for the American public is recognized and contested among Indian Sikhs. Although a true conflict between these communities never materialized, they remain largely separate, often disagreeing about what it means to be a Sikh and what Sikh practice entails.

These two communities, and the way they each construct their identities and separate themselves from each other, can shed light on the relationship between religion and ethnicity, specifically regarding the implications of whites convert to non-white religious traditions. While scholars have suggested that the connection between religion and ethnicity is losing its salience (Hammond and Warner 1993; Herberg 1955), others continue to find many contexts in which these identities remain strongly linked (Karpov 2012; Min 2011; Mitchell 2008). However, this

research has done little to establish *how* the relationship of ethnicity to religion is challenged, and when it is, who has the authority to define the content of religious identity. The conversion of whites to non-white religious-ethnic traditions provides the ideal opportunity to study this phenomena, however, white converts have received limited scholarly attention (Cadge 2005) and existing research does not examine the boundaries drawn between religious groups or who has the authority to define the content of the religious identity and its boundaries. Studying this phenomenon can not only shed light on the relationship of religion and ethnicity, it also provides a deeper understanding of how power and race operate in American religious communities. Here I take use power to refer to the ability to define the meaning of practices and symbols and convey those meanings to the broader public.

Sikhism is the ideal case to study religion and ethnicity and the impact of conversion on the content of religious identity because Sikh identity is closely bound to a Punjabi identity (Leonard 1992) and until Sikh Dharma, there was no sizable community of non-Punjabi Sikhs (Dusenbery 2008). Thus, Sikh Dharma challenges this link between religion and ethnicity and can reveal how the ethnic identity of converts shapes both the content of religious-ethnic traditions and the boundaries drawn around them. I compare narratives of practice and belief among members of each community as well as their interactions with and perceptions of each other. I follow other scholars in viewing my respondents as key informants on their religious groups (Cadge and Davidman 2006; Furseth 2011; Peek 2005).

I find that, although both members of Sikh Dharma as well as Indian Sikhs draw on the same elements (symbols, practices, and values) to construct a Sikh identity, they diverge in regards to the religious practices they emphasize. Furthermore, these practices gain symbolic meaning and act as boundaries between members of Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs, separating

the two groups along both religious and ethnic lines. Furthermore, while members of Sikh Dharma drew boundaries between Sikh Dharma and the Indian Sikh community, they redefined Sikh boundaries in a more general sense by universalizing Sikh values and practices. By doing so, they legitimated their own claims to Sikh identity. Indian Sikh respondents contest the practice of yoga as a Sikh practice, particularly when this view of yoga was conveyed to the broader public. Public appearances of Sikh Dharma members discussing yoga and Sikhism, such as Hari Jiwan's, are seen as a misrepresentation of the Sikh faith. My findings suggest that the ability to challenge and redefine the contents of religious-ethnic traditions is shaped by racial and ethnic identity, where members of a predominantly white Sikh community have the ability to redefine the contents and boundaries of Sikhism for themselves and the broader public despite the objections of Indian Sikhs.

In what follows, I outline the literature relevant to my topic, discussing themes of identity construction and boundary work within research on religion and ethnicity, as well as the Sikh case specifically. Following this I outline my methodology and then discuss my results, highlighting the ways that my respondents construct their identity as Sikhs and how they construct boundaries between each other, before offering conclusions to be taken from them.

Religion and Ethnicity

Religion and ethnicity represent two identities that have been difficult to disentangle and to understand in the American context. Two key processes are at work in shaping the relationship of religion and ethnicity: identity construction and boundary work. Although identity construction and boundary work are interrelated, each building off the other (Lamont and Molnar 2002, Nagel 1994), they must be distinguished analytically. Identity construction refers to the

process of defining “what we are,” the specific content of our identity, whereas boundary work defines “who we are,” contrasted with who we are not (Nagel 1994).

In constructing identity, we draw on both the past and present to define the content of our identity, participating in what Nagel describes as the construction and reconstruction of culture. This process is evident in many arenas, from the specification of what it means to be part of a national ethnic identity (Kelly 1993) to efforts to preserve language and thus uphold a cultural identity (Johnston 1991). Our identities are layered, with different layers gaining prominence in different contexts. For example, one might identify as Latino in one setting and Mexican in another (Nagel 1994:154). Further, identity construction is not a process isolated within single identities. Our many selves are interconnected and membership and involvement with one identity can strengthen another (Min 2011; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Religion itself has been shown to construct and reinforce ethnic identity, although the specific mechanisms through which it does so vary by religious tradition (Min 2011). For example, Min shows that symbols of ethnicity are embedded within religious rituals in both Korean and Hindu practices in the US, however in the former they are carried out in religious spaces whereas for the latter they are most commonly practiced in the home. This literature illustrates that our many identities do not operate in a vacuum but interact with each other in unique ways.

Identity construction cannot be understood without considering the role of differentiation and boundary work (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992). Boundaries refer to distinctions that categorize people, objects, and practices and they can be either symbolic or social (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Loveman and Muniz 2007). Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions attached to characteristics that categorize and distinguish between different groups and signify status, etc. whereas social boundaries are rules based on such characteristics that limit or allow

access to resources, social mobility, etc. These two types of boundaries work together to separate groups through culture, interaction, and resources. According to Lamont and Molnar, symbolic boundaries exist at the “intersubjective level” whereas social boundaries exist at the collective level (2002:169). I study boundaries at the intersubjective level, following other scholars in viewing my respondents as key informants on their religious groups (Cadge and Davidman 2006; Furseth 2011; Peek 2005). Boundary work occurs both internally and externally, where groups separate themselves from others and form internal distinctions among themselves (Anderson 1999; Durkheim 1965; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Both internal symbolic boundaries (Becker 2000; Furseth 2011) and external symbolic boundaries (Yukich 2010) operate in religious communities as they struggle to define 'true' religious identity and practice. However, although individuals may perceive boundaries between each other, these symbolic boundaries may not impact interaction and resource distribution, remaining symbolic (Furseth 2011; Yukich 2010).

The question that then arises is how identity construction and boundary work shape the relationship of religion and ethnicity. Scholars have proposed that the ethnic content of religious identities loses its salience in the American context due to the individual nature of religion (Hammond and Warner 1993). They argue that through assimilation, religious identity becomes a matter of individual choice rather than heritage, increasing ethnic variation within religious traditions and thus decreasing the salience of ethnicity within religious groups (Hammond and Warner 1993:56). This argument is based on the assumption that both religion and ethnicity are declining in social importance and that boundaries around religion will weaken. These assumption have been critiqued, with recent work showing that religion continues to exert influence in society (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Connor 2014; Ecklund 2006). Religion may even become a barrier to assimilation, as in the case of Muslims, who face many negative stereotypes

in the U.S. (Naber 2000). In fact, Hammond and Warner (1993) have been critiqued for neglecting non-western religions in their analysis (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Furthermore, the assimilation process itself is influenced by immigration patterns (Jimenez 2010) as well as the particular social context immigrants occupy in the U.S., specifically their racial context (Feagin 2006; Omi and Winant 1994; Voas and Fleischman 2012).

