

The Labels that Defines us

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A friend and I, talking about our respective religions, wondered how religions are named — some religions are identified by the names of their founders, while others are not.

Christianity clearly evokes the title of Messiah that Jesus acquired. Christ was not his name; it is a title that comes from the Greek word *Christos* meaning "Messiah" or savior. His name was Jesus. In many Indic languages, he is called *Yasu Massih*.

Islam is named not for its founder, Mohammed, but for an underpinning of its belief — peace or submission; I have seen this religion also referred to as Mohammedanism; most Muslims, though, do not prefer such a designation. The Bahai faith obviously gets its name from Baha'Ullah, the founder. Although an offshoot of Islam, most Shia and Sunni Muslims see it as a heretical sect.

Judaism gets its moniker from Judah, the preeminent patriarch of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Judah was Abraham's great-grandson (i.e., Abraham — Isaac — Jacob — Judah). King David, a descendant of the tribe of Judah, founded a dynasty that ultimately went by the name of his tribe.

Historically, Judaism brought forth the idea that its followers were somehow the chosen people of God. But the two religions that arose from the Judaic tradition took this quite a step further to the belief that those who were not of their faith were condemned. Sometimes I wonder at what these two children of Judaism — Christianity and Islam — have wrought. In true western psychoanalytic tradition the two siblings seem to hate the parent, while almost destroying each other; these two offspring of Judaism show a long record of anti-Semitic practices and have waged crusades and jihads against each other.

What we first-generation immigrants often admire about American culture and society is its spirit of tolerance, as well as its emphasis on human rights and gender and ethnic equality — matters that we generally lump together under the heading of "liberal tradition". This openness stems largely from the East coast presence of the European Jewish community. I base these very general inferences on their historical contributions to the struggle for civil rights and for women's' equality as well as the movement against the Vietnam War. Their sensitivity and commitment to these issues is probably rooted in their own experience as a long-suffering minority.

There are many common strands and points of convergence between Sikh philosophy and the Semitic worldview that came to us through Islam, but more of that another time. Buddhism, that offers us a rich philosophy, is obviously named for its founder Gautam Buddha, a prince who chose to walk away from his regal trappings upon encountering suffering and poverty in his kingdom.

I really don't know the origin and meaning of the word "Hindu," except as a possible variant of the north Indian River *Sindhu*. The river's name became corrupted to *Indus*, the people of the Indus valley came to be known as *Hindus*, while the country became *India*. The celebrated scholar of the history of religion, W. Cantwell Smith, suggested that Hindu practices and traditions are so variegated, distinct and diverse, that to group them under the rubric of a single faith — Hinduism — is neither correct nor fair. The noted

historian, Hew McLeod argues similarly.

The idea that Hinduism is less a distinct religion and more a label for people of the Indus valley has its defenders. For example, the eminent Sikh scholar, Kapur Singh, reasons similarly. In his opinion, all people of north India, whether Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians or Muslims etc., are Hindu, but not by religion; it seems to me like more of an ethnic or anthropologic designation. I have a couple of Hindu Punjabi friends who also believe that though they are Hindus, their religion is Sikh.

The Indian thinker S. Radhakrishnan, who taught philosophy at Oxford, and later became India's President, opined similarly. He recommended that in view of the many diverse and even contradictory traditions of the Hindus, the belief system should be classified not as a religion, but as a way of life.

But I wonder about this. In the final analysis, isn't every religion a way of life? If a religion is not to guide us in how we live and die then what on Earth is it about? And shouldn't those who follow a path be the ones to give it the label that they think best describes themselves?

I raise these questions because I see a number of places of worship, particularly outside India, that are named Hindu temples. There even exist books and encyclopedias of "Hinduism". There is little doubt that most of the one billion Hindus look to their faith as a belief system under the label of "Hinduism," notwithstanding analyses to the contrary by acclaimed academicians.

The problem is that though Hinduism has a rich worldview, there also exist a host of contradictory practices under its panoply. One can find practices ranging from celibacy to vestal virgins in temples and the elevation of the *Kama Sutra* to a sacred text, from sects that are meat-eaters to those who would classify this as the greatest sin, from those who venerate the cow to those who sacrifice it and eat it, from those who worship idols to those who are unquestionably iconoclastic, and from those that are clearly pantheistic to others who are strictly monotheistic. Yet, most Hindus respect the *Laws of Manu* as the guiding principles of their faith.

There have also been reformists and movements aimed at hammering out a unified vision of what constitutes Hinduism or Hindu *Dharma*. Dayanand was not the first in that line, although he might have been the most strident and successful. The past three decades have seen another resurgent movement labeled "*Hindutva*," aimed at promoting a singular vision of Hinduism and Hindu culture. The emphasis of this movement is to define every Indian as a loyal believer and follower of *Hindutva*.

I also raise this question because of an aggressive effort by some Hindu institutions to claim Sikhism as an offshoot of Hinduism and thus deny the younger religion its original vision and unique identity.

Such efforts are not new and have existed since Sikhism began 500 years ago. They remind me of the 2000 year old movement, "Jews for Jesus," that still exists. This, to me, would be akin to claiming Christianity as a sect of Judaism, and Jesus, born a Jew, as the Messiah that Judaism promises and still awaits. I am sure such a formulation would enrage both Jews and Christians.

