

# 6

## ***Bhakti, Sadhu Sundar Singh, and the Art of Reading Scripture***

*An Indian Approach to Reading  
the Bible in Canada*

ALISON HARI-SINGH

### Introduction

I WAS BORN WITH my feet in two worlds. One foot was rooted in the paradigms and ethos of the place I was raised while the other was ineluctably coupled with the cultural history and genetic pull of my ethnic heritage. Both my father and mother hail from North India—Himachel Pradesh and Punjab, respectively—but in 1968, only a few months into their marriage, they immigrated to the United Kingdom. In 1982, due to persistent social unrest, they decided to relocate again, this time with two young children in tow, from England to Canada, under the banner of “Canadian multiculturalism”—the notion that those new to Canada could maintain their ethnic heritage and still be fully-fledged Canadians. Nonetheless, growing up in northern Saskatchewan, everything around me said that the narratives, ways of thinking, and practices of European

settlers were normative—not simply for white Canadians but for all people, regardless of race, culture, and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

As a child, the solution to my “identity issues” was to reject being Indian and fully embrace being Canadian, which really meant adopting a white Canadian way of being. The fact that my parents were (and still are) practicing Christians merely compounded my angst. For my parents, being Indian and being Christian are not mutually exclusive identities. In the world in which they encountered Christianity—that of the English and US missionary schools long-established in Northern India—there existed an already developed Indian-Christian metaphysics. This was not the case in rural Saskatchewan. In that context, being Christian meant *not* being Indian. I had to choose, so I did.

Some thirty years later, I still find myself choosing. But, in many ways, the act of choosing has become even more challenging. Today, I see myself as a Christian who is both Indian and Canadian, someone whose thinking has been shaped by the values, practices, and ways of thinking of the Indian diaspora *as well as* the North Atlantic. Neither of these particular cultural identities supersedes the other. Instead, I understand my identity to be hybrid and heterogeneous.<sup>2</sup> In more recent years, this hybrid identity has been reshaped by a conscious retrieval of “Indian-ness.” However, the reclamation of my Indian identity has less to do with going back to India. Instead, I am interested in understanding how being Indian allows me to live an authentic Christian life here in Canada.

The following is my attempt at articulating my ethno-cultural identity as it pertains to being a South Asian immigrant engaged in a particular Christian practice—namely, reading the Bible in Canada. Accordingly, there are two serious issues at stake: (1) What does it mean to be a Christian if you are not of European descent? (2) What

1. This paper is a springboard from my reading of Malhotra, *Being Different*. More importantly, it is a theological reflection on the stories of personal encounter with Sadhu Sundar Singh and his spiritual legacy as handed down to me from my father’s side of the family.

2. Some scholars consider the term “hybridity” problematic: Parry, “Problems in Current Theories”; Young, *White Mythologies*; Mitchell, “Different Diasporas,” 533–53; and Werbner “Multiple Identities.”

does it mean to be a Christian if you are not of European descent and reside in a country shaped by the norms, values, and epistemologies of the North Atlantic? The common practice I have observed within my own family and among other Indo-Canadian Christians is that while they do attend established Christian churches, they more often gather together in their own independent Indian churches. These are spaces in which they can speak their own language, sing their own songs, and express Christian belief and practice in an Indian way. In other words, even though they are Christians, they are reluctant to give up their cultural commitments. They do not feel obligated, necessarily, to take on European assumptions and ways of thinking when it comes to considerations of Christian faith and practice. Christianity, for them, is not a European religion. Hence, European understandings of Christian belief and practice do not define what is legitimate.

