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Sin and expiation in Sikh texts and contexts: from the Nānak Panth to the Khālsā

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In India, the Sikhs are new comers on the long tormented religious scene of the Panjab, as compared to the Hindus and the Muslims.¹ Their Panth (lit. “way”, an institutionalized order going back to an historical founder) emerges in the early 16th century within the widely spread north Indian Sant movement. Its charismatic spiritual leader is the saint-poet Nānak (1469-1539), to whom the Sikhs trace the origin of their religion.² The Sants form the main component of the *nirgunī bhakti* tradition of medieval Hinduism. They orient their loving devotion (*bhakti*) towards a God beyond attributes (*guṇa*), invisible, unfathomable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, creator, benevolent and clement, thus distinguishing themselves from the advocates of *saguna* traditions who worship Devī, Śiva, Viṣṇu, or an avatar of the latter as an embodied or anthropomorphic deity. The Sants also generally deny any soteriological value to caste. Chanting God’s praises in congregation (*sarigati*) as well as repeating His name (*japu*) and remembering It (*nāma simaraṇa*) are their only rituals.³

¹ For a fine and handy history of the Sikhs, see Jaswant Singh Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² On Nānak, see W. H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976). At the head of the Sikhs, Nānak was followed by nine successors, each of them becoming Gurū at the death of his predecessor. Here is their list: Gurū Aṅgad (1504-1552), Gurū Amar Dās (1479-1574), Gurū Rām Dās (1534-1581), Gurū Arjan (1563-1606), Gurū Har Gobind (1595-1644), Gurū Har Rāi (1630-1661), Gurū Har Krishan (1656-1664), Gurū Tegh Bahādur (1621-1675), and Gurū Gobind (1666-1708). – In the present chapter, the transliteration used is based on that of the Indologists. It is strictly applied for quotations from the sources, for technical terms mentioned between brackets, and for the books’ titles in the bibliography; but, in order to reflect the current pronunciation of the words, for authors’ names, books’ titles and Indian words used within the text, the transliteration tilts towards transcription and does not include all the –a(-) inherent to the Gurumukhī syllabic script used by the Sikhs, nor the final brief vowels marking the cases of consonant names and adjectives in the language of the *Ādi Granth*. For a description of this language, based on the variety of literary old Hindi called Sant-bhāṣā, see Christopher Shackle, “‘South-Western’ Elements in the Language of the *Ādi Granth*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 40 no. 1 (1977): 36-50; “The South Western Style in the *Guru Granth Sahib*,” *Journal of Sikh Studies* 5 no. 1 (1978a): 69-87; “Approaches to the Persian Loans in the *Ādi Granth*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 41 no. 1 (1978b): 73-96; “The Sahaskritī Poetic Idiom in the *Ādi Granth*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 41 no.2 (1978c): 297-313; *An Introduction to the Sacred Language of the Sikhs* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1984); and *A Gurū Nānak Glossary* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1995). For Indo-Persian names and words used in the text when not taken from Sikh sources in Gurumukhī, the Arabic letters are transliterated as in John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884).

³ For a quick but illuminating overview of the *bhakti* currents, see David Lorenzen, “Bhakti,” in *The Hindu World*, eds. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 185-209. On the Sants, see also

Nānak, whose religious activity began in the early 16th century, was active when Bābur (1483-1530), the warlord who was to be the first Mughal emperor, launched his initial raids across the Panjab (1505 to 1519) from what was then Khurasan, and then conquered northern India (1525-1526).⁴ Like all his successors at the head of the Panth, Nānak was from the Khatrī caste, which is quite near the top of Panjab's urban hierarchy, while his disciples came from various strata of society.⁵ But very soon, from the days of Gurū Amar Dās, Jāṭ peasants and landholders (*zamīndārs*) came to form the majority of the Sikhs. These were settled nomadic pastoral groups, who had retained their martial and egalitarian ethos and who were already the dominant caste in Punjabi villages.⁶ Other important sections of the Panth consisted of Khatrīs and Aroṛās (an urban caste quite close in status to the Khatrīs), and, above all, of members of various, mostly rural, service and artisan castes.⁷ By the mid-seventeenth century the Sikhs had a territorial and financial organisation and a book of scriptures – the *Ādi Granth*, reverently called Gurū Granth Sāhib – compiled in 1604 by their fifth Gurū, Arjan, from his hymns, those of his predecessors at the head of the Panth, and compositions written by Sant poets such as Kabīr (c. 1398–c. 1448), Nāmdev (trad. 1270-1350) and Ravidās (late 15th-early 16th century).⁸ They also engage in severe military skirmishes with Mughal forces; the turbulent Jāṭs were harassed for their resistance to revenue taxes. In the early 18th century, the Sikhs were fortified in the Panjab hills, and their tenth and last Gurū, Gobind, after many fierce battles against both the Hindu hill rajahs and Mughal forces, was assassinated in 1708 while helping Mu'azzam, the future Mughal emperor Bahādur Shāh (r. 1707-1712), succeed his father, the last great Mughal Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). His four sons having been killed before him, he had decreed, according to the Sikh tradition, that after him, the authority of the Gurū would pass jointly to the sacred scriptures and the gathered Panth. A few decades later, the Sikhs fought for supremacy in the Panjab against both the Mughals and the Afghans, and by 1799, they created in the region one of the successor states of the Mughal

Karine Schomer, "The Sant tradition in Perspective," in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, eds. Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1-17.

⁴ Khurasan covered parts of modern day Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Zāhīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur was a Tīmūrid prince from Kabul. On him, see Stephen Frederic Dale *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Bābur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India, 1483-1530* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁵ On the Khatrīs, see Horace Arthur Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province*, vol.2 (Lahore: S. T. Weston at the Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1914), 501-526.

⁶ On the notion of "dominant caste", see notably Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus: le système des castes et ses implications* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 204-208.

⁷ On the Jāṭs, see Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, vol.2, 357-377, and Joyce Pettigrew, *Robber Noblemen: A Study of the Political System of the Sikh Jats* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975). On the crucial role of the Jāṭs in the evolution of the Panth, see W. H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), 9-13. On the Aroṛās, see Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, vol.2, 16-21.

⁸ The *Granth* was to be finalised in the early 18th century by the tenth Gurū, Gobind, who introduced in it the hymns of his father, Gurū Tegh Bahādur. For a remarkable synthetic presentation of the *Ādi Granth*, see W.H. McLeod, *Sikhism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997), 166-176.

Empire, which lasted until the annexation of the Panjab to the territories ruled by the British East India Company in 1849.⁹ Following the independence and partition of India in 1947, the Sikhs managed to have the Indian State of Panjab reshaped in 1966 so that they form the majority of its population.

Theology had to follow! In this chapter, I shall first deal with sin and expiation as they were conceived by Gurū Nānak and his eight first successors at the head of the Panth: their theology, as expressed in their *Ādi Granth* compositions, is very much the same as that of the other Sants.¹⁰ I shall then examine the changes introduced in these conceptions by Gurū Gobind, who organised a substantial part of the Sikhs as a militant order at the very end of the 17th century, and I shall concentrate on the construction of cowardice as a major sin and on martyrdom as the proper way to expiate it. I shall then show how, in the chaotic 18th century, new notions of sin and expiation were derived from the new commandments attributed to Gobind and were formulated again and again throughout that period in code-manuals, taking one of them as an archetypical example. I shall conclude with indications of the way the situation has evolved until our time, with a landmark being the promulgation of the Sikh Code in 1950.

