The field of Sikh studies is still in a relatively young and rapidly growing stage. Only in the past few decades has Sikhism begun to appear within ‘world religions’ textbooks and the curricula of departments of religious studies as a distinct religious tradition. Due to Sikh studies emerging predominantly from the work of historians, textualists, and south Asianists, most of its foundational scholarly literature to date has focused on Sikh history, texts, and doctrines, and relatively less scholarship is available which focuses on living Sikh practices. The situation is similar within the available scholarly literature on other Asian religions as well.

There are between 250,000 and 650,000 Sikh Americans in the United States, as many as half of whom live in the state of California (total estimates vary widely partly because the U.S. census does not gather data about religious affiliation). Although Sikhs have a history in the U.S. dating back to the 1890s, most of the currently available scholarly literature on Sikhism has focused on Sikh history within India, and very little research has been done focusing on Sikhism as a living religion in the U.S. The small amount of existing research has largely focused on the comparatively tiny population of Sikhs that existed in the U.S. prior to the 1965 relaxation of anti-Asian immigration policies, and—having been conducted primarily by anthropologists—often does not take Sikh religion as its central focus. So the field of Sikh Studies generally, and the field of Sikhism in the U.S. in particular, are ripe for re-imagining and further study, utilizing new approaches.

In my own ongoing research, I am seeking to explore and to bridge these gaps in the available literature through an ethnographic and historical study of American Sikhs’ own understandings of their religious beliefs, identities, and practices. I take as an entry point and focal lens into studying these topics among American Sikhs the central Sikh worship act and community religious practice: musical performances of the most sacred Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. The performance of religious music has been central to Sikh identity and practice since the beginning of Sikhism as a distinct religious tradition in India in the 15th century,
and the performance of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib remains the central religious practice of Sikhs in the United States today. As Sikhs have migrated to places around the world, they have demonstrated remarkable abilities to adapt and thrive within diverse global situations, while sustaining and continuously re/interpreting Sikhism within new contexts, and I argue that one of the primary ways that Sikhs have carried Sikh ways of being and knowing with them has been through these sacred musical and performative practices. For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss how I am employing two increasingly prominent theoretical and methodological approaches which both bring a focused awareness to practice: ‘lived religion’ and ‘performance’ theory. Both of these approaches are informing and challenging me in the ways that I am currently thinking about Sikhism in the U.S., and about Religious Studies in general.

‘LIVED RELIGION’ APPROACHES AS A NEW WAY OF RE-IMAGINING SIKH STUDIES

‘Lived religion’ is a still emerging (sub)field and methodological and theoretical orientation within the academic study of religion, and I think there is still much work that will be done in shaping and charting the concerns, theories, and approaches associated with it. At the same time, there are some factors pointing to the relative maturity of the field, including a monograph dedicated specifically to describing the emerging field (Meredith McGuire’s Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life), and an ongoing series of books on ‘Lived Religions’ from Johns Hopkins University Press1 (edited by David Hall, and Robert Orsi).

Discourse on ‘lived religion’ emerged out of the work of Harvard Divinity School scholars Robert Orsi and David Hall, particularly beginning (in somewhat preliminary form) with Orsi’s The Madonna of 115th Street

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