This paper unearths a source from which Indo-Canadian Christians might draw in order to articulate how they read the Bible: the life and thought of the Indian Christian mystic Sadhu Sundar Singh. Singh's theologically and culturally expressed life of *bhakti* was the cornerstone of his Christian faith and practice. Moreover, *bhakti* shaped how he approached reading Christian Scripture. His example serves as an archetypal form of discipleship that many North Indian Christians living in Canada today emulate. I contend, therefore, that by examining the life and thought of Sadhu Sundar Singh, an analogous Indo-Canadian Christian hermeneutic is uncovered. This hermeneutic demonstrates how many Indian Christians read the Bible in the Canadian context in a way that is Christian, Indian, and not defined by European standards of methodological legitimacy.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, I first explore the Hindu notion of *bhakti*. I then provide a brief biography of Sadhu Sundar Singh's life. Next, I explore the theological concepts and methods that underscore Singh's Christian *bhakti*. Finally, based on Singh's methodological approach, I offer a two-pronged framework for Indian Christians living in Canada, who, like myself, are reluctant to leave Christian faith and the art (or skill) of reading Scripture to

the domain of European understandings of Christianity. My hope is that this Indian approach to reading the Bible might be a methodology all Canadians can access and practice.

### *Bhakti* Defined

In order to argue my case—that an examination of the Christian *bhakti* of Sadhu Sundar Singh denotes a heuristic hermeneutic by which many Indian Christians read the Bible in Canada—the term *bhakti* must be defined. Defining *bhakti*, however, necessitates two steps. First, I provide a very rough outline of Hindu theological<sup>3</sup> conceptions of cosmology and ontology. Second, I establish a working definition of *bhakti* that relates Singh's Christian *bhakti* to the wider Hindu tradition.

#### Hindu Theology: Cosmology, Ontology, and Revelation

It is difficult to enter a discussion regarding the nature of *bhakti* without providing some context. *Bhakti* is not a silo concept; it is couched in an entire cosmology and system of thought. As Hillary Rodrigues points out, there is neither a single, authoritative Hindu cosmology nor is there a singular Hindu theology. Nonetheless, Hindu cosmology, whether theological or philosophical, is essentially cyclical. Hindus believe that both time and creation move in repetitive cycles of rebirth (*samsara*). These cycles are not necessarily a renewal. Rather, creation moves toward degeneration over time based on the principle of *karma*. *Karma* is a moral principle of causality in which good deeds (*punya*) are commendable while wrong deeds (*papa*) have negative consequences. All created things are caught up in these repetitive cycles of *samsara* and are

3. "Theology," here, refers more broadly to the cosmological arguments that make up Hindu religious belief. Hindu theology is, essentially, theistic, while Hindu philosophy is atheistic. See Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 224.

ultimately seeking *moksha* (ultimate release, liberation, or salvation from *samsara*).<sup>4</sup>

Hinduism is more than a sensibility. It is a complex system of beliefs founded on the written texts believed to be revelatory, particularly the Vedas.<sup>5</sup> Although there are many Hindu schools of thought and theology, one Hindu philosopher, Shankara, has become the most highly regarded over the centuries. Shankara was a high caste Hindu—a Brahmin—from South India who lived during the eighth or ninth century AD. He is thought to have founded the *matha* or monastic practice within Hinduism. Accordingly, Shankara did not marry but lived the life of a *samnyasin*<sup>6</sup>—a solitary wandering monk.

Shankara's philosophical theology is known as Advaita Vedanta. It is based on a notion of radical non-dualism.<sup>7</sup> For Shankara, only one thing is absolutely real—Brahman—and Brahman is indivisible.<sup>8</sup> Since Brahman cannot be divided into constitutive parts, consequently, *atman*—the human being's true Self—must be identical with Brahman.<sup>9</sup> When one realizes that Brahman is “all there is,”<sup>10</sup> and that one's true nature is Brahman, the human being is liberated both bodily and spiritually.

For Shankara, any conception, thought, or imagining we have about Brahman, is essentially the work of *maya* (illusion or ignorance). When we apply such attributes to Brahman, we reduce Brahman to an ultimate deity or “Lord.” The Lord (*Ishvara*) is the

4. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 53.

5. Sharma, “Hinduism,” 26.

6. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 250.