1. Sin and Expiation in the early Sikh writings

The Sikh categories of sin and expiation have been constructed both from and in opposition to those of brahmanical Hinduism. The Hindus who became followers of Nānak and his first successors came from a diversified Hindu universe, socially and ritually structured by caste dharma, with rules of conduct (*ācāra*) pertaining to the orthodox and therefore correct performance of certain social and ritual duties. Infringements of this dharma were often social faults (*pāpa*) and necessitated codified reparations (*prāyaścitta*) imposed by a caste council (*pañcāyata*).

Now, for these Hindus, becoming the disciple of Nānak was an individual decision quite akin to leaving a “church” (in the Weberian sense) and entering a theistic “sect” (*sampradāya*), headed by a charismatic mystic, poet and theologian – a “virtuoso”, and characterized by a strong guru-pupil relation. In such a context, sin, for which there are various terms in the *Ādi Granth* (*pāpu*, *dokhu*, *dosu*, *avagaṇu*, *aūgaṇu*, *vikāru*), meant the internally felt transgression of voluntarily and personally adopted rules of Divine origin, and more precisely of what Nānak and his successors called the Divine Order (*hukamu*, from Ar. *ḥukm*). At the heart of this Divine Order was dharma, that is to say, both the rules governing the physical universe and those governing society, and the duties of a religious and moral

⁹ For a synthetic clarification on the “successor states” of the Mughal Empire, see J. C. Heestermann, “The Social Dynamics of the Mughal Empire: A Brief Introduction,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47 no. 3 (2004): 292-297.

¹⁰ On the Sant basis of early Sikhism, see W. H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak, and the Sikh Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976), 151-158.

life.¹¹ In the latter sense, for the Sikh Gurūs, it meant above all meditating on God with love and forsaking all illusions on the nature of both the world and the way to salvation:

karaṇaihāru ride mahi dhāru ||

taji sabhi bharama bhajio pābrahamu ||

*kahu nānaka aṭala ihu dharamu ||*¹²

Enshrine the Creator within your heart.

Renounce all illusions, adore the Supreme Lord.

Says Nānak, eternal is this dharma.

The human who does not follow the Divine Order sins gravely. In a hymn full of vivid metaphors, Nānak compares him to a wild hunter, a being always on the move to fulfil his lustful desires and, because of that, bogged down in such sins as falsehood, violence, robbery, concupiscence, anger, cheating, and the like. Here are the first couplet and refrain of this hymn:

1.

eku suānu dui suānī nāli ||

bhalake bhaūkahi sadā baiāli ||

kūru churā muṭṭhā muradāru ||

dhānaka rūpi rahā karatāra ||

R.

mairi pati kī pandi na karaṇī kī kāra ||

haū bigarai rūpi rahā bikarāla ||

terā eku nāmu tāre sansāru ||

*mairi ehā āsa eho ādhāru ||*¹³

1.

A dog and a bitch are with me.

In the morning they bark and continue till the evening.

Falsehood is the dagger, the dead lies robbed.

I stay in the form of a wild hunter, O creator!

R.

I did not follow the Lord's advice nor did I do what I should have done.

My appearance is hideous, I am frightening.

Your Name alone gets one across the cycle of births.

¹¹ On Nānak's theology in general, see McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, 148-226; on *hukamu* and dharma in particular, see McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, 199-203.

¹² Nānak, *Ādi Granth. Sī Gurū Grantha Sāhiba Daranpaṇa*. 10 vols. Chief ed. Sāhib Singh (Jalandhar: Rāj Pabliśarz, 1962-1964), 196. All the editions of the *Ādi Granth* have the same standard pagination of 1430 pages.

¹³ Nānak, *Ādi Granth*, 24.

This is my hope, this is my support.

The situation of the human is all the more complicated in that, for Nānak as in brahmanical Hinduism, sin is the human's carry-over from his past, for when the soul is joined to the body at birth, the human is loaded with the results of all the good (*puṇya*) and bad (*pāpa*) actions of his past lives. This is the doctrine of *karma*, which combines with the idea of rebirth, the current actions of an individual predicting his future condition or "birth" just as his past actions account for his current state.¹⁴ The human guided only by his own false, un-regenerated self, and whom Nānak and his successors call *manmukh* (whose "face" is oriented towards his own unregenerate "spirit"), is thus in danger of remaining bound to the wheel of transmigration. In the words of Amar Dās:

manamukhu bhūlā ṭhaūra na pāe ||
jo dhuri likhiā su karama kamāe ||
*bikhiā rāte bikhiā khojai mari janamai dukhu tāhā he ||*¹⁵

The erring *manmukh* finds no fixed place.

The *karma* he indulges in has been written from all eternity.

Drunk with poison, he searches out poison: to him the pain of death and rebirth!

For the Sikhs as for the adepts of *bhakti* in general, "the motif of personal devotion (*bhakti*) flows against the current of impersonal karma and the 'ocean of rebirth', like a stream of fresh water flowing back out into the ocean":¹⁶ the only escape consists indeed in surrendering oneself to God in total devotion, and in relying on His grace to wipe out the consequences of one's *karma*.

bahute aūgaṇa kūkai koī ||
*jā tisu bhāvai bakhase soī ||*¹⁷

Loaded with many sins, someone is shrieking;

When it pleases Him does He forgive.

This grace is manifested by a voice, called *guru* in early Sikhism, uttering in the heart of the human the Word (*sabadu*) which contains the divine Order, both in terms of cosmic ordinance and of injunction to follow the right path. A human hearing God's voice who wants to engage on that path must first of all become conscious that all sins proceed in the last resort from what Nānak and his eight first successors call the *haūmāiṃ*, the "me, I", that is egotism. This *haūmāiṃ* characterizes the

¹⁴ The doctrine of *karma* is in fact quite complex and diversified in Indian traditions, as amply demonstrated in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed. *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

¹⁵ *Ādi Granth*, 1057.

¹⁶ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth*, 36.

¹⁷ Nānak, *Ādi Granth*, 357.

manmukh perpetually bound to transmigration. And why are humans incapable of refraining from sinning? Because they are spiritually blinded by *māiā*, the world and its snares, the worldly delights apparently real, but actually corrupting:

*manamukha māiā moha viāpe dūjai bhāi manūā thiru nāhiṃ ॥*¹⁸

Attachment to *māiā* pervades the *manmukhs*; pleased by duality, their mind is unsteady.

This is how finally, at the time of death, a *manmukh*, overwhelmed with pain and anguish, regrets; but it is too late and he goes away:

upajai pacai hari būjhai nāhiṃ ॥

anadinu dūjai bhāi phirāhī ॥

*manamukha janamu gaiā hai birathā anti gaiā pachutāvaṇiā ॥*¹⁹

He is born, he dissolves, he is not aware of Hari²⁰.

Day after day he wanders, pleased by duality.

The birth of a *manmukh* is useless; in the end, he goes away, regretting.