Others scholars argue that religion and ethnicity remain linked to each other, although they disagree on how (Gans 1994; Mitchell 2006; Karpov et al. 2012). Some scholars emphasize the ways religion conveys ethnic meaning (Gans 1994; Demerath 2000). Gans (1994) presents the concept of symbolic religiosity, arguing that religious symbols are utilized outside of specifically religious contexts to signify ethnicity. However, Gans' arguments have been critiqued for making "religiosity symbolic of ethnicity," masking the independent influence of religion (Sharot 1997:2; Winter 1996). Others propose a two-way relationship between religion and ethnicity (Mitchell 2006), arguing that religious aspects of non-religious identities can be activated in certain circumstances, becoming primary identities shaping the way seemingly non-religious ethnic identities operate. In some circumstances, religion and ethnicity can become rigidly linked through popular ideology, at times creating situations of intense conflict (Karpov et al. 2012). These scholars show that religion and ethnicity remain very much linked, where the content of religious and ethnic identity is shared and religious-ethnic identities remains salient.

Sikhism and Ethnicity

Scholars of Sikhism consistently note the link between Sikh identity and Punjabi identity (Axel 2001; Leonard 1992; Shani 2007). With globalization, Sikhs have begun to spread across the globe (Leonard 1992; Shani 2007) but the vast majority are still Punjabi. Not only are most Sikhs Punjabi, the Punjabi aspect of their identity has both ethnic and religious significance, even

among the diaspora (Shani 2007). Within India, agitation for *Khalistan* (a separate Sikh state), is driven by religious tensions between Sikhs and Hindus; however such a state would be unequivocally Punjabi (Axel 2001).

The tight link between religious identity as Sikh and ethnic identity as Punjabi begs the question of how members of Sikh Dharma fit into the Sikh tradition as a predominantly white community and how they instantiate such identities in the U.S. context. There has been only one study which compares Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma, conducted by Dusenbery (2008) in the 1970s. He argues that the relationship of these two communities is shaped by cultural differences in understandings of the nature of people and groups, where each community uses different standards to evaluate the others' claims to Sikh identity, thus contributing to misunderstandings between them. This study focuses on epistemological differences between these communities, leaving unaddressed their differences in practice, the boundaries members themselves draw between each other, the significance of the racial identity of most Sikh Dharma members, and the broader implications for discussions of race and ethnicity.

Because members of Sikh Dharma are predominantly white, they experience privilege within American society (McIntosh 1988; Omi and Winant 1994). Given this, the phenomena of white conversion to non-Western traditions has important implications for our understanding of the relationship of religion and ethnicity and how it is shaped by race and ethnicity. These practitioners are able to claim a historically non-white religious identity, raising questions about their reception within and impact on "original" practitioners of Sikhism. By studying identity construction and the use of symbolic boundaries among members of these two communities, each of which occupy different hierarchical locations within the U.S. racial and ethnic structure,

I address how power impacts the ways individuals are able to shape the content of and boundaries around identity.

Challenging the Link between Religion and Ethnicity

Among converts and religious practitioners who challenge connection between religion and ethnicity, there is a struggle to define “legitimate” practice (Siegler 2010; Kraus 2010). Converts to religious-ethnic traditions often place a heightened emphasis on practice, to the point that those without a regular practice cannot be considered “true” members of their faith (Siegler 2010). By focusing on practice, converts circumvent avoid issues of lineage and ethnic identity. Furthermore, the types of practices converts highlight are often different than those emphasized by mainstream members of the faith (Cadge 2005). Among Buddhist converts, specific, solitary practices such as meditation are central, whereas Thai Buddhists are much more community oriented and emphasize transmitting Thai culture (Cadge 2005). When religious practitioners deviate from mainstream religious practices, they justify their differences by drawing on authoritative sources of their religious tradition, thus integrating practices and values that might otherwise conflict (Cadge 2005; Kraus 2010), effectively constructing a new religious identity (Nagel 1994). This body of work reveals a great deal about how converts to religious-ethnic traditions construct their religious identities. It tells us much less about the boundaries these groups construct between each other. Furthermore, the implications of redefining religious identity and practice when converts are white, and the link between religion and ethnicity, go unaddressed.

Studying white practitioners of a non-western religious-ethnic tradition offers several insights. First it provides a deeper understand of one process through which the content of identities, specifically religious identities, change. Second, it reveals how boundaries are

constructed and reinforced within a religious tradition. Third, it reveals the impact of social location on the relationship between religion and ethnicity in the American context by showing how power affects the ability of white converts to claim a religious identity, change it, and represent it to the broader public. Finally, by studying both identity construction and boundary work, my research contributes to prior work on these two Sikh communities.

In this study I ask how members of both Sikh communities construct their Sikh identity, what boundaries they construct between each other, and what boundaries they construct around Sikhism more broadly. I find that although members of Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs construct their identity in similar ways, their religious practices diverge. Religious practices themselves become a source of division because of the symbolic meanings attached to them. Furthermore, I find that members of Sikh Dharma exercise great agency in removing or redefining boundaries around Sikh identity, effectively separating religion from ethnicity. Overall, I find that members of Sikh Dharma redefine what it means to be Sikh with ease, making room for themselves within the faith. In doing so, however, they alienate Indian Sikh respondents, who feel that Sikh identity is being misrepresented, both within the faith and to the American public at large.

Methods

This study draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews in two Sikh communities: Sikh Dharma and the Indian Sikhs of Houston. Research was conducted from June 2014 to February 2015. My respondents include both men and women over age 18, for a total of 31 interviews (Appendix B). In each community I focused on variations in Sikh practice, the ways Sikh identity is conceptualized and performed, and the boundaries community members draw between themselves.

I recruited Sikh Dharma members at an annual two and a half weeks long gathering held in New Mexico in June 2014. Recruiting participants at this event provided access to a large concentration of members without requiring extensive travel across the U.S., which was not practically feasible. Because of my personal background with Sikh Dharma, I did not have to go through a formalized entry process to begin research. Instead, I simply attended the gathering. This gathering is attended by both members of Sikh Dharma and yoga students from across the globe and the retreat includes Sikh religious practices and yoga classes. I restricted participants to Sikh Dharma members living in the U.S. I conducted a total of four participant observations at key events during this retreat, including Peace Prayer Day, a day spent celebrating and praying for peace, and a *Gurdwara* on Sunday (see Appendix B). I acted as both a participant and an observer, taking part in the events while also taking notes about the setting, the event, and the claims made about legitimate Sikh practice and identity, in a small, ruled notebook. During these events I also recruited respondents for interviews. I also drew on key informants, which allowed me to schedule interviews prior to the event. I then employed snowball sampling, asking each respondent I interviewed to recommend others. Most people I spoke with were eager to participate, although some were unable to due to time constraints. I conducted 16 interviews with members of Sikh Dharma, 14 of which took place in New Mexico. Of the remaining two, one was conducted by phone and the other in Los Angeles due to time constraints during the event. When selecting respondents, I recruited along a range of backgrounds. These included: people who became Sikh in the early 70s and had been involved with the community for decades (6 people), people who had been born into the community (5), and people who had joined Sikh Dharma recently (5). I interviewed both men and women (8 each), and I also sought out non-white respondents (13 white, 2 African American, and 1 Persian).

I collected data in the Indian Sikh community in Houston from September 2014 to February 2015. Most Indian Sikhs living in the U.S. reside in urban areas (Jakobsh 2012). For the purposes of this study I focus specifically on Indian Sikhs in the Houston area. There is a large Sikh community in Houston, with four *Gurdwaras*. As such it is an ideal place to study Indian Sikhs because it provides access to a large number of Sikhs in an urban area, a common context for Sikhs in the U.S. While there are several sects within the category of “Indian Sikhs”, the majority of my interviews are with “mainstream” Sikhs. “Mainstream Sikhs” are those who generally follow the guidelines laid out in the *Rehat Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct) and who accept the SGPC as the central Sikh authority.