7. Advaita Vedanta is reluctant to impose any quality upon Brahman, thus, it engages in a process of negation called *neti neti*, meaning Brahman is “neither this, nor that.” See Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 251. Similar to apophatic theology in Eastern Orthodoxy, it is an analytical process of conceptualizing an idea or thing by defining what it is not.

8. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 250. This tradition of radical non-dualism or absolute monism upholds the belief of the Reality of the one over that of the many. See Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 239.

9. Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 241.

10. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 250.

one who presides over the world and is the object of religious devotion. *Bhakti* is utter commitment and devotion to *Ishvara*. Shankara sees such commitment to *Ishvara* as permissible but at a lower level of knowledge of Brahman. It is a remnant of ignorance which one hopes eventually to transcend fully.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in Shankara's philosophical theology, whenever particular qualities or characteristics are projected upon Brahman, there remains a vestige of *maya*,<sup>12</sup> and *moksha* has not been obtained.

### The Origin and Meaning of *Bhakti*

The Vedanta of Shankara is arguably the standard interpretation of Hindu philosophical theology. Around the first or second century AD, however, a form of popular Hinduism—*bhakti*—emerged based on a novel interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita.<sup>13</sup> The practices of this new movement centered on devotion to the personal deities of Vishnu, Shiva, and Dev through icons, shrines, temples, holy men, devotional songs, dances, religious drama, festivals, and pilgrimage. Through *bhakti*, Vedic religion—which was mainly sacrificial and aniconic—became tangibly connected to popular practices of devotion, icons, and “foreign” participation.<sup>14</sup> These newfound devotional practices preserved the Vedic tradition, yet acknowledged and gave a legitimate place to popular religious practice.

*Bhakti* Hinduism, contrary to traditional Hindu teaching, gave central prominence to devotion toward a deity as a means to *moksha*. Although “not everyone can be a priest or a learned seer . . . everyone can know the Lord through devotion and can

11. Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 241–42.

12. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 251.

13. Karen Prentiss notes that the emergence of the *bhakti* movement in the first and second centuries AD was essentially a reform movement within Hinduism. Moreover, it was something like the Protestant movement in Christian Europe in terms of why it emerged; that is, as a reform to over-indulgence within the tradition. See Prentiss, *Embodiment of Bhakti*, 5.

14. Hopkins, “Bhakti Hinduism,” 99.

perform his duties as a form of devotion to him.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, for those without social standing in Hindu society, *bhakti* Hinduism provided a way to participate fully in religious life.

If this is the case, what does *bhakti* look like? Chhaganlal Lala highlights five essential prerequisites of *bhakti*: human birth, high aspiration, faith, surrender, and prayer. All who are born human possess the condition of higher aspiration, but we squander this objective on transient things. Thus, the only way for the human being to overcome this tendency and surrender to the Lord completely is through faith. Surrender is the dedication of one’s whole being, body, mind, and action to the Lord, but faith is the anchor. With faith comes surrender; by surrendering to the Lord, a person can attain *moksha* in one single life. Finally, a faith-filled and surrendered soul always senses the presence of God through prayer. Prayer is the means by which the devotee communes with the Lord and, thereby, receives the grace of God.<sup>16</sup>

Such recompense is not realized in a vacuum, however. There are aids to *bhakti*. The first is *satsanga*, or holy company, and the second is holy reading.<sup>17</sup> Of the two, knowledge of Scripture is of utmost importance because it is the only authority by which one decides the courses of action and inaction. Moreover, Scripture reveals truth to us. As Lala puts it, by reading we “seek the treasure . . . the Lord himself.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, while reading Scripture and *satsanga* are aids to *bhakti*, they are not ends in themselves. Reading, regardless of how helpful and revelatory it is, is not the final goal. In other words, time with Scripture alone can never substitute one’s simple and direct experience of God through prayer. Nor can it provide greater spiritual insights than those accrued in unsurpassable moments of worship.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is in the observance of prayer

15. Hopkins, “Bhakti Hinduism,” 99.

16. Lala, *Philosophy of Bhakti*.

17. Lala, *Philosophy of Bhakti*, 135.

18. Lala, *Philosophy of Bhakti*, 139.

19. Lala, *Philosophy of Bhakti*, 139–40.

and devout worship that the human being ultimately encounters God<sup>20</sup> in all God's grace and glory.