Expiation, in such a human condition, means basically regenerating one's soul, and this cannot come from self-inflicted penances or from ritual purifications, which have no power to prevent the *manmukh* from remaining the slave of his *haūmaiṃ*, nor from consequently staying entangled in the sin which renders impotent both his will and his judgement. Expiation can only take one form: following the discipline of remembering God and repeating His Name. That will allow the *manmukh* to regenerate his soul and attain salvation (*mokṣa*) by becoming a *gurmukh*, a human being guided by God (lit. who has his "face" oriented towards the True "Gurū") who can gradually get away from *māiā* and one day reach the state of final emancipation from transmigration by uniting with God in perpetual bliss. This mode of expiation and salvation is expressed in a mere five- word-verse by Nānak:

*suṇiai dūkha pāpa kā nāsu ॥*²¹

Listening, pain and sin are erased.

These conceptions about sin and expiation prevailed unchanged throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, as is evident from the compositions of Nānak's eight first successors who considered

¹⁸ Rām Dās, *Ādi Granth*, 652.

¹⁹ Amar Dās, *Ādi Granth*, 127.

²⁰ Hari ("yellow, reddish brown, yellow" in Sanskrit, derived for some from the root *hr-* "to take away" evil) is, in Hindu contexts, an epithet of Viṣṇu, and so of Kṛṣṇa. In the *Ādi Granth*, it is one of the most common names for God.

²¹ Nānak, *Ādi Granth*, 3.

themselves as torches bearing the flame which had appeared with Nānak and used to sign their own compositions with his name.²²

2. Treason and martyrdom

In the very late 17th and early 18th century, in a context where the Sikhs, now predominantly Jāt, had to fight against the Hindu rajahs of the Hills and the Mughal forces, radical changes were introduced in the Panth by the tenth and last Guru, Gobind. In 1699, according to the tradition, the Gurū assembled his Sikhs and invited them to partake in an initiation ceremony in a new egalitarian and militant order, the Khālsā, the “Pure Ones”.²³ The episode is narrated at length in the most detailed of the two first traditional histories of the Sikhs.²⁴ The Gurū had solemnly summoned his Sikhs on the occasion of their usual spring gathering of the first day of the Hindu month of Vaisākhi. Appearing sword in hand under a large tent, he asked who among them would be ready to sacrifice his life for him. The first man to come forward was Dayā Singh, like the Gurū a Khatrī by caste. The tent was shut and the noise of a sword falling on a wood block was heard. Four more volunteers presented themselves, and the scenario was repeated. The Gurū then opened the tent, revealing that in fact, no one had been slain, and he declared that these “five cherished” (*pañj piāre*) would form the nucleus of his new order. He then held a ceremony in which the Pañj Piāre were initiated, followed by all the Sikhs ready to observe the discipline of the Khālsā.²⁵

²² Luckily for the historian and the philologist, Arjan, when he compiled the *Ādi Granth*, carefully distinguished his predecessors and himself by referring to each as a numbered quarter (*mahalā*, from Ar. *maḥalla*) of a city: Nānak is thus Mahalā 1, Aṅgad Mahalā 2, and so on. Gobind did the same with his father.

²³ In the Sikh context, “according to tradition” means, in fact, according to the first complete accounts of the history of the Sikhs compiled between the 1840s and the 1910s from a wide range of sources: 17th and 18th century hagiographies of Nānak or *Janam-sākhī* (lit. “birth stories”), 18th century heroic poems on the sixth and tenth Gurūs or *Gur-bilās* (lit. “pleasure of the Gurū), and oral tradition. The first of these great narratives, written in Braj-bhāṣā verses by Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū (d. 1846), was issued in 1841 under the title *Panth prakāś* “Light on the Panth”. For a recent edition see Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū, *Srī Gura Pantha Prakāśa*, ed. and English trans. Kulwant Singh. 2 vols. (Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 2006-2010). A detailed account of the now established version of the creation of the Khālsā is found in the second of these narratives, completed in 1843 by Santokh Singh (1788-1844), written in a mixture of Braj-bhāṣā and Hindi verses, and entitled *Gur pratāp sūraj* “The Glorious Sun of the Gurūs”. For a recent edition, see: Santokh Singh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa Sūraja Grantha*, 11 vols., ed. Ajit Singh Aulakh (Amritsar: Bhāi Catar Singh Jivan Singh, 2009). The third and last set of major traditional histories of the Sikhs was the work of Giān Singh (1822-1921), whose *Panth prakāś* (1880), written in Braj-bhāṣā verses, and *Tavārikh Gurū Khālsā*, written in Panjabi prose and published in instalments between 1891 and 1919, remain quite influential. For a recent edition of the latter, see Giān Singh, *Tavārikh Gurū Khālsā*, 2 vol. (Amritsar: Bhāi Catar Singh Jivan Singh, 2006).

²⁴ Santokh Singh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa*, vol. 9, 789-814.

²⁵ The initiation ritual was, according to the Sikh tradition, the one that is still used for admission in the Khālsā today (see below, part 4).

The Gurū also gave the initiated Sikhs a code on that occasion. The men were to be called Siṅgh (Lion) and to wear unmistakable symbols of identification. These symbols, in the list which became canonical, are five in number. The name of each one begins with the Gurumukhī letter called *kakkā* (k-), hence their collective designation as the *pañj kakke*, or five Ks. They consist of uncut hair and beard (*kesa*), a comb (*kaṅghā*) in the hair, a dagger (*kirapāna*), a metallic bracelet (*kaṛā*) and kind of long short (*kaccha*). As for the women, they were to be called Kaur (Princess). The Sikhs were to abstain from smoking, from eating the meat of animals killed in the Muslim way, and the men from having sexual relations with Muslim women.

The Sikh tradition also attributes to Gurū Gobind the composition of the second sacred book of the Sikhs, the *Dasam Granth*, mostly written in Braj-bhāṣā, the western dialect of Hindi then well established in northern India as the literary idiom of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.²⁶ It is now commonly admitted that the bulk of the book was not authored by Gobind; but its major compositions are quite likely to be his or to have been directly inspired by him.²⁷ A particularly striking one is called the *Bacītar nāṭak* “The Wonderful Drama”: it is a kind of spiritual and military autobiography, which starts with the celestial existence of Gobind²⁸. While he is so much absorbed in meditation that he has become one with God, his Lord addresses him. He tells him that all those whom He sent to the earth for revealing His supremacy – “minor” Gods such as Brahma and Viṣṇu, and human messengers such as Rāmānanda and Muhammad – forgot Him in their race for being themselves called supreme. Full of egotism, such envoys spread strife and enmity:²⁹

*je prabha sākha namita ṭhaharāe || te hiām āi prabhū kahavāe ||
tā kī bāta bisara jāṭī bhī || apanī apanī parata sobha bhī ||
jaba prabha ko na tinai pahicānā || taba hari manuchana ṭhaharānā ||
te bhī basi mamatā hui gae || paramesāra pāhana ṭhahirae ||
taba hari siddha sādha ṭhahirāe || tina bhī parama purakhu nahīm pāe ||
jo koī hota bhayo jagi siānā || tina tina apano panthu calānā ||
parama purakha kinahūṃ naha pāyo || baira bāda haṃkāra baḍhāyo ||³⁰*

Those whom the Lord established as His humble witnesses got themselves called “Lord”.