My entry to this community was much more formal compared to Sikh Dharma. I contacted the leadership of *Gurdwaras* in the Houston area about the research project and ultimately attended two *Gurdwaras*. The first gave me approval very quickly but with several conditions. The first was that any views expressed by members of the *Gurdwara* should not be represented as views of the *Gurdwara* itself. Second, community leaders must sign off on any direct quote. Third, I was formally introduced to the *sangat* (those who meet in the presence of the Guru.), who were told that I had gone to school in India and that I was now a graduate student at Rice studying Sikhism. While this announcement meant that some community members avoided me because they did not want to participate, it also gave me credibility as someone who has personal knowledge of Sikhism and India. Gaining access to the second *Gurdwara* was more difficult because the contact information of the leaders of the community was difficult to obtain. Ultimately I contacted them through a previous respondent and was immediately permitted to conduct my research without any conditions.

I used the same recruitment methods in the Indian Sikh community as I did in Sikh

Dharma, drawing on key informants, participant observation, and different snowball sample chains. I conducted participant observations during the Sunday services at two *Gurdwaras* and recruited attendees after the services during *langar* (food served in a gurdwara, provided to all regardless of class, religion, or race). I began my research in a recently built *Gurdwara* in a suburb of Houston. The second *Gurdwara* in which I collected data is a large, much older *Gurdwara*. I found it more difficult to recruit Indian Sikh respondents because I was not personally familiar with this community and had to forge entirely new connections. I found respondents by conversing with people at these *Gurdwaras* and being introduced to community members by key informants. After I was introduced to the *sangat* in the first *Gurdwara*, several people approached me to say they were interested in participating or that they appreciated the work I was doing. While helpful, this raises the concern that my results may be biased towards those most interested in the subject. I addressed this in two ways. First, when requesting recommendations for future interviews I made it clear that I was also interested in interviewing people who are only marginally religious. Thus, through snowball sampling, respondents with a variety of practices and approaches to Sikhism were introduced into my sample. Second, I approached attendees myself at the conclusion of services about interviews, introducing variety in my sample. However, many of the people I approached individually were unwilling to do an interview or were difficult to get a hold of to schedule interviews with.

I completed a total of 15 interviews with Indian Sikhs. I included respondents from a range of ages (21 to 78), as well as people who had been born in the U.S. (5) vs people who immigrated here (10). Finally, I recruited both men (10) and women (5). As I asked respondents to refer others to me, I soon found that almost everyone referred me to men. When I realized this I began requesting recommendations for women, however, I had already conducted a substantial

number of interviews and thus I interviewed more men than women. Likewise, I noted that the people I was referred to were often involved in activism or leadership in the community or were seen as deeply religious. Approaching community members I was not recommended to for interviews helped remedy this, however, the people I interviewed may be more religious than the broader Sikh community as a whole.

My personal background with Sikh Dharma certainly influenced this study, and I argue that this was a benefit. During the course of the study I was conscious of my connection to the research. When doing interviews in each community I was mindful of my appearance, wearing modest clothing with my bangs pinned back² in order to avoid influencing my respondents. In my interviews with Indian Sikhs I was also very aware of my pronunciation of Punjabi words, making an effort to present myself as knowledgeable about Sikhism. Because of my background I had easy access to Sikh Dharma and gained some credibility among Indian Sikhs. Finally, although I avoided interviewing anyone I was personally close with, my personal networks were valuable in finding respondents. Thus, while my connections with Sikh Dharma have impacted this research, I argue that they are an asset to my study, easing the data collection process and offering a valuable perspective of this community.

In the course of data collection, I altered my approach to respondents, the questions I posed, and their phrasing in order to more fully understand these communities, employing a modified inductive approach (Thomas 2006). For example, after the first couple interviews with Indian Sikhs, I made an effort to ensure they were honest with me regarding their opinions of Sikh Dharma by bringing up my connection to Sikh Dharma and emphasizing that I would not be

2 In Sikhism, keeping your hair uncut is a central religious tenant and a key symbol of Sikh identity. Modesty does not have the same religious symbolism but is highly valued within the community. I was concerned about this due to my own connection with Sikh Dharma and how members may have expected me to behave and dress due to my background.

offended by their opinions. Many respondents were critical of Sikh Dharma and practices within it, suggesting they were comfortable expressing their views. Similarly, while conducting interviews with members of Sikh Dharma it quickly became apparent that my respondents disliked the term “convert” and I instead began asking them when they “became Sikh.” In this way, I molded my methods to the people I was studying and the questions I was interested in answering. After each observation and interview I recorded extensive electronic notes, using templates I created in which I described the setting of the interview or event and my initial impressions of what took place. I audio recorded each interview and listened to the recordings, typing partial transcriptions once data collection was complete. These transcriptions focus on sections of the interviews in which respondents discuss their Sikh identity, the boundaries of Sikh identity, and the relationship of each Sikh community with each other.

My analysis focused on these same sections. I employed a two cycle coding process (Saldana 2013). In the first round of coding I applied mainly descriptive codes, noting the elements my respondents drew on to describe their identity and the instances in which they drew boundaries between themselves and others. I then wrote memos about my impressions of these descriptive codes, noting similarities between the specific elements my respondents drew on to describe their Sikh identity and the prominence of yoga as a boundary between groups. I then returned to the transcripts and developed more nuanced codes about both Sikh identity and boundaries between religious communities. I noted the ways members of each community drew boundaries between each other, as well as how members of Sikh Dharma redefined boundaries around Sikhism more broadly by universalizing Sikh values and practices. In what follows I describe the findings which emerged.

Results

I find that both members of Sikh Dharma and the Indian Sikh community draw on the same elements to construct a Sikh identity, using symbols, practices, and values to determine who is a Sikh. Religious practices such as yoga, however, become boundaries between these communities. While many members of Sikh Dharma draw boundaries between themselves and Indian Sikhs, they also universalize Sikh values and practice more broadly, not only rejecting ethnic boundaries within Sikhism but broadening boundaries around Sikhism to include practitioners of other faiths. Members of Sikh Dharma are able to reshape the content of Sikh identity and the boundaries around it, despite the objections of Indian Sikhs. In what follows I review the ways respondents from each community constructs Sikh identity. I then describe the boundaries they draw between each other and the ways that members of Sikh Dharma broaden and transform religious boundaries.

The Building Blocks of Religious Identity

Both Indian Sikhs and members of Sikh Dharma drew on similar factors to demonstrate their Sikh identity. Respondents highlight Sikh symbols, Sikh practice, and Sikh values. They are, however distinct in the particular way in which they discuss these practices and values.

Sikh Identity among Indian Sikh

A central element these respondents draw on to describe their Sikh identity are symbols, which are both highly significant and highly visible to outsiders, such as the turban. The turban has always been a powerful symbol of Sikh faith and commitment to a Sikh way of life (Walton-Roberts 1998), however since 9/11 it has become an even more important marker of Sikh identity in the U.S. With the 9/11 attacks, the meanings attached to this symbol among the general public shifted, with turbans becoming conflated with Islam and gaining stigma as a result (Sohil and Gohil 2009). The conflation of the turban with Islam has shaped the way these

respondents understand the turban and the importance they place on it. Many respondents view the turban as an essential element of their religious identity. In describing Sikhism, one Indian Sikh man³ brought up the turban by saying: “It has not only spiritual aspects but also some physical aspects that you gotta maintain and part of it is wearing a turban, keeping uncut hair, etc., which forms the identity of a Sikh person.” Here he is pointing to the turban as a central element of Sikh identity broadly. Another respondent⁴ made a similar comment, saying:

because of Sikhism I wear these five articles of faith and the most visual ones that I keep are a beard and turban. So I obviously look very different from others and...obviously people think you know, I probably belong to a different religion, or they don't know my background so you can see that impact on my daily life is there. You know, I am always aware being a Sikh that I am representing Sikhism because I can be visually recognized as a Sikh so I need to be very aware of my actions.