### Sadhu Sundar Singh and the *Bhakti* Tradition

As stated earlier, the *bhakti* tradition within Hinduism evolved due to popular practices already in existence. However, *bhakti* Hinduism also developed because Hindu theologians took issue with certain philosophical assertions within the standard tradition. An eleventh-century Hindu theologian named Ramanuja, for example, contested Shankara's impersonal Absolute Reality (*nirguna Brahman*) as a "useless God."<sup>21</sup> Instead, Ramanuja argued for some form of Divine transcendence and, thus, a separation of matter from transcendent reality.

The assertion of this basic division between the Divine and the material radically changed the direction of Hindu belief and practice all over India. Not surprisingly, Christianity, a religion that maintains a similar tenet, took root in those parts of India in which there was already a strong *bhakti* tradition. Through *bhakti*, the *bhakta* could become a Christian and yet not feel that they had left their Indian way of being behind.<sup>22</sup> *Bhakti* Hinduism was the spiritual tradition in which Sadhu Sundar Singh was formed, the tradition in which he realized his own form of Christian *bhakti*.

The following section begins with a brief biography of Singh's life. I then highlight those aspects that constitute Singh's Christian *bhakti*. Finally, I look at how Christian *bhakti*, as Singh understood it, influenced the way he read Christian Scripture, thus demonstrating that Singh's Christian *bhakti* serves as an archetypal example by which many Indians practice reading the Bible in a Canadian context.

20. The reference to "God" here is not to a monotheistic supernatural being, but to transcendent Reality or Brahman.

21. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 111.

22. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 111–12.



## Singh's Biography in Brief

Sundar Singh was born on September 3, 1889, in the village of Rampur in Punjab, India. He came from an affluent family who, though they were devout Sikhs, made sure their son was also educated in the essential teachings of the Hindu *bhakti* tradition.<sup>23</sup> Singh was an earnest child with a receptive conscience. He was also zealous in his convictions. His conversion story is a case in point: after the devastating deaths of his mother and brother, Sundar's father sent him to the local primary school, run by the American Presbyterian Mission in his village. Singh hated Christianity and refused to read the daily Bible lesson. In his later life, Singh admitted of his childhood days that while the Gospel teaching of the love of God attracted him, he still thought it was false and therefore opposed it.<sup>24</sup> He was so staunch in his opinion that one day, in a zealous rage, he tore up a New Testament and burned it in the presence of others, including his father. His actions burdened him so terribly with guilt that he cried out to God in prayer asking for God to be revealed. If God did not answer, Singh confessed that he would have gone down to the railway and committed suicide.

Singh received his answer, though it was not what he expected. In this moment of prayerful desperation, he waited for Krishna or Buddha or some other *avatar* of Hinduism, but none appeared. There was, however, a light that began to shine in his room. The light hovered and grew in intensity. Within it was none other than the living Christ—the one he thought was dead. Christ asked him, “Why do you persecute me? See, I have died on the cross for you and for the whole world.” Singh wrote: “These words were burned into my heart as by lightning, and I fell on the ground before him. My heart was filled with inexpressible joy and peace, and my whole life was entirely changed.”<sup>25</sup>

23. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 92.

24. Charles Moore notes that Singh opposed colonial religion. See his introduction in *Essential Writings*.

25. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 21.