They forgot their duty, busy as they were each one with his own glory.

As they did not recognize their Lord, then Hari installed human beings in their place.

²⁶ For an overview of this literature and a description of its language, see Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition. A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, 1991).

²⁷ Like the *Ādī Granth*, the *Dasam Granth* has a standard pagination of 1428 pages. For an excellent and concise overview of the *Dasam Granth* and for a clear presentation of the debates around it, see McLeod, *Sikhism*, 176-180.

²⁸ *Dasam Granth: Srī Gurū Dasama Grantha Sāhiba Jī*, 2 vols., (Amritsar: Bhāi Catar Siṅgh Jīvan Siṅgh, 1979), 39-76.

²⁹ Rāmānanda is the name given to a celebrated (but perhaps not historical) 15th century Vaiṣṇava teacher, devotee of Rāma and Sītā, and founder of the Rāmānandī *saṃprādaya*.

³⁰ *Dasam Granth*, 55.

They too were overpowered by egotism; they installed stones as supreme lords.
Then Hari installed Siddhas and Sādhus;³¹ they too could not find the Supreme Being.
Whosever wisdom was awoken started his own Panth.
None could find the Supreme Being; they spread hatred, quarrel, egotism.

God adds that He is now sending him, Gobind, for the propagation of the (true) Panth and for spreading dharma:

*maiṃ apnā suta tohi nivājā || panthu pracura karabe kahha sājā ||
jāhi tahām tai dharamu calāi || kabudhi karana te loka haṭāi ||*³²

I have fostered you as My son; I have created you for the propagation of the Panth.
Go therefore, enforce the dharma, divert the people from evil actions.

Invested with this divine mission, Gobind claims action in two spheres. On the one hand, he teaches the people that behaving like a yogi or an ascetic, reciting the Koran, studying the *Purāṇas* or wandering in various guises and gathering disciples are *māiā*, and that they should instead meditate on the Lord.³³ Though cast in the mould of something like an avatar-myth, with Gobind being astonishingly presented as the “son” (*sutu*) of God, this part of the story remains in line with the teachings of the former Gurūs. But almost without transition, Gobind then proceeds to narrate the wars he engaged in against the Mughals and the hill rajahs who helped them. On one occasion, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb decides to send one of his sons to the Panjab. Several Sikhs, frightened, leave Anandpur, the fortified city of Gobind in the Shivalik hills, for safer villages, without permission from the Gurū:

*kitaka loka taji saṅgi sidhāre || jāi base giravara jahha bhāre ||
cīta mūzīyana ko adhika ḍarānā || tinai ubāra na apanā jānā ||*³⁴

Some people left my company; they went to live in the hills, they sought a place there.
These fools were much frightened; they did not know that their safety was with me.

But as if by divine punishment, the Mughal Prince’s officers chase and catch them, shave their heads and urinate on them, strike their foreheads with shoes and bricks, walk them in the villages with

³¹ *Siddha* is a term applied to fully “realized” members of medieval Tantric traditions; behind this designation is the belief that semi-divine figures, also known as Siddhas, were resident in a heaven which practitioners could reach through the perfection of their body by various means such as *tantra*, *yoga* or alchemy. – *Sādhu* is a common term for a Hindu ascetic.

³² *Dasam Granth*, 57.

³³ The *Purāṇas* are narratives originally in Sanskrit verse, dating from the 4th century AD onwards and containing mythological versions of the creation, history and destruction of the universe. They also relate the exploits of the different gods.

³⁴ *Dasam Granth*, 71.

a bag of horse excrement tied on their faces, and plunder and destroy their houses. The Gurū comments:

*gura paga te je bimukha sidhāre || Thāṁ ūhām tina ke mukha kāre ||*³⁵

Those who turn their face away from the feet of the Gurū, in this world and the next, their face is blackened.

In contrast, all the people who are known to be disciples of the Gurū are spared, and they are protected from sin and pain:

*je je gura caranana ratta hvai haiṁ || tina ko kaṣaṭi na dekhana pai haiṁ ||
riddha siddha tina ke griha māhīṁ || pāpa tāpa chvai sakai na chāhīṁ ||*³⁶

Those who are in love with the Gurū's feet, they never see suffering.

Prosperity and success abide in their homes, sin and pain cannot touch them.

With this episode, we see a major change in Sikh theology and in the conception of sin. It is now a religious duty for a Sikh to stay by his Gurū, to fight with him for the establishment of the just order of dharma, and as a consequence, cowardice and dissimulating one's own Sikh identity become major sins, punished by God both in this and the next world.

Now, is there a way to expiate this new type of sin? We can find an answer to this question, and a positive one, in an episode inevitably recounted in the traditional narratives of Sikh history, which, from the early 1840s onwards, endlessly retell the battles fought by the tenth Gurū and his troops. The story begins in 1704. A Mughal force commanded by Vazīr Khān, governor of Sirhind, with the help of hill-rajahs hostile to Gurū Gobind, besieges Anandpur for several months, bringing the inhabitants and the Sikh army to starvation. Ground down by privation, forty of the Gurū's followers decide to desert and flee. Informed of their plan, Gurū Gobind summons them and requests them to write a disclaimer by which they declare that they renounce their loyalty to him and that he has no responsibility towards and authority over them anymore. Here is the concise account given by Rattan Singh Bhangū in 1841:

*tau satigura etī kahī yaha hama jāho likhāi |
satigura kahinde thaka gae hama mannī sikkha na kāi ||
au duī etī dihu tuma likkha | tuma hama gurū na hama tuma sikkha |
tau lokana ima hūṁ likha dayo | huto gurū jī jima tho kahayo ||*³⁷

³⁵ *Dasam Granth*, 71.

³⁶ *Dasam Granth*, 72.

³⁷ Rattan Singh Bhangū, *Srī Gura Pantha Prakāśa*, vol. 1, 112, Santokh Singh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa Sūraja Grantha*, vol. 11, 155-161, and Gīan Singh, *Tavārikha Gurū Khālasā*, vol. I, 749-754, who write in great detail about this episode, call the disclaimer by the technical term of Persian origin *bedavā*.

Then the True Gurū spoke thus: “Write this to me:

‘The True Gurū orders, but we are tired; we do not consider ourselves as Sikhs anymore.’

Give me also this second written undertaking: ‘You are not our Gurū, we are not your Sikhs.’”

Then the people gave the written statement that the Gurū had requested.

After this, the deserters leave for the plains. Meanwhile, Gobind and a small garrison manage to escape from the besieged city. After many tribulations, the Gurū succeeds in gathering his scattered forces in the township of Khidrana: a new battle is fought against the Mughals and their allies in December 1705, and this time, the Sikhs are successful. After the battle – I am now following closely Santokh Singh’s account in his 1843 *Gur pratāp sūraj* – the Guru goes all over the battlefield, rescuing the wounded and blessing the dying. Among the slain are the forty Sikhs who had asked to be relieved of their allegiance to the Gurū: having been shamed by their wives at home, they had felt guilty and decided to join the Gurū again, and had come to take part in the battle. One of them, Mahāṃ Siṅgh, has not yet expired³⁸. The Gurū sits next to him, cleans his wounds, lets him have the *darśan* he longs for in his thoughts, and asks him if he has any wish to express.³⁹ The man then begs the Gurū to tear into pieces the disclaimer that he and his thirty-nine companions had written before leaving Anandpur. Gobind, who has the letter in his pocket, tears it and bids him farewell with these words:

*‘jāhu mahāṃ singha jahim mama loka | basahu sadā kabi nahim tahim śoka ||
de kari prāna kina upakāra | tisa ko phala tuhi bhayo adhāra’ ||*⁴⁰

“Go, Mahāṃ Siṅgh, where my world is. Live there forever; there will be no grief for you there. You have given your life in an act of selfless assistance; for this, you will get an infinite reward.”