This demonstrates that not only is the turban a key element of Sikh identity, wearing a turban shapes the way a Sikh acts in day to day life, as well as the way others perceive their actions. What makes the symbol of the turban so important is that those who wear it become a visual representation of the faith, thus holding them accountable for their actions.

Not only do these symbols provide a visual representation of the faith, wearing such symbols demonstrates devotion to the *Guru*. The Indian Sikh man⁵ who described wearing a turban to represent Sikhism made this clear, saying:

3 IS_Int1, Indian Sikh, male, 25

4 IS_Int4, Indian Sikh, male, 32

5 IS_Int4, Indian Sikh, male, 32

it's an expression of love as well. Love between you and your *Guru*. So your *Guru* said that as a discipline he set these five things. So for example I wear this iron bracelet so it reminds me, whenever I do some deed, it reminds me that I can't do a bad deed or I'm reminded that...stop, don't do this. The iron bracelet reminds me of that. So similarly there are other aspects or articles. For example I keep a wooden comb to clean my hair. So the main essence of five articles is to keep the discipline and it's an expression of love between me and my teacher or me and my *Guru*.

This highlights a central aspect of Sikh beliefs, one oriented around devotion to and worship of God. For this respondent, that is the most important reason for keeping such symbols, to have a visual expression of his devotion. Within the Indian Sikh community, such narratives about turbans arose almost entirely among men since it is very uncommon for Indian Sikh women to wear turbans.

The second element of Sikh identity my respondents discussed is practice. A particular practice that consistently emerged among both male and female Indian Sikh respondents is listening to Sikh music and reciting Sikh prayers. Such practice is a display of devotion. For example, one respondent said: "I do my daily *sadhana* (a discipline maintained in order to work towards religious or spiritual objectives), I try to meditate daily. And I believe that I'm not a good Sikh right now so I need to improve and become a better human being, a better Sikh." This illustrates how important *sadhana* is to the respondent and that when he does not actually do *sadhana* he is not acting as a good Sikh should. For this respondent, *sadhana* is reading Sikh prayers and listening to Sikh music, meditating on God's name throughout. The particular justifications offered for religious practice once again centered on devotion. For example, in

explaining why he recited certain prayers daily, one Indian Sikh respondent⁶ said that he does so because “this is my *Guru*’s instruction, that I have to do it, so, I mean unless I have a really serious reason that I cannot do it, I try to do it. So, I mean it’s like an order that I have to obey.” Thus, for this respondent, practices are important simply because of devotion to a *Guru* and a desire to fulfill the wishes of the *Guru*.

Finally, Indian Sikhs also drew on Sikh values. For some respondents, this came up in the very beginning of the interview, when I asked respondents “To start can you tell me a little bit about your religion (central beliefs, practices, etc.)?” In their answers, respondents focused on specific Sikh values, such as equality of all people, saying that these values were guiding principles in their lives. For these respondents, Sikh values are not only an important part of their religious identity, they also shape their daily lives and interactions with non-Sikhs. This is illustrated by one man⁷ who said: “it’s more of a daily living...what you’re thinking about in that is God, Waheguru...it’s tying that into the daily living of what we do every single day...it’s a reflection that goes on a daily basis.” For this respondent, what is important to him about Sikhism is not so much specific practices. Instead, what is important is acting out Sikh values in his daily life.

This is similarly illustrated by another man⁸ who said: “Personally I believe more on the spiritual side because if you’re not in line with the religion spiritually, no matter how you are physically, you’re not accepting the religion. Or you’re not practicing the values, which is what the intent of religion is, it’s to get you closer to God. It’s to make you a better person.” Thus, while the respondent recognizes that other people may approach Sikhism and Sikh identity

6 IS_Int9, Indian Sikh, male, 51

7 IS_Int12, Indian Sikh, male, 45

8 IS_Int1 Indian Sikh, male, 25

differently, to him the most fundamental element of Sikhism is the values. For the respondent, it is following these values that will ultimately put him on the path to improving himself and thus becoming closer to God, the primary goal of Sikhism.

Sikh Identity in Sikh Dharma

Respondents in Sikh Dharma were similar to Indian Sikh respondents in the specific symbols they described. Once again, the turban was an essential symbol of Sikh identity. For example one man⁹ spoke of the turban as a way to represent Sikhism, saying

You have to stand up, you have to be who you are. You can't be afraid to acknowledge who you are. You know, there's a tendency to want to blend in and be innocuous and that's not what Siri Singh Sahib taught or the *Gurus* taught. And you know, I wear *bana* (the "uniform" of a Sikh) It refers to a particular style of dress which is loose-fitting and modest along with a turban and the *five Ks* (symbols of the Sikh faith) very comfortably out in the world, you know. So I'm fine with that.

Here the respondent emphasizes the importance of Sikh symbols to people who claim a Sikh identity, once again tying it to the need to represent yourself accurately and clearly as a Sikh. For a Sikh to not wear their turban means that they are not being who they truly are.

Where members of Sikh Dharma diverged from respondents in the Indian Sikh community is the way women described the turban. While women in the Indian Sikh community rarely wear turbans, and thus rarely brought them up in their interviews, women in Sikh Dharma felt that the turban was an important element of their own faith, articulating much the same views as male respondents about the importance of wearing a turban in order to accurately

9 SD_Int1, Sikh Dharma, male, 61

represent Sikh identity. For example, a woman¹⁰ in Sikh Dharma spoke of a time when she had been asked to take her turban off, saying “I have had people offer me money to take my turban off...in the face of those kind of things, it becomes a conviction, it becomes an expression of my conviction.” Here the respondent describes an instance in which she had been discriminated against because of her turban and drew on that event to highlight the importance of continuing to wear it and continuing to represent her religious identity.

Also like Indian Sikh respondents, members of Sikh Dharma brought up music and prayer when discussing Sikh practice, however, their narratives were slightly different. Sikh music and prayer is in *Gurmukhi* (a script used by Sikhs to write in the Punjabi language) and in their discussion of it, respondent both described its importance and defended their ability to practice it despite limited, if any, knowledge of the language and its pronunciation. One longtime member of Sikh Dharma¹¹ said: “the *shabad guru* (word of the guru) is so powerful and no matter how bad you pronounce it, no matter how bad the translation is, you can read from it and meditate on that sound current and still have a transformation, you know?” This shows that not only is prayer and music important, it is seen as something that will actually transform you and make you into a better and more holy human being, despite the errors made by individuals reciting it.

However, respondents in Sikh Dharma also discussed the importance of other practices. One of these was waking up in the *amrit vehla* (the hours from about 3:00am-6:00am in which devout Sikhs wake and meditate. At this time it is believed you can be closest to God.) and doing *sadhana* (a discipline maintained in order to work towards religious or spiritual objectives). One

10 SD_Int11, Sikh Dharma, female, 63

11 SD_Int7, Sikh Dharma, female, 61

man¹² in this community discussed waking up early in the *amrit vehla* by saying “That’s just what a Sikh does. And when you’re really in it and you’re really feeling it, you can’t imagine like, why would I not do this?” The *amrit vehla* is recognized by both Sikh Dharma members and Indian Sikhs as the most appropriate time to worship God. Very few of the Indian Sikh respondents, however, described actually waking up early in the morning, instead offering a more flexible definition of *amrit vehla*. In contrast, this time was a very important time for many members of Sikh Dharma to meditate on God. For example, another respondent¹³ said:

Sadhana changed my psyche...I’ve done 40 years of *sadhana*, two and a half hours a day for forty years...you work through a lot of the subconscious...*sadhana* gives you the experience of that. You actually experience what he’s teaching as truth, you know what I mean, and then the challenge is to kind of live to that truth. They say is like, everybody knows what the truth is, it’s just not so easy to live it.