Eventually, Singh's conversion created such a rift between him and his father that he was "disowned" and cast out of his family's home. Missionaries in the area took pity and sent him to finish his schooling. On September 3, 1905, Singh received the sacrament of baptism from a clergy person working with the Church Missionary Society in Simla. He was 16 years old. A month later, barely a grown man, Singh appeared in the wooded hills of Sabathu in the saffron-colored robes of a sadhu.<sup>26</sup>

The rest of Singh's life would be marked by travel. Though he never completed a seminary degree, Singh lived the life of an itinerant mystic evangelist. His evangelistic work took him all over India and even into Tibet. Stories of his travels became so renown that he was asked to go on speaking tours in Europe—where he had become a controversial figure<sup>27</sup>—Southeast Asia, and the USA. In due course, the constant travel took a toll on Singh's health. He could no longer go on speaking tours, but Christian publishers began requesting written works. Subsequently, in the last few years of his life, he published eight small books. These were written mainly in Urdu and translated into English, French, German, Swedish, Japanese, Mandarin, and every other prominent dialect in the subcontinent. Writing, however, was not enough for him. He longed to see Tibet converted to Jesus Christ. In 1929, at the age of 39, Singh set out for Tibet from his Sabathu home and was never heard from or seen again.

### Singh's Christian *Bhakti*

It is clear that Singh's writings and lectures reveal an inherently "inculturated" faith.<sup>28</sup> As Streeter and Appasamy note, Singh did

26. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 17–18.

27. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 25. In the 1920s, Singh became such a controversial figure that arguments about him were called the *Sadhustreit* ("Sadhu fight") in German Roman Catholic circles.

28. By "inculturation" I mean the adaptation (or translation) of Christian teachings to a particular cultural tradition and the subsequent development, or even reinterpretation, of Christian teachings due to the influence of that

not deliberately set out to “Indianize” Christianity. Rather, for him, the Gospel message is *supra* national. Singh was a man who was “truly Indian in all his ways and thoughts,” and yet, he had entered fully “into the heart of the Gospel,” not into “the Christian tradition of the West.”<sup>29</sup> As Singh himself said, “Indians greatly need the Water of Life, but they do not want it in European vessels.”<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, in conjunction with his *bhakti* Hindu upbringing, Singh’s Christian faith journey was one of profound piety and devotion. In his biography of Singh, Appasamy notes that Singh did not approve any idea of God that was not expressed in *bhakti*.<sup>31</sup> Thus, through his intuitive inculturation of the Christian faith, Singh lived out a type of Christian *bhakti*.

Three characteristics mark Singh’s Christian *bhakti*.<sup>32</sup> The first is the cultivation of a life of prayer. Akin to the Hindu *bhakti* tradition, prayer, for Singh, is the “greatest theological college in this world.”<sup>33</sup> Prayer is not about coming to God with our requests, reciting set formulas, or “speaking in other tongues”; rather, prayer is communion (or union) with God.<sup>34</sup> It is contemplative and meditative. Prayer is the cultivation of a relationship—the “opening of the windows of the soul to let God in.”<sup>35</sup> For Singh, prayer demonstrates the highest aspiration or desire for God: “It is breathing and living

---

culture. This can be understood of as a kind of contextual theology. In his Encyclical “Redemptoris Missio,” however, Pope John Paul II writes that inculturation is the “intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.” In this case, the emphasis is more on Christianity’s influence on the receptive culture, and less on a mutual intermingling. See John Paul II, “Redemptoris Missio.”

29. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 109.

30. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 232.

31. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 188.

32. These three characteristics are not only drawn from my own reading of Singh’s writings but also through a synthesis and extrapolation of how his numerous biographers have understood his theological thought.

33. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 38.

34. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 140.

35. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 238.

God.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, prayer for the Christian *bhakta* is beyond language and draws one into a transcendental state, for it is in this state of union that one can be truly receptive to God.