He then asks for a funeral pyre to be prepared, has the forty martyrs cremated together, and declares during the cremation:

*makra saṅkarakhaṇa arakī hoi | āna śanānahi je nara koi ||
manokāmanā prāpati soū | pāpa kare gana baya sabhi khoū ||*⁴¹

When the sun enters Capricorn, any person coming to bathe (in the pool of this place)
Will have his heart’s desires fulfilled; all the sins he committed will be erased.

³⁸ They are two according to Bhangū, *Srī Gura Pantha Prakāśa*, vol. 1, 162.

³⁹ “*Darśana*” (a Sanskrit word meaning literally “looking at, viewing”), when referring to the meeting of the devotee’s and the iconic deity’s eyes, is an act of worship in itself, and an essential part of the ritual worship called *pūjā*. The principle can be diversely expanded, notably to cover the auspicious sight of a holy man, – as is precisely the case here. On *darśan*, the standard study is Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Santokh Siṅgh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa Sūraja Grantha*, vol. 11, 462.

⁴¹ Santokh Siṅgh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa Sūraja Grantha*, vol. 11, 463.

adding:

*abi te nām mukatisara hoi | khidarāṇā isa kahai na koī ||
is thala mukati bhae sikha cālī | je nisapāpa ghāla bahu ghālī ||*⁴²

From now on, the name of this place will be Muktsar,⁴³ none will call it Khidrāṇā anymore.

On this ground, forty Sikhs were liberated, and all their sins were annihilated.

To this day indeed, these forty Sikh martyrs are remembered as the Cālī Mukte, the Forty Liberated Ones. They are celebrated every year in a major festival held in Muktsar, and they are commemorated in the prayer of the Khālsā known as Ardās, which is recited at the conclusion of most Sikh rituals.⁴⁴

We now have the answer to our question. The fate of these Forty Liberated Ones illustrates the “expiation” side of the fundamental theological change introduced in Sikhism by Gurū Gobind: refusing to fight with and for the Gurū is a major sin; but that sin can be expiated by martyrdom. And so strong is the sin-destroying power of martyrdom that where it has taken place, its very memory can destroy sin, just as in Islam the *baraka* of a Saint at the place where he is buried removes sin.

The theme of martyrdom became later on quite central in Sikhism and was, as brilliantly and eruditely demonstrated by Lou Fennec, constructed by Sikh reformists of the early twentieth century as an ideal of triumphant glory when the spreading of evil demands a militant response.⁴⁵

3. The codification of sin and expiation in the 18th century

Starting from Gurū Gobind and the *Dasam Granth*, another line, which runs throughout the history of Sikhism, can be followed regarding sin and expiation. We have already seen that in the *Bacitar Nāṭak*, on one occasion, Sikh renegades had been punished for their desertion by being humiliated by Mughal officers. This episode is clearly linked with the theological renewal brought about by Gurū Gobind, and more specifically with the code which, according to the tradition, he enjoined his Sikhs to follow. In fact this code gradually evolved on the basis of the Gurū’s fundamental injunctions, as is evidenced by the six *Rahit-nāmās* or Code-manuals composed throughout the 18th century.

These manuals have been thoroughly studied and translated by Hew McLeod.⁴⁶ Claiming to have been prepared at the command of the Gurū and to record his actual words, they contain

⁴² Santokh Singh, *Srī Gura Pratāpa Sūraja Grantha*, vol. 11, 463.

⁴³ Meaning “Ocean of Liberation”.

⁴⁴ For an English translation of this prayer, with an introduction, see W. H. McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 103-105.

⁴⁵ See Lou Fennec, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition. Playing the ‘Game of Love’* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially pp. 178-225.

⁴⁶ See W. H. McLeod, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987) and *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

numerous injunctions pertaining to various domains of life, many of which are not mentioned in the traditional Sikh histories. These injunctions were produced in response to the relentless attacks of the Mughals against the Sikhs in the early 18th century and, perhaps even more, to the campaigns launched in the later part of that century across the Panjab by Afghans, who presented their raids as a jihad. In such a context, the aim of the manuals was to protect the Khālsā and mobilize its members against the enemy, that is, the Muslims. The Khālsā was now a “church” in the Weberian sense, an institutionalized community with its rationalized cult and dogma, and at the same time, it was the mystical body of the Gurū, as is expressed in the following passage of one of the epical poems written in Braj to the glory of Gobind in the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, and called *Gurbilās* (pleasure of the Gurū). The Sikhs ask the Gurū which form he will take after he leaves this world:

khālasa āpano rūpa batāyo |

*khālasa hī so hai mama kāmā |*⁴⁷

The Khālsā is my own form, he said.

It is the Khālsā which is my desire.

What is relevant for our purpose in the 18th century code manuals is that along with defining the duties of Khālsā Sikhs, they list the penances which representatives of a particular *sarigat* or local Sikh community could impose on one of its members as an expiation rite. We shall take as an example the *Rahit-nāmā* composed by Dayā Singh, because, besides detailing the religious duties of a Sikh, giving norms regarding his character, his personal attitude, his appearance and his social behaviour within the Panth, it is the *Rahit-nāmā* which gives the most detailed list of penances.⁴⁸ The latter are called *tanakhāh*, a word of Persian origin meaning “salary” and referring, in the eighteenth century Panjab, to the grants of money made by the Mughals to those who assisted them. For the Khālsā Sikhs, the word *tanakhāh* was used to mean a penance that washed away an offence against the *rahit*.

The *Dayā Singh Rahit-nāmā*, as shown by W. H. McLeod, is a late eighteenth century work, and nothing is known of its author.⁴⁹ As presented in this text, the *tanakhāhs* imposed upon those who violate the *rahit* and are called *tanakhāhīās* (deserving *tanakhāh*) generally consist in fines or strokes with a cane; re-initiation in the Khālsā could also be imposed. For instance, a Sikh must pay one and quarter rupee if he wears a sacred thread, if he has sexual relations with a child or if he bathes ritually

⁴⁷ Sainapatī, (first manuscript dated 1711), *Srī Gura Sobhā*, ed. Gandā Singh, (Patiala: Panjabi University, 1967), 170.

⁴⁸ Panjabi text in Piārā Singh Padam, ed., *Rahitanāme* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1974), 68-76; English translation in McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, 2003, 310-325.

