

Sikhism at Claremont McKenna College: Year Two

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Thanks to the generous support of the Global Institute for Sikh Studies, this spring semester I taught, for the second time, an introductory course on the Sikh tradition (RLST 045: Sikhism).

The Course and the Students

The course was more than fully enrolled at eighteen students. The group included a number of Sikh and South Asian students, but more than half the class this year had no personal connection to South Asia or the Sikh tradition. Once again the students represented all five of the Claremont Colleges, all class years, and a diverse range of majors, interests, and geographical points of origin.

Once again the class leaned toward seminar-style discussion with occasional lectures, student “takeovers” of the classroom and field trips to the local gurdwara (we went twice this semester to accommodate student schedules—a few students went on both trips). The first part of the course was historical, covering the development of the tradition over time; the second part focused on lived religion, exploring in greater depth topics like sacred space, gender, embodiment and identity; and the final section of the class looked at contemporary topics, including Sikh arts and Punjabi culture, migration and diaspora, Operation Blue Star/1984 and the Sikh experience in post-9/11 America. For the final class the students crowd-sourced readings and links for a discussion of Sikhs and popular culture, which was fascinating, as the materials ranged from bhangra-hip-hop dance crews to *kirtan* and pop music to the appearance of Maharaja Dulip Singh in a video game.

Lectures and Class Visits

In the fall I was able to organize a Sikh Studies lecture at CMC’s Athenaeum by Prof. Gibb Schreffler (Pomona College), who talked about the *dhol* in Punjabi and Sikh culture, as part of a series on Devotion in South Asia. Prof. Schreffler also visited the Sikhism class this spring to talk about bhangra dance and music. Finally, we had a “virtual class visit” via Skype from Supreet Singh Manchanda, one of the creators of Super Sikh Comics, a new comic book series with an American Sikh hero.

Student Comments

Students responded positively to the class once again, and the ratings in every category of evaluation met or exceeded departmental and college-wide means. Here are a few student comments from course evaluations:

“I found all of the concepts we covered valuable. Personally, I thought that our discussions about fundamental Sikh history/belief were most valuable because they first introduced me to the faith. Our discussions about the modern Sikh diaspora and current issues faced by

members of the faith were eye-opening as well.”

“Experiencing different cultures and different opinions was a very valuable thing. I have never been exposed to the religion before, and it has opened my eyes to many different aspects of life and how to interpret it.”

“Professor Martinez encouraged small group discussions and sharing. This helped me engage with the material. I also loved the structure of the course. It was very effective to start with fundamental ideas (and texts) from the religion and move into modernity later.”

“I really liked the class visit to the Gurdwara and all of the readings in general.”

“I liked the group presentations and the small groups. Also, professor martinez's lectures are AMAZING. She is a very engaging lecturer.”

“Coming from the Sikh tradition myself, I was quite amazed with Professor Martinez's commitment to this course. I learned a lot and was always seeking more.”

“This is one of the best courses I've taken at the 5 C's by far, I think Professor Martinez is simply excellent and reminds me of what an education is meant to look like / be expected from professors here.”

Future Offerings of the Course

The course will be offered again in Spring 2019. I look forward to continuing to explore and experience the Sikh tradition with a new group of terrific students next spring! At least one more Sikh Studies lecture will also take place during 2018-2019.



The Sikhism class of Spring 2018 at CMC (with Super Sikh Comic #1 in hand).