Accordingly, Singh began each day with two hours of prayer, Bible reading, and meditation.<sup>37</sup> It is no surprise then that repetitive mediation on the biblical text comprises the second mark of his Christian *bhakti*. As Appasamy notes, Singh spent a lot of time “devouring” his Urdu New Testament. His method of reading was simple: he would read the same passage over and over again in an attempt to understand the text’s meaning.<sup>38</sup> Singh also spent a lot of time meditating on the parables. As his friends often noted, he argued in pictures and drew analogies to demonstrate whichever point he was attempting to make. Very similar to the “Indian Seers and poets” before him,<sup>39</sup> who retained the Indian pattern of inference and analogy, Singh “proved” his points through parabolic analogy, not logical argument.<sup>40</sup> “The Sadhu’s mind,” Streeter and Appasamy note, “is an overflowing reservoir of anecdote, illustration, epigram, and parable, but he never makes the slightest effort to avoid repetition [of these illustrations]; in fact, he appears to delight in it.”<sup>41</sup>

The final mark of Singh’s Christian *bhakti* is faith-filled experience. Singh was uninterested in the merely intellectual pursuit of Christianity. Instead, following the *bhakti* tradition, “service” and “reverence” was of utmost importance to him<sup>42</sup>; correct doctrine was less important than how one’s life was lived.<sup>43</sup> More specifically, Singh’s Christian *bhakti* was so defined by his contemplative

36. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 28.

37. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 28.

38. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 159–61.

39. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 228.

40. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 188. In some schools of Indian thought, analogy (*upamana*) constitutes a separate and legitimate basis of knowledge. See Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 97.

41. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, x.

42. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 30.

43. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 237–38.

experience that it trumped ecclesial, doctrinal, or even scriptural authority.<sup>44</sup> “The first thing in religion,” Singh wrote, “is not ritual or works (*karma*), nor a new philosophy (*jnana*), but a new heart, and only those who know and love the crucified and risen Christ can understand fully what this means.”<sup>45</sup>

Singh grew up cultivating these disciplines in a Hindu context.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, even after he became a Christian, he was not interested in overcoming Hinduism. Rather, he attempted to relate his newfound faith to the nobler elements of the Hindu religion.<sup>47</sup> It was not that he brought every characteristic of Indian philosophy and religion into his newfound Christianity, but he modified Hindu philosophy in light of his Christian experience.<sup>48</sup> For Singh, Hinduism dug the channels, but Christ, the water, flowed through them.<sup>49</sup> Hinduism had already received insight from the Holy Spirit; Christ simply fulfilled the initial revelation.

#### Singh’s Christian *Bhakti* as a Scriptural Hermeneutic

Without question, Singh’s Christian *bhakti* played a tremendous role in how he read the Bible. First, Singh believed that we must read the Bible in faith. Just as he loved the sacred Hindu texts, Singh loved the Bible. For him, it was sweet like sugar.<sup>50</sup> He was convinced of the “wonderful power of the Bible,” which he believed should be read in child-like faith. “The language of the word of God” he wrote, “is spiritual; only he who is born of the Spirit can rightly and completely understand it, whether he is a scholar or a

44. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 82; and Francis, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 94.

45. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 108.

46. Francis, *Lover of the Cross*, 92.

47. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 231–33.

48. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, 138.

49. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 232.

50. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 196.

child.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, for Singh, deep calls to deep.<sup>52</sup> There is no secret key required to crack the Bible’s code in order to understand it, as long as one reads in faith.

Second, Singh believed that it was necessary for the reader to be in deep communion with God in order to understand the Scripture’s meaning. This relationship is cultivated through prayer. For Singh, the Bible is a “mystically inspired creation.”<sup>53</sup> Everyday language cannot really express spiritual things in an exhaustive manner. That is why it is so difficult for us to penetrate through the words to the spiritual truth. “To those, however, who are in touch with the author, that is, with the Holy Spirit, all is clear.”<sup>54</sup>

Singh clearly believed that the Scriptures were inspired—in terms of the words themselves, but their “inward meaning.”<sup>55</sup> In reading the Bible, Singh’s aim was always to understand who God is and, subsequently, who we are in relation to God. Thus, the Bible is not merely “words on a page” that need to be historically dissected in order to confirm (or revoke) its veracity; rather, the text is spiritual and should be read for its outlook on ultimate meaning and reality. In other words, the Bible tells *God’s story*. If one is to understand what a biblical text means, one needs to be spiritual and approach the Bible as such. Consequently, as Singh indicated, if one is in constant communion with Christ through prayer, the meaning of the words is made plain.<sup>56</sup>

Third, Singh believed that the reader must surrender completely to God and to the authority of God’s Word in order for the meaning to be clear. This was not about believing in the infallibility of the Bible. But through prayerful and faith-filled reading, this type of surrender is possible. For Singh, because Christians who hail from the North Atlantic have lost the “art of prayer,” they have

51. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 83–84.