⁴⁹ McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, 67, 71-72. As stated by McLeod, the author cannot be the Dayā Singh who, according to Sikh traditional histories, was, as we have seen, the first to offer his head to Gobind at the inauguration of the Khālsā in 1699.

without having his hair covered by a turban or without wearing a short garment.⁵⁰ For cutting the hair, the *tanakhāh* should be death, but it is reduced to 50 strokes with a cane because the Gurū showed compassion to his followers; the sinner should then be re-initiated, read aloud the *Rahit-nāmā*, and for forty days repeat as many times as possible the *Japu-jī*, a fundamental composition of Gurū Nānak at the beginning of the *Ādi Granth*.⁵¹ Similarly, if a Sikh smokes the hookah, he should not only pay 25 rupees and receive fifty strokes with a cane; he should also be re-initiated. Then, says the text, “he is pure” (*suddha ho*):⁵² this is all the more interesting in that it strongly reminds one of the Hindus who, having fallen in a degraded mode of life, had to go through special rites for being cleansed of pollution and readmitted into their caste.

In one case, the penance imposed is death:

gurū kī jo nindā kare tāṁ kā sīsa kāṭe, nahīṁ vahāṁ se bhāge /⁵³

The one who slanders the Gurū, his head must be cut, there is no way out of this.

There are also offences which cannot be expiated and condemn the sinner to a horrible disease:

siṅgha hoi kari ṭopī dhāraigā so kuṣaṭī hogā /⁵⁴

The one who, though being a Sikh, wears a hat, he will become a leper.

or to an after-life in hell. This is specifically the case if a Siṅgh of the Khālsā adopts Muslim or Hindu manners:

turaka kā māsa khāi au besayā bhogai, so donoṁ naraka maiṁ jāi | turakoṁ kī saṁgata karai, usa kusarigata maiṁ na mela kare, anta ko vahi naraka maiṁ jāigā (...) | larigoṭa dhoti dhavalī kaṭī bāṁdhe au kesa nagana rakhai, so mahāṁ naraka bhogai (...) | tilaka dhare, dhāgā

⁵⁰ The sacred thread referred to here is the one borne by Hindus belonging to the three higher classes or *varṇas* of the brahmanical hierarchy, those who have access to sacred knowledge (*Veda*): the *brāhmaṇas* or priests as well as masters and teachers of the *Veda*, the *kṣatriyas*, endowed with sovereignty and, as warriors, responsible for the protection of the dominion, and the *vaiśyas*, traditionally described as commoners engaged in productive labour, in agricultural and pastoral tasks, and in trading. This sacred thread is conferred on them at their initiation to Vedic studentship, which makes them “twice born” (*dvija*), and it is worn by them throughout their lifetime, normally over the left shoulder and diagonally across the chest to the right hip. It consists of a loop made of three symbolically knotted and twisted strands of cotton cord and is replaced regularly.

⁵¹ *Ādi Granth*, 1-8 ; for a good English translation with an introduction, see Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Siṅgh Mandair, ed. and trans., *Teaching of the Sikh Gurus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-19.

⁵² Dayā Siṅgh, *Rahitanāma*, 72.

⁵³ Dayā Siṅgh, *Rahitanāma*, 71.

⁵⁴ Dayā Siṅgh, *Rahitanāma*, 71.

dhāre, kaṅṭha meṃ mālā kāṭha kī pahire, apane dharama ko chedegā, ghora naraka meṃ pare /⁵⁵

The one who eats meat from animals killed in the Muslim way and the one who takes his pleasure with a prostitute, may both go to hell! The one who associates with Muslims, do not keep his company: in the end, he will go to hell (...). The one who wears a strip of cloth concealing his private parts (*laṅgoṭa*), a white loincloth (*dhoti*) and who keeps his hair uncovered, he will suffer in a terrible hell (...). The one who applies a sectarian mark on his forehead, who wears a sacred thread and who has a rosary made of wood destroys his dharma and will fall into a frightful hell.

Regarding the Hindus, this passage refers indeed to those who have been initiated by a spiritual master (*guru*) in a theistic sect (*saṃpradāya*). Such initiates, from the day of their initiation (*dīkṣā*), wear a *laṅgoṭ* under their loincloth (*dhoti*) as a symbol of their chastity (the Sikhs, as we have seen, wear underwear shorts called *kaccha*), they keep their hair uncovered if they are ascetics (the Sikhs wear a turban to protect their uncut hair), they apply on their forehead sectarian marks (*tilaka*) made from a coloured substance such as ash or sandalwood paste, they have around their neck a rosary of wooden beads, and, if they are of “twice born” origin, they may very well retain their sacred thread.⁵⁶

Other passages of Dayā Singh’s text complete the list of specific Hindu practices forbidden to the Sikhs on pain of *tanakhāhs*. Such is the case of the following one, which also alludes to the divisions of the Sikhs:

bhādanī kuṛīmāra dhīramallīā masanda rāmarāīā gerū raṅge kasumbhā ke raṅga se baratana kare savā rupayā tanakhāha /⁵⁷

The one who indulges in tonsure, girl-killing, association with the Dhīrmallīās, the *masands* or the Rāmrāīās, who uses colour prepared from red ochre or from safflower, for him a *tanakhāh* of one rupee and a quarter.

The communities mentioned in this enumeration are numbered among the Pañj Mel, the five reprobate groups which members of the Khālsā must swear to spurn, following an injunction of Gurū Gobind at the time of the creation of the new order.⁵⁸ The list has never been quite fixed. The *masands* (from Ar. *masnad*: “throne” or “the one who sits on a throne”) were instituted by Gurū Rām

⁵⁵ Dayā Singh, *Rahitanāma*, 71.

⁵⁶ The devotees of Viṣṇu, the Vaiṣṇavas, have a *tilak* which is a kind of U figure from the meeting point of the eyebrows, sometimes with a vertical red line between its arms. They wear rosaries whose beads are made of *tulsi* (sweet basil plant) berries. The devotees of Śiva, the Śaivas, have a *tilak* consisting of three horizontal lines with or without a central dot or “third eye”. They favour rosaries of *rudrākṣa* (*Eloecarpus ganitrus*) berries.

⁵⁷ Dayā Singh, *Rahitanāma*, 72.

⁵⁸ On the Pañj Mel, the *masands*, the Dhīrmallīās and the Rāmrāīās, see W.H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), s. v.

Dās as a regular category of surrogates to the Gurū with extended responsibilities such as preaching, supervising the local communities and collecting the offerings made to the Gurū. Since with the passage of time, many of them had become independent and corrupt, Gobind abolished them when he founded the Khālsā. They are always included in the list of the Pañj Mel.

The Dhīrmālīās and the Rāmraīās are also generally included in that list. The Dhīrmālīās go back to the partisans of Dhīrmal (1627-?), who was already hostile to orthodox Sikhs at the time of his grandfather Gurū Hargobind and whose opposition increased when he was passed over as Gurū Hargobind's successor. The antagonism of the Dhīrmālīās contributed to Gurū Teḡ Bahādur and his faithful having to leave the plains and seek a safer abode in the Shivalik Hills. The Rāmraīās are the heirs of the partisans of Rām Rāī (1646-1687). The latter, elder son of Gurū Har Rāī, had been taken as a hostage at the court of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb because his father had helped the future emperor's brother Dārā Shukoh (1615-1659) in the customary war of succession at the end of Shāh Jahān's (r. 1627-1658) reign. At the Mughal court, Rām Rāī had been turned into a supporter of Aurangzeb, who granted him revenue free land. Rejected by his father, he had gathered a schismatic group of Sikhs around him. Those who observe the head-shaving custom (*bhandanī*) of certain Hindu ascetic renouncers and those who kill baby-girls (*kuṛī-mārī*) as was common in pre-colonial days among certain Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims of the Panjab (as elsewhere), are also often listed among the Pañj Mel⁵⁹.