In the final analysis, the idea of who is a "Hindu," "Christian" or a "Sikh" is one that only Hindus, Christians or Sikhs may decide. It really is no one else's business.

Sikhism or Sikhi, as many Sikhs prefer to call it, is different. The name of the religion has nothing at all to do with the names of the ten Founder-Gurus of the movement.

Nanak was the first Guru, but I have never heard this faith called Nanakism. Nor is the name of any of the succeeding nine Gurus ever used to identify the religion, though it is sometimes called the "Way of Nanak" or the "House of Nanak," but never in an institutional sense.

I am aware that Devinder Singh Chahal from Montreal has forcefully argued for Sikhism to be viewed as "Nanakian" philosophy. I doubt he is aiming to rename the religion. I believe he is taking the lead from the way we identify schools of thought or philosophies: witness the Socratic Method, Aristotelian Logic, Platonic Love, Hegelian Philosophy, or Newtonian Physics, etc.

It is true that Sikh tradition is, in its essential core, the worldview of Nanak, but the evolution and elaboration of that philosophy to maturity occupied another nine Gurus that followed Nanak during the course of two centuries. The moniker "Nanakian Philosophy," I believe, diminishes the contributions of the subsequent nine Masters in the development of the belief system with its well-defined practices — a code of conduct, a model of self-governance, an internal system of justice, as well as its unique traditions and institutions.

A label such as "Nanakian Philosophy" also shifts the emphasis away from the disciple and towards the founder of the faith.

But then, another very valid and historically consistent Sikh belief posits that all ten Gurus, from Nanak to Gobind Singh were, in fact, different physical manifestations of the same light of Nanak and, in their message, no differentiation is possible between any of them. This is exactly why they all acted in the name of Nanak, used the eponym Nanak in all of their writings, and were individually identified in Guru Granth not by name, but only by number in the sequence of their ascension to Guruship.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Hew McLeod, a prominent historian of Sikhism, prefers to view it as the message not of the "Gurus," but of the Guru. By looking at all ten Gurus as the one single light of the Guru, it is a subtle point that Hew McLeod makes, but it should please Sikhs.

Exactly this rationale might then also be used to support Devinder Singh Chahal's thesis. But, in my view, "Nanakian philosophy" would remain an inadequate term, likely to be misinterpreted and to mislead.

Some writers, including McLeod, increasingly argue that the suffix "ism" at the end of the word for a religion is not very meaningful; it seems to encapsulate the concept with a fence around it and thus limit it. He further suggests that referring to Sikhism as "*Gurmat*" might be preferable. This interpretation stems from a literal rendering of the word: "*Gur*" refers to Guru and "*mat*" would be translated as the way or wisdom, making Sikhism the path that hews to Guru's wisdom.

Interestingly, if one listens to discourses and explications of Sikh belief in gurdwaras, one can't fail to notice that in Punjabi, most preachers and granthis refer to the Sikh way as "gurmat."

At a recent conference, one U.S. based Sikh scholar, Mrigendra Singh, took this idea a step further that did not sit quite so well with many. He acknowledged that the Sikh message hews to the teaching of the Guru, and also that the word "Sikh" for the followers of this path is not so easily understood by many, especially if they are non-Sikhs. So he suggested that the Sikh path could be redubbed "Guruism" instead. I wondered what the followers then would be called —

Guruists or *Guruities*, and how comprehensible would that term be to Sikhs or to non-Sikhs?

Never having heard such a proposition, I was totally baffled, though some in the audience might have thought that the idea was swell.

As I pondered some more, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea. Times have now changed. The term "Guru" now no longer suggests only a supremely enlightened teacher, nor does it always speak of the Sikh meaning of the term. Gurus are now a dime a dozen. One can find a tabla or sitar guru, a guru in the kitchen, or one in the spa. Some might even think of me as a guru of anatomy, because that's what I have taught for close to four decades.

The Sikh application of the term Guru takes us to a reality that transcends both the senses and the intellect. A Sikh Guru, then, is a master of this transcendent as well as immanent reality.

When we speak of Guru Nanak or his successor Gurus, the term is very specific and unmatched in its meaning or reverence. So "Guruism" just wouldn't do; it is too generic and unconnected to the message that we label Sikhi.

In fact, I think that the word "Sikh" for a follower of Sikhi says precisely who we are and how we ought to see ourselves. We usually take this word to be of Sanskrit origin, meaning a "student". And what better role for us can there be than as students of life and seekers of truth. This meaning of the word clearly implies that the path is endless, just as a student's lot is never done, and the journey becomes the destination. The Sikh scholar, Kapur Singh, argues that the word "Sikh" is of Pali derivation. Etymologically then, its Pali antecedent, "Sikho," is best rendered as a call to the seekers of truth; this is consistent with my take here.

Sikhi is the path of the Sikh Gurus, but it places the onus on us, the followers of that path. Relabeling it Guruism or Nanakism may exalt the founder, but would diminish the essence of the journey and curtail the role of the follower.

Several times in the Guru Granth, the Gurus equate the Sikh with the Guru. In the final analysis, it is fitting that the word "Sikh" places the emphasis on the followers who walk the path. It seems to me that this was exactly the point when Guru Gobind Singh founded the institution of the Khalsa by initiating the first five Sikhs in 1699, and then himself accepting initiation from their hands.

Sikhi is one of the few paths that are defined by the primary character trait of the follower and not by the gigantic, overpowering and looming shadow of the founder.