For this respondent, it is specific practice that actually changes you and brings you closer to God, the primary goal of Sikhism.

Yoga is linked to the practice of *sadhana* during the *amrit vehla*. In the Sikh Dharma community waking up in the *amrit vehla* entails not only reciting *banis* (Sikh prayers) but it also includes the practice of yoga. For many Sikh Dharma respondents, yoga itself was an important element of how they practice Sikhism and how they understand their own Sikh identity. One respondent¹⁴ illustrates this well, saying:

It’s just kind of like, exercise your body. Get in the warrior spirit...the way that we do it is complimentary, very complimentary. Because we’re using *mantras* (a

12 SD_Int8, Sikh Dharma, male, 31

13 SD_Int8, Sikh Dharma, male, 31

14 SD_Int8, Sikh Dharma, male, 31

repeated phrase) that are very Sikh *mantras* and it's working our minds and our bodies in such a way that we're more able, in my feeling, we're more able to understand and really manifest and really put it in ourselves what all these Sikh teachings are.

In this quote the respondent first emphasizes the lack of conflict between Sikhism and yoga and then he goes on to argue in fact, the particular practice of yoga in the Sikh Dharma community is basically a Sikh practice because it uses Sikh *mantras* and it helps practitioners live according to Sikh values. This demonstrates a clear divergence from Indian Sikh respondents' descriptions of their own practice and Sikh practice more broadly.

Not only did members of Sikh Dharma differ in the particular types of Sikh practice they discussed, they also differed in the explanations they offered for these practices. Instead of focusing on devotion to God and *Guru*, these respondents described a regular practice as necessary in order to get the most out of Sikhism. For example one man¹⁵ said “It's the daily application of yourself to a discipline that allows you to experience the wisdom contained in a discipline.” For this respondent, Sikh practices are important because they benefit individuals and help them grow. Thus, for this respondent, and many others within Sikh Dharma, religious practices are understood as pathways to self-improvement. This view of practice is cast in the light of Sikh theology, where the ultimate goal is reunion with God and therefore perfection of the self.

Finally, like Indian Sikh respondents, many Sikh Dharma respondents highlighted values as fundamental to their identity as Sikhs. For example, when speaking of what she sees as the

15 SD_Int12, Sikh Dharma, male, 42

most important part of Sikhism, one woman¹⁶ said “I would say that the first and foremost is the emphasis on living according to a set values that have a lot of integrity.” Thus, for her, values are of preeminent importance to her own Sikh identity. This point about identity is further illustrated by another respondent¹⁷ who, in describing what he sees as the most important part of Sikhism, said: “For me it is the values and probably has a lot to do with the community I grew up in. I really respect that set of values and I aspire to live them, and that’s what the identity represents to me. That’s why I maintain the identity.” For this respondent the primary reason he describes himself as a Sikh and follows the practices of Sikhism is because of Sikh values. These respondents illustrates how central Sikh values are to members of Sikh Dharma, who claim that the very reason they maintain their religious identities is because of the religious values.

Boundaries Between Communities

Overall, there is a great deal of similarity between Indian Sikh and Sikh Dharma respondents in terms of how they construct a Sikh identity. Both draw on symbols, practices, and values as essential to Sikh identity. Despite these similarities, however, there are key differences between them in terms of specific practices and their justifications. While both Indian Sikh and Sikh Dharma respondents highlight the importance of practice to Sikh identity, the specific practices they focus on and the ways they are carried out differs. Some of these differences emerge along the lines of gender, where women in Sikh Dharma wear turbans while women in the Indian Sikh community do not. Within Sikh Dharma, this practice is lodged in notions of gender equality (Elesberg 2003; Jakobsh 2015). Furthermore, through wearing the turban, a key symbol of Sikh identity, women are able convey their Sikh identity to others (Elesber 2003). Finally, Sikh

16 SD_Int10, Sikh Dharma, female, 31

17 SD_Int3, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

Dharma and Indian Sikh respondents differ in the reasons they offer for particular practices. While some Indian Sikhs follow certain Sikh practices because that is what the *Guru* requires, members of Sikh Dharma focus on the ways practices can serve to change their own identity.

Cultural differences in practices and the meanings behind them shaped the extent to which members of Sikh Dharma engaged with Indian Sikhs. Respondents in Sikh Dharma described feeling uncomfortable attending Indian Sikh *Gurdwaras* and, in some cases, felt uncomfortable even interacting with Indian Sikhs. This discomfort stems from a fear that they will be accused of practicing Sikhism inaccurately. For example one man¹⁸ in Sikh Dharma said:

If I go into a [Indian] Sikh community, then...what happens inside of me is like okay, I'm different and there's a different kind of practice here, and...there is.

Like they greet each other in a Sikh way, you know, we say '*sat nam*' and they say '*sat siri akal*' or lots of things that I don't even know...I mean if I had gone to India than I would know, but I didn't know that being American.

For this respondent, the differences between the two communities made him so profoundly uncomfortable that he did not like to attend events or interact with Indian Sikhs for fear that his claim to a Sikh identity may be called into question.

Other respondents describe these differences becoming a source of debate, creating a separation between Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs for that reason. This is well illustrated by one Sikh Dharma man¹⁹ who said:

18 SD_Int2, Sikh Dharma, male, 42

19 SD_Int8, Sikh Dharma, male, 31

We who would otherwise be more friendly and cohesive with each other, we find the differences sometimes and we kind of like, try to debate those differences. So I've done that sometimes.

Here he recognizes that there are more similarities than there are differences between Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma, but he also notes that members of each community focus on the differences between them.

While many respondents within Sikh Dharma described boundaries between Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs, there were respondents who focused on their similarities, denying any real division between them. For example one man²⁰ said:

I'd like to emphasize the arbitrariness of drawing lines. Because I think it's important to recognize... you can define *3HO* (3 Hs Organization, where Hs stand for Happy, Healthy, and Holy) Sikhs as Sikhs who came to the faith and the practices through the teachings of the Siri Singh Sahib. But then, and that's a pretty easy to define group, you can define them and all other Sikhs. But then you still run into trouble with Sikhs who grew up Sikh and then found the teachings of the Siri Singh Sahib and, and there's some mixture. And so there's these, these, they're very gray lines. And then, also if you're looking in terms of Indian Sikhs verses American Sikhs, I think if they're Sikhs in American then they're Indian American Sikhs, and other Sikhs, if your gonna define Indian Sikhs as Indian American Sikhs then you need to define other people as Irish American Sikhs or whatever, you know, you have to, you have to kind of be fair. And I think anywhere you create a divide there's gonna be an overlap.

20 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

For this respondent, any distinctions made between Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma are inaccurate, misrepresenting the reality of the Sikh community as a whole. Furthermore, the respondent finds drawing such distinctions problematic because it creates divisions, divisions that are not real in any objective sense. He focuses instead on the overlap and the similarities between these groups. In interviewing Indian Sikhs, many of these respondents also expressed the view that there are no divisions between Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma and that there is no question about the identity of members of Sikh Dharma as Sikh. For example one Indian Sikh²¹ said: “I think they have brought those positive aspects to Sikhs and they are part of the, they are part of Sikhism. I shouldn’t have called it Sikh Dharma, but I believe they are part of Sikhs, you know.” In saying this, the respondent is making a point of erasing even nominal differences between Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs in order to illustrate the unity of the two.