The 18th century *Rahit-nāmās* are thus a unique testimony of the way the Siṅghs sought to build up and affirm their Khālsā identity by strongly distinguishing themselves from both Muslims and, something that has not been underlined in scholarly studies, Hindus, at a time when they were fighting to establish their supremacy in the Panjab.

4. Sin and expiation, sect and caste: the 20th century Sikh code

In the early 20th century, Sikh reformers of the so called Tat Khālsā ("true Khālsā") current of the Siṅgh Sabhā (the reformist "Society of the Lions"), affirmed that Sikhism was radically distinct from Hinduism. Like many religious reform movements of colonial times, they aimed at restoring their religion to its reconstructed pristine purity and wanted to make each Sikh individually a "good Sikh". Towards this

⁵⁹ The reason for female infanticide was the high expenditures generated by a wedding and dowry (the same cause is still behind abortion of female foetuses today). It could also be, in the Bedī sub-caste of the Khattrī caste, a result of the fact that it was impossible for its members to marry their daughter in a higher sub-caste (*gota*, from Skt. *gotra*), as required by the caste dharma, for they were ranking first in their caste (*zāt*, from Skt. *jāti*). After much discussion, female infanticide was finally prohibited by the colonial power through the 1870 Female Infanticide Act. The whole process is still quite debated, in particular by feminist scholars; see, among many others, Malavika Kasturi, "Law and Crime in India: British Policy and the Female Infanticide Act of 1870," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 1 (1994): 169-193, and Satadru Sen "The Savage Family: Colonialism and Female Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century India," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 53-79.

end they undertook to prepare a new comprehensive version of the Sikh code.⁶⁰ After decades of debates and slow progress, this code was finally formalized in 1950 – the same year as the Indian Constitution! – in the form a booklet in Panjabi entitled *Sikh rahit maryādā* (lit. “correct behaviour (for) the Sikh mode of living”), which remains to this day the definitive statement of the Khālsā code.⁶¹ It was prepared by the Central Gurdawara (Sikh Temples) Management Committee (SGPC), an elected body.

The history of the SGPC goes back to what has been called “the third Sikh war” (the first two being those of the British against the Sikhs in 1846 and 1849, when they conquered the Panjab). This “third war” was fought by Tat Khālsā Sikhs to take the management of the *gurdvārās* of the Panjab away from the *mahants* (lit. “superiors”), who had been their hereditary custodians since the turmoil of the 18th century.⁶² These *mahants* were in fact Śaivaite renouncers of the Udāsī *saṃpradāya*, which claimed to go back to the followers of Gurū Nānak’s celibate and ascetic son Śrī Cand (trad. 1494-1629). They were seen as hinduizing the *gurdvārās* by the Central Sikh League (CSL), a political party created in 1919 on Tat Khālsā lines, but they were supported by the British, who did not trust those they called the “neo-Sikhs”.⁶³ In 1920, the CSL formed the SGPC for liberating the *gurdvārās* from the *mahants*. This was followed, the same year, by the formation of the Akālī Dal (Army of the Eternal), a body based on a military model. The Akālī Dal confronted the colonial government, occupied *gurdvārās* and finally won: the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925 signalled its victory and provided for a committee elected by Sikhs to manage the *gurdvārās*: Sikh leaders conferred this responsibility on the SGPC.⁶⁴

The *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* was prepared over the years by special committees established from 1931 on by the SGPC. In its final 1950 version it contains two sections. The first one is by far the longest and deals with personal discipline. It covers such religious topics as how to behave in a *gurdvārā* and how to read the *Ādi Granth*, and deals at length with the rituals of birth, naming, wedding and funerals. The second brief part deals with Panthic discipline and is almost exclusively dedicated to the initiation in the Khālsā. This ceremony is performed by five Siṅghs representing the Pañj Piāre of the founding of the Khālsā. Amidst various recitations, sanctified sugared water stirred with a double-edged sword and called *ammrit* (nectar of “immortality”) is poured five times into the candidate’s cupped hands and drunk by her or him, five times it is sprinkled on her or his eyes, and five times over his hair. This rite, reminiscent of the *saṃskāras* punctuating the life the Hindus with the dual purpose

⁶⁰ On the Siṅgh Sabhā reform movement and its internal debates, see Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 305-377 and 401-417.

⁶¹ Śromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Kameṭī, *Sikkha Rahita Maryādā* (Amritsar: Śromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Kameṭī, 1950); English translation in McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, 377-401.

⁶² In Hinduism, a *mahant* is the superior of a monastery.

⁶³ See D. Petrie, “Secret C.I.D. Memorandum on Recent Developments in Sikh Politics, 1911” *Punjab Past and Present* 4 no.2 (1970): 302-379.

⁶⁴ On this third Sikh “war”, see Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

of removing impurities and generating new qualities, is called *pahul*.⁶⁵ After having been thus baptised, the initiate is said to be an Amrit-dhārī. One of the Pañj Piāre then expounds the *rahit* to her or him. When he comes to sins, he explains that there are four major ones (*kurahitām*):⁶⁶

1. kesām dī beadabī; 2. kuṭṭhā khāṇā; 3. para-isatrī jāṃ para-puruṣa dā gaman (bhogaṇā); 4. tamākū dā varataṇā |

1. showing disrespect to one's hair [by cutting it]; 2. eating meat from animals killed according to Muslim law; 3. having sexual intercourse with any person other than one's spouse; 4. using tobacco."

Anyone who commits one of these four cardinal sins becomes a *patita* (fallen). This Sanskrit participle built on the root *pat-* "to fall" is the word used in classical brahmanical literature to designate a Hindu who has committed such a violation of the dharma that he is excluded from his caste. As for a Khālsā Sikh committing one of the cardinal sins and thus becoming a *patita*, she or he is liable to excommunication: she or he may be ejected from the Panth by the SGPC or one of its local branches. But a person who confesses his or her errors may expiate the sin by performing humiliating punishment and be re-admitted to the Panth after having been duly initiated again.

The second part of the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* also contains four small paragraphs on the ways to expiate any other "breach of the Rahit" (*rahit dī koī bhull*), and specifies that:

*saṅgata nūṃ bakhaśaṇa vele haṭha nahīṃ karadā cāhīdā. nā hī tanakhāha luāṇa vāle nūṃ daṇḍa bharana vica aṛī karanī cāhīdī hai. tanakhāha kise kisama dī sevā, khāsa kara ke jo hatthām nāla kīṭī jā sake, lāuṇī cāhīe |*⁶⁷

The *saṅgat* should not use compulsion when imposing a penance and the offender should not question its verdict. The penance should take the form of service to the *saṅgat*, particularly the kind that requires manual labour.

These penances are imposed by SGPC or by its local branches. There have been famous cases. For instance, in 1961, one of the leading political figures of the time, Master Tārā Singh (1885-1967), went on a fast to death in support of the creation of a separate Panjabi speaking state in India, but he was persuaded to end his fast after forty-eight days, and the Government appointed a commission to look into the question of Sikh grievances. Nevertheless, a duly appointed committee investigated the circumstances that led to the abandonment of the fast and pronounced Master Tara Singh guilty of having gone back on his plighted word and of having blemished thereby the Sikh tradition of religious steadfastness and sacrifice. Various penances "requiring manual labour" were

⁶⁵ Etymologically, this word means "stirring"; see Ralph Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*, vol.1, (1966), entry no. 8487.

⁶⁶ Śromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Kameṭī, *Sikkha Rahita Maryādādā*, 35; McLeod *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, 399.

⁶⁷ Śromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Kameṭī, *Sikkha Rahita Maryādā*, 37; McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, 401.

imposed on Master Tārā Singh, such as scrubbing dishes in the Golden Temple refectory and cleaning the shoes of the faithful at its entrance.⁶⁸

The *Sikh Rahit Maryādā*, which defines *the* true Sikh as the Khālsā Sikh is of course not admitted by the whole Panth, which includes many Sahaj-dhārīs: this word, meaning “those who are in ‘the bliss of union’ (*sahaj*) with God” designates the non-Khālsā Sikhs, but is interpreted by Khālsā Sikhs as signifying “slow adopters” and referring to the Sikhs who are on their way to Khālsā initiation. The situation is all the more complicated in that all non-Sahaj-dhārīs are not Ammrit-dhārīs. Certain Sikhs indeed observe some or all the injunctions of the *Rahit*, always including the uncut hair, but do not take initiation: they are called Kes-dhārīs (keeping their hair uncut), and are usually regarded as members of the Khālsā, although they are not Ammrit-dhārīs. Thus, all Ammrit-dhārīs are Kes-dhārīs, but only a minority of Kes-dhārīs are in fact Ammrit-dhārīs. There are also Sikhs who belong to Khālsā families, but cut their hair: they are derogatively called *monās* (shaven) by the Ammrit-dhārīs, and are consequently categorized as *patita*.

Now, in terms of caste, all the Jāṭs of the Panjab, who form two thirds of the Sikhs in the region, are Kes-dhārīs, and a significant minority of them are Ammrit-dhārīs, while all the Sahaj-dhārīs are members of the urban Khatrī, Aroṛā and Ahlūvālīā castes, which also include many non-Sikh members.⁶⁹ This means that for the Panjabi Jāṭs, in socio-religious terms, the “caste” and the “sect” have become co-extensive, whereas for the other castes, Sikhism remains a matter of personal choice, – though until recently it was customary for the Khatrī, the Aroṛā and the Ahlūvālīā families of the Panjab to have systematically one son initiated into the Khālsā.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, it is clear that even for the Ammrit-dhārī Jāṭs, the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* does not provide guidance for all the aspects of life. Similarly, it does not mention all the faults and crimes that could rightly be considered as sins, such as murder, to take only one example. The corollary is that the caste remains the regulating social milieu, sometimes – as is usual for the Hindus belonging to a sect – at the cost of an insurmountable tension. For instance, regarding marriage, the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* does have detailed prescriptions, with the following basic rule:

sikkha sikkhaṇī dā viāha, bināṃ zāta-pāta, gota vicāre de hoṇā cāhīe |⁷¹

Marriages between Sikhs should take no account of caste or sub-caste.

⁶⁸ See Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 196-206.

⁶⁹ The Ahlūvālīās present an interesting case of social ascension. Originally named Kalāls, and brewers of country liquors, they adopted the name of a prominent mid-18th century military leader from their caste, Jassā Singh Ahlūvālīā. They concomitantly followed a lifestyle higher than was required for their very low caste. They were so successful that today their status is comparable to that of the Khatrīs. See McLeod, *Historical Dictionary*, 25-26.

⁷⁰ On the dialectics of caste and sect, see the papers gathered in Marie-Louise Reiniche and Henri Stern, eds. *Les ruses du salut: religion et politiques dans le monde Indien* (Paris: EHESS, 1995), especially the essay by Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, “L’inégalité des *śūdra*: convictions smārta, dilemma vishnuite. Un débat interne à l’hindouisme”, 88-91.

⁷¹ Śromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Kameṭī, *Sikkha Rahita Maryādā*, 25; McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khaksa*, 399.

But in the real life of Indian society, where marriages remain arranged by families, Amrit-dhārī Jāt parents, like all other Sikhs, almost always choose for their children partners belonging to the same caste and to another sub-caste, in strict conformity with the basic injunctions of the very caste-system that is rejected by the *Rahit*.

Conclusions

In this brief survey, we have seen that for the Sikhs of the time of the nine first Gurūs, in the 16th and 17th centuries, when nascent Sikhism was essentially a path of salvation, all sins were considered as rooted in one's own ego and its evil impulses and desires, and they could only be expiated by meditating on God and seeking union with him. Of course, the sources do not say anything of other forms of expiation (or punishment) which the sinner (the offender) might have to undergo in the society to which he belonged. The Hindus who joined the Nānak Panth remained socially members of their caste and of their society at large. Consequently, some of their faults could be held to go against the caste dharma and to be liable to penances imposed by the *pañcāyat*, while others would be held as offences or crimes coming within the competence of the local *qāzī*, the Muslim judge appointed by the Sultan or in his name.

When their growing conflict with the Mughals led the Sikhs to turn from a peaceful devotional community to a militant order, important changes were introduced in these conceptions by the tenth Gurū. On the one hand, deserting the battlefield became a major offence, which could be expiated only by readiness for martyrdom. On the other hand, a code was issued by the Gurū for his Khālsā, and was later worked upon again and again for two centuries. Its 18th century versions sought to provide each Sikh of the Khālsā with a detailed list of his duties in terms of religious, personal and social life. Infringing the code meant to sin, and the code contained graded penances for various types of offenses. The worst of the redeemable sins necessitated, after due *tanakhāh*, a re-initiation into the Khālsā, while unredeemable ones condemned the sinner either to deadly disease or hell, or to capital punishment. All these are clear indications that the Khālsā aimed at constituting itself as a separate social body, as a theocratic polity in which sin and offence or crime were one and the same, and fell under the same jurisdiction. But this vision remained a Utopia, for when Ranjīt Singh became the Maharajah of the Panjab, he kept intact the judicial system of the Mughals, appointing himself the judges of the criminal courts, and keeping up the courts of the *qāzīs* and the caste *pañcāyats* for matters pertaining to personal law.⁷²

The mid-20th century version of the code is marked by the Tat Khālsā reformist ideals, and the story has now come full circle. The main emphasis is indeed clearly on the individual again, and on the various ways in which he must behave to be personally a good, non-sinning Sikh. Expiation is summarily dealt with, and must take the form of service (*sevā*) to the community, except in the case of the four major sins, which necessitate re-initiation. But we have also seen that in a way that is typical

⁷² Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 107.

of Hindu society, severe tensions persist for initiated individuals between their adhesion to the Sikh code and their unavoidable submission to caste dharma.

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