While there were some Indian Sikh respondents who focused on the similarities between communities, there were others who saw separation between them as well. In contrast to members of Sikh Dharma, however, the boundaries that Indian Sikhs drew between the communities were focused around specific practices. The central boundary drawn by respondents from the Indian Sikh community was based on yoga. The concern with yoga is linked to a boundary that remains contested in India, that between Hinduism and Sikhism (Axel 2001; Oberoi 2008; Tharamangalam 2004). By incorporating yoga into their Sikh practice, members of Sikh Dharma draw on a practice with roots in Hinduism. In India, however, there is a long lived project of distinguishing Sikhism from Hinduism (Oberoi 2008). The incorporation of yoga raises concerns among Indian Sikhs about maintaining this distinction and keeping clear what is “truly” Sikh. This tension arose in my interviews, with respondents expressing concern about the

21 IS_Int4, Indian Sikh, male, 32

conflation between Sikhism and Hinduism and explicitly separating the two. These concerns often arose when discussing Sikhs in India. This is clearly demonstrated by one Indian Sikh man²² who says:

Since we are surrounded by Hinduism, a number of customs like this, I would say Sikhs are now celebrating *puran mashi*, full moon, things like that. There's no such thing celebrating those in Sikhism. So that has slowly crept in from the surroundings.

Here the respondent is both recognizing the conflation that has occurred between Sikhism and Hinduism, and problematizing it, framing certain practices as in-authentically Sikh. For this respondent, participating in these practices actually violates Sikh identity. This concern with Hindu practices was raised by other respondents as well. For example, one Indian Sikh woman²³ said “never will anybody who's a Sikh with understanding and meaning have a picture of *Devi Mata* because they've chosen a path of Sikhi.” *Devi Mata* is a Hindu goddess linked to *Vishnu*, a central figure in Hindu mythology. Here this respondent is engaging in the construction of a “true” Sikh identity by specifying what “true” Sikhs do not engage in. Keeping pictures of a God, specifically a Hindu one, deviates from appropriate and authentic Sikh practice.

This effort to differentiate Sikhism from Hinduism is linked to Indian Sikh respondents' efforts to differentiate Sikhism from yoga, a historically Hindu practice (Stoeber 2012). Indian Sikh respondents draw boundaries between “authentic” Sikh practice and those see yoga as a Sikh practice, which is viewed as “inauthentic.” For these respondents, however, the issue is not the practice of yoga, it is the practice yoga as a specifically *Sikh* practice. It is at this point respondents feel a need to police the boundaries of Sikhism and separate Sikhism and yoga. For

22 IS_Int6, Indian Sikh, male, 78

23 IS_Int11, Indian Sikh, female, 38

example, one respondent²⁴ says of this “I do not see how yoga is an important part of Sikhi or has any connection to the faith...[it’s about] being aware that this is not a part of the core of Sikhi and it’s not something that the *Gurus* did or told us to do...people start to conflate the two and that’s how the faith sort of loses its essence.” This illustrates just how important it is to Indian Sikhs that a distinction be made between yoga and Sikhism.

Boundaries around Sikhism

Both Indian Sikhs and members of Sikh Dharma drew boundaries between each other through their descriptions of Sikhism. However, when members of Sikh Dharma describe Sikhism, not only do they highlight boundaries between themselves and Indian Sikhs, they broaden and redefine what it means to be Sikh, transforming boundaries that exist between Sikhs and religious others. They do so in terms of Sikh identity, Sikh practice, and the Sikh religion more broadly. As one man²⁵ in Sikh Dharma said “Sikhi is the *Guru*, and the *Guru* is universal.” Thus, the *Guru* has no boundaries that can be limited by other identities such as race, ethnicity, culture, or even religion.

Universalizing Religion

While most respondents within Sikh Dharma did not explicitly address the link between Sikhism and Punjabi ethnicity, several expressed concern about drawing distinctions between Sikhs. One respondent²⁶ made this very clear, saying “I’d like to emphasize the arbitrariness of drawing lines...I think anywhere you create a divide there’s gonna be an overlap.” Here he pushed back on any separation of Sikhs and instead highlighted the communities between them. Another

24 IS_Int14, Indian Sikh, male, 21

25 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

26 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

respondent²⁷ in the Sikh Dharma took this a step further, saying:

I don't believe there are American Sikhs or white Sikhs or Indian Sikhs or Punjab, there's Sikhs. Period. Because I don't like being referred to as an African American Sikh. Okay? I think that, that's an oxymoron. That's ah, a moron is saying it anyways [laughs]. The cultural, racial distinction before the word Sikh is the antithesis of what Sikh is. Once you have said I'm a Sikh, your racial, cultural identity is no longer relevant in my estimation. It is there, but it is not the basis of your identity. The basis of your identity is I am a Sikh...I make my best effort not to draw distinctions or make judgments in my mind based upon any filters that have to do with race or ethnicity.

This respondent very clearly and explicitly challenges ethnic, racial, and cultural distinctions between Sikhs by framing "Sikh" as a master status, taking preeminence over other identities. In framing Sikhism as a master status (Hughes 1984), the respondent also problematizes any discussion of racial or ethnic identity within Sikh communities. In fact, to this respondent, placing an ethnic or racial identity before "Sikh" is a contradiction to core Sikh beliefs in equality. In this way, any claim about the ethnic specificity of Sikhism itself becomes anti-Sikh.

While these respondents pushed back on distinctions between Sikh communities, a couple respondents spoke explicitly about spreading the religion beyond the current boundaries of ethnicity. For example, one longtime member of Sikh Dharma²⁸ said: "I think there's gonna be another huge wave of change in the next 100 years, not only as the result of more people practicing outside of India who are of Punjabi origin, but of people who are becoming Sikhs

27 SD_Int12, Sikh Dharma, male, 61

28 SD_Int16, Sikh Dharma, male, 57

from all over the world.” Here the respondent expresses the belief that Sikhism will spread across the globe, not just through the migration of Punjabis, but through the spread of Sikhism to people in all countries, far beyond the borders of ethnicity. Thus members of Sikh Dharma not only reject any ethnic specificity within Sikhism, they advocate for the spread of Sikhism beyond ethnic boundaries.

Universalizing Identity

While it makes intuitive sense that members of Sikh Dharma would believe that anyone can become Sikh, respondents within Sikh Dharma take this a step further, reshaping boundaries between Sikhism and other religious traditions, thus universalizing elements of the religion. One key way Sikh Dharma respondents universalize Sikhism is by articulating the belief that anyone can be Sikh. These respondents claim that not only can anyone identify as Sikh, they argue that people can be Sikh without actually identifying as members of the religious tradition or ever having heard of it. According to these respondents, to be Sikh is about holding particular values, and these values are universal. This is well illustrated by a man²⁹ who said “to be Sikh is just to be a learner and to my understanding, Sikh was chosen as a name of the people who practice it because it’s a, it’s a very universal term to describe somebody. That everybody, everybody is a learner.” Here this respondent is describing the essence of Sikhism and claiming that it is not specific to anyone, that it is found in all people regardless of their religious identity. For him, the essential element of Sikhism is the search for truth. Furthermore, when the respondent describes the origin of the name “Sikh”, he adds all the weight of history to his description of Sikhism. In this framing of Sikh identity, there is little room to challenge the legitimacy of members of Sikh Dharma as authentic Sikhs.

29 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

This narrative of Sikhs as learners emerged consistently among respondents. Another woman³⁰ in Sikh Dharma expanded on it, saying:

It's the path of the learning soul, which is really what Sikh means. And you know, when *Guru Nanak* (the first of 10 Sikh *Gurus*) came out of the three days in the river, he said everyone was a Sikh. There's no such thing as a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian, any of that, we're all here as learning souls. We're all here on earth to learn and understand our infinite selves while we're in finite form. So there is a Sikhism that has a structure and leaders and rules and protocols, the vast majority of which were all created after the *Gurus*.

This respondent draws on the sayings of the first *Guru* to support her “universal” framing of Sikhism in which she essentially erases any boundaries between religious traditions. The respondent takes this a step further and says that any structure or rule unique to Sikhism was put in place after the *Gurus* had passed away. In saying this, the respondent questions the validity of all such structure and rules.

Universalizing Practice

Members of Sikh Dharma also redefined Sikh identity and the boundaries around it by describing the practices of Sikhism as accessible to all, regardless of religious identity. These respondents felt that specific practices are not confined to any particular religious tradition. Furthermore, they expressed the view that people could be practitioners of other religions and still participate in Sikh practices. This is demonstrated by one woman³¹ who said “I think it's just a technology, it's a spiritual path, and anyone can be a Sikh. You can be a Buddhist Sikh.” In saying this, the

30 SD_Int7, Sikh Dharma, female, 61

31 SD_Int5, Sikh Dharma, female, 34

respondent illustrates her views that Sikh practices are not confined to those who claim a Sikh identity. She describes Sikh practices as a technology, thus separating them from any particular religious identity. This language of Sikh practices as a technology emerged consistently among my respondents. One respondent³² said of Sikh practices such as wearing a turban “[they are] not at all religious, they're just tricks basically.” In saying this, the respondent removed the boundaries that confine Sikh practices solely to those who claim a Sikh religious identity.

Caveat to Openness

While members of Sikh Dharma often expressed the view that Sikhism is not confined to people who identify as Sikh, when asked if Sikh practices can be combined with non-Sikh practices, many of these same respondents expressed the view that one cannot practice two religious traditions at once, although not all respondents felt this way. For example when asked whether or not it is possible to be Sikh have religious practices that are not Sikh, one woman³³ said “I think this path was for everyone. This is not just about um, it isn't, you could be a Jewish Sikh.” This particular view, however, was the minority among my respondents, something this respondent acknowledged herself.

Although none of these respondents problematized the practice of any other religious tradition or expressed the belief that other religions were “false”, they did believe that Sikhism, and other religious traditions, are all-encompassing. For these respondents, this means that while Sikhs may participate in certain practices or attend religious events in other religious traditions, these practices and events cannot be regular facets of their own religious practice as Sikhs. These respondents felt that ultimately, you would be required to choose one path and commit to it. In

32 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

33 SD_Int4, Sikh Dharma, female, 32

this context, members of Sikh Dharma framed Sikhism as a religion that requires complete commitment. This is clearly illustrated by one respondent³⁴ who said “as far as individual discrete practices, I think that they can absolutely be incorporated into anybody’s life. Um, I think that the one major caveat is that to live as a Sikh, to take that, to internalize that and to live that and represent it means that you have a one-pointed focus on the *Guru*.” For this respondent, non-Sikhs may participate in specific practices or believe in specific values of the Sikh tradition but an essential element of the faith is about devotion to the *Sikh* view of God and without this, one cannot truly be Sikh. Thus, while these respondents broaden Sikh identity, they do so conditionally. Sikh practices are made accessible to all, but complete commitment to the Sikh path is simultaneously upheld as central to the Sikh faith and a Sikh identity.

Discussion and Conclusions

My findings demonstrate that both Indian Sikhs and members of Sikh Dharma play a role in legitimating and challenging existing boundaries drawn around religious and ethnic others. When it comes to defining the content of their identity (Nagel 1994), both Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma respondents drew on the same elements: symbols, practices, and values. Furthermore, when it came to the specific symbols they discussed and the importance of Sikh values, my respondents’ narratives were very similar. Both members of Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs highlighted the importance of turbans, especially since the backlash against Muslims in the U.S., and both highlight meditating on God's name. This indicates that respondents from both communities share some historical context which they draw on to reconstruct Sikh identity (Nagel 1994:162), determining what elements of the Sikh faith are important and why.

However, there is a clear divergence in my respondents’ narratives of Sikh practice.

34 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

Members of Sikh Dharma discuss elements of practice that Indian Sikh respondents either do not see as important or do not recognize as Sikh at all. For example, Sikh Dharma respondents highlight the importance of *amrit vehla* and yoga whereas Indian Sikh respondents view the former as much more flexible and the latter as completely distinct from Sikhism. This finding is consistent with scholarship on white converts to religious-ethnic traditions who find that they often emphasize strict adherence to religious practice to legitimize their claim to the religious identity (Siegler 2010). This can be seen in Sikh Dharma members' commitment to *amrit vehla*, a practice Indian Sikh respondents are much less concerned with. Further, members of Sikh Dharma actually reshape Sikh identity, incorporating practices such as yoga into the Sikh practice. This aligns with scholarship on converts to religious-ethnic traditions which finds stark differences in practice between white converts and the "original" practitioners of religious-ethnic traditions (Cadge 2005). Furthermore, members of Sikh Dharma draw on established sources of authority to legitimate the yogic practices they integrate, bringing new content into Sikhism while presenting a "coherent" Sikh identity (Nagel 1994).

These differences in practice between members of Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs become the basis for boundaries respondents draw between each other (Lamont and Molnar 2002). My findings illustrate that these respondents construct boundaries between each other based largely on the symbolic meaning of specific religious practices (Furseth 2011; Lamont and Molnar 2002). The religious practices that become salient boundaries, however, differ among respondents from each community. Members of Sikh Dharma draw on cultural distinctions to explain the separation. For these respondents, their different racial and cultural background, and the differences in practice that stem from it, keep them from feeling comfortable among Indian Sikhs. In contrast, Indian Sikhs distinguish between themselves and Sikh Dharma members by

pointing to the practice of yoga. Thus, religious and cultural practices serve as symbolic boundaries separating Sikh Dharma and Indian Sikhs, but the specific practices cast as boundaries differs between groups. The differences which become symbolically meaningful boundaries are rooted in the background of each community.

Furthermore, my findings demonstrate how *religious* practices become symbolic boundaries between *ethnic* groups. This finding contributes to the study of boundary work by demonstrating how symbolic boundaries maintain group distinction across multiple lines, in this case, along both religious and ethnic lines. Without any articulated ethnic boundary within Sikhism, ethnic divisions are maintained through religious divisions of practice. In fact, these ethnic divisions are maintained in spite of existing ideological narratives that denounce religious and ethnic distinctions, narratives recognized by both Indian Sikh and Sikh Dharma respondents. Thus, we can see how divisions between groups are maintained along multiple interconnected identities.

Mitchell calls for further study on the “religious foundations, expressions, and implications” of ethnic identities (2008:1148). Through my focus on boundary work I answer this call, showing how religious boundaries actually strengthen ethnic boundaries within a religious group. Like Mitchell (2006), I suggest there is a two-way relationship between religion and ethnicity, however, my findings point to the ways ethnicity acts in religious spaces instead of the ways religion can be activated in non-religious, ethnic spaces. My findings show that religious boundaries maintain both religious and ethnic divisions. Furthermore, these findings suggest that there remains a persistent and durable link between religion and ethnicity in the U.S. context, where ethnic boundaries are maintained, at least in part, *through* ethnicity's connection with religion.

These findings push back on Hammond and Warner's (1993) argument that the link between religion and ethnicity will weaken as religion becomes more individualistic. In both their claims to Sikh identity and the boundaries Sikh Dharma members draw between themselves and Indian Sikhs, they are enacting American religious individualism. Their ability to do so, however, reinforces *internal* religious and ethnic boundaries within Sikhism, ensuring the continued salience of these linked identities in the future. Thus, while members of Sikh Dharma appear to challenge the link between religion and ethnicity, through both the fact of their identity as Sikh and their individual narratives, ultimately they maintain internal ethnic divisions within the Sikh tradition. While at first glance it may appear that the link between religion and ethnicity is challenged, my findings show how members of both Sikh communities actually maintain internal ethnic divisions along religious lines. Furthermore, my findings suggest that the introduction of new ethnic groups to religious-ethnic traditions does not weaken the link between religion and ethnicity because these boundaries are maintained internally.

I find that members of Sikh Dharma have great flexibility to define and redefine Sikhism. Furthermore, I note the multiple ways their descriptions of Sikhism differed markedly from Indian Sikhs. When describing Sikhism, members of Sikh Dharma framed it as universal in terms of values, practice, and identity. While most respondents recognized a boundary between Indian Sikhs and Sikh Dharma, a few respondents pushed back on distinctions made between Sikhs, saying they are all one. Furthermore, respondents articulated the belief that Sikhism would spread across the globe, with spiritual communities emerging everywhere, regardless of race or nationality. Through universalizing Sikhism, members of the Sikh Dharma community make room for themselves within a religious tradition that had no precedent for the widespread conversion of westerners. The prevalence of this universalizing narrative among members of

Sikh Dharma suggests that they are trying to separate religion and ethnicity, making Sikhism a much more open and flexible identity, one that is not a matter of birth and one which has the possibility to spread beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. I argue that this “de-ethnicizing” of religion, in conjunction with the redefinition of religious practice and values, has the potential to change the content of religious traditions as a whole. The resources in the Sikh Dharma community (Khalsa 2012), as well as their privileged position in the US context (Omi and Winant 1994), puts them in a powerful position to mold the future of Sikh identity in the U.S.

The ease with which members of Sikh Dharma redefine and adjust boundaries around Sikhism in their individual narratives has important implications regarding the relationship of religion to ethnicity. These respondents feel very little constraint in identifying what is and is not Sikh, despite their lack of Sikh lineage and limited cultural knowledge of Sikhism in India. This suggests that within the U.S. context, new white practitioners of historically religious-ethnic faiths have outsized agency in defining the content of religious identity. Indian Sikhs raise this concern, rejecting the view that yoga is a Sikh practice. Furthermore, Indian Sikhs are concerned this understanding of Sikhism is spreading among the American public and may cause the faith to “lose its essence.” In understanding how religious and ethnic identities are related in the U.S., this suggests that we cannot disregard the distribution of power. In the U.S., where ethnic and racial identity continues to privilege whiteness, racial and ethnic identity may impact the degree of agency religious practitioners have in constructing their faith.

Moving forward, I suggest further research in several areas. As one respondent³⁵ indicated, what I describe as two separate communities are not entirely distinct in reality. While they do generally operate separately, there are people in each community who cannot be neatly

35 SD_Int13, Sikh Dharma, male, 23

classified as a member of one or the other. Further study should be done on such individuals within both the Indian Sikh and Sikh Dharma community. By looking at how they understand their own Sikh identity and their place in each of these communities, we can better understand each community individually. Future research on the relationship of religion and ethnicity would also benefit from a religious comparison. Comparing the way Sikhs navigate this process to other religious-ethnic traditions would indicate what is particular about the Sikh context and what is characteristic of the relationship of religion and ethnicity more broadly.

In this project I rely mostly on the narratives of members of each Sikh community. I am not able to say with certainty, however, how these narratives affect actual interactions between community members. Future research on the subject would benefit from a more detailed ethnographic analysis. An ethnography conducted in a city with large numbers of both groups would provide a more detailed picture of how these two groups interact with each other day to day. Furthermore, such an ethnography would benefit from a comparison with a Sikh community in which both Indian Sikhs and white Sikh converts are joint members and share in administration. This would provide a more complete picture of how these communities interact, and a more complete picture of how their different conceptions of Sikh identity and practice shape everyday interaction. Such data would also address the importance of power and structural location in shaping the connection between religion and ethnicity by revealing its impact on interactions between community members. This would allow researchers to understand not only the discourses of identity but how identity shapes behavior (Cerulo 1997).

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Appendix A – Glossary

3HO: 3 Hs Organization, where Hs stand for Happy, Healthy, and Holy

Adi Granth: The Sikh holy book, believed by most Sikhs to be the Guru since the passing of the 10th Guru.

Amrit vehla: the hours from about 3:00am-6:00am in which devout Sikhs wake and meditate. At this time it is believed you can be closest to God.

Bana: the 'uniform' of a Sikh. It refers to a particular style of dress which is loose-fitting and modest along with a turban and the five Ks.

Bani: Sikh prayer

Devi Mata: a Hindu goddess linked to Vishnu.

Five Ks: Five articles of faith that all baptized Sikhs wear, as well as many Sikhs who are unbaptized. These are Kesh, Kara, Kangha, Kachera, and Kirpan.

Gurdwara: Sikh temple.

Guru: spiritual teacher. In Sikhism there were 10 Gurus who guided the faith and after the 10th Guru the Guruship was believed to be passed to the Siri Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Nanak: the first of the 10 Sikh Gurus

Kachera/Kaccha: loose fitting shorts worn as underwear under your clothing. They are meant to serve as a reminder to control sexual desires.

Kangha: a small wooden comb kept by Sikhs. It is used twice a day and meant to symbolize cleanliness.

Kara: a bracelet made of iron or steel meant to symbolize union with god and serve as a reminder of a Sikh's commitment to God and to living righteously.

Kesh/Kes: leaving hair uncut as a symbol of respect for God's creation. This is based on the belief that God's creation is perfect as it is and doesn't require any alteration.

Khalistan: A separate Sikh state, one that was never established despite the Sikh separatist movement in Punjab.

Kirpan: a sword or dagger which symbolizes the struggle of good in the face of evil and a commitment to defending the powerless and the innocent, regardless of their background (religion, caste, color).

Langar: food served in a gurdwara, where everyone sits together on the floor and receives the same food, regardless of their background. Symbolizes the equality and unity of humankind.

Punjab: A regional and ethnic identity in Punjab, the state in India where Sikhism originated.

Mantra: a repeated phrase or slogan, usually used in Hinduism and Buddhism as a meditation technique.

Puran Mashi: full moon festival in Hinduism

Rehat Maryada: a book which contains the officially recognized Sikh code of conduct. Work was begun on it in 1930 and completed in 1950.

Sadhana: a discipline maintained in order to work towards religious or spiritual objectives.

Sangat: those who meet in the presence of the Guru.

Sat nam: greeting among Sikh Dharma meaning true name.

Sat Siri Akal: a common Sikh greeting meaning God is the ultimate truth.

SGPC: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. A body of elected officials meant to manage Gurdwaras and religious affairs of Sikhs in three states of India and are the central authority figures within the Sikh faith.

Shabad guru: The word of the guru, often used to refer to the hymns in the Adi Granth.

Turban/Dastar: a cloth worn wrapped around the head. It is a central article of faith within Sikhism.

Vishnu: the sustainer, a central god in Hindu mythology

Appendix B – Tables and Figures

Table 1. Research Methods in Each Community

	Participant Observation	In-depth Interviews
Sikh Dharma	4	16
Indian Sikh Community	5	15