52. See Psalm 42:7.

53. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 83.

54. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 84.

55. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 201.

56. Streeter and Appasamy, *Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 202. See also Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, 95.

also lost hold of the central truth of the deity of Christ.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, European and North American Christians from the USA and Canada are no longer able to read in faith and, therefore, cannot understand what the biblical text means. Singh felt that the Bible has the power to show us our faults and shortcomings, but due to “higher methods,” we set out to find fault with it. We are always looking for mistakes. “It is no wonder,” he wrote, “that people can’t understand what the text is saying!”<sup>58</sup> By reading in this way, Singh saw European and North American Christians as suffering from a spiritual “influenza” for which we need to be inoculated.

Singh’s three ways of reading Scripture—faith-filled reading, prayerful reading, and surrendered reading—was his method of inoculation. Christian *bhakti*, such as Singh’s, underscores a legitimate hermeneutic by which Indians cultivate the art of reading and, consequently, understand the Scriptures. Singh’s approach, I believe, is how many Indian people continue to read the Bible in Canada.

### Christian *Bhakti*, Knowing God, and Reading Scripture Faithfully in Canada

To conclude, I want to espouse two things based on what I have just said about Sadhu Sundar Singh’s Christian *bhakti* and how Indian Christians read the Bible in Canada. First, this method is, in many ways, out of step with the approach of most mainline Euro Canadian churches. Without genuine faith in the salvific work of Christ, however, Christian *bhakti* as an Indian method of hermeneutics is futile. Singh remarked that while he did not desire to condemn theologians and biblical critics outright, he thought that the tendency in European and North American thinking to “doubt and deny everything” was very unfortunate. For him, theologians and biblical critics trained in European epistemologies had completely lost all sense of spiritual reality. He maintained, “You must stop

57. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 105.

58. Heiler, *Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 108.

examining spiritual truths like dry bones! You must break open the bones and take in the life-giving marrow!”<sup>59</sup>

In my lived experience with Indian Christians in Canada, questions of historical veracity as it applies to reading the Bible are valuable and interesting, but penultimate. Instead, comprehending the meaning of the biblical text and the personal transformation that takes place through faithfully meditating upon the biblical text is crucial. The Bible is to be read, talked about, believed, and observed, even when what it says is confusing, troubling, or infuriating. Bible reading is an exercise in struggle—a struggle that, with perseverance, eventually delivers blessing. This approach to reading the Bible is not about certainty in historical facts that confirm the accuracy of the biblical text, but the blessing of knowing God in fullness, namely, union with God.

Second, this approach is difficult to live out in the North Atlantic context because it necessitates surrendering to an authority beyond us. Concerning Europe and North America, Singh made a challenging comment. He wrote, “It is not enough to know *about* Jesus Christ, you must *know* Him.”<sup>60</sup> Our Eurocentric Enlightenment assumptions—e.g., autonomy, individualism, and rationalism—often allow us to think that we control what is to be known. Therefore, it is felt that knowing “about Christ” suffices. The aim of Christian *bhakti*, however, is to know God. Indo-Canadian Christians read the Bible in this unique way for a particular purpose. Though it is similar in many ways, this goes beyond a simple evangelical reading. For Indian Christians, I contend, the art of reading Scripture lies not in taking a “step back” from the text or being “objective” about what is read, but that through reading (i.e., entering the biblical story), we encounter God and thereby find ourselves. Thus, the Indian Christian, like Singh, reads the biblical text and, consequently, understands. By focusing on simply knowing “about” God, Christians steeped in the ways of European culture, values, and traditions have lost the ability to cultivate a relationship with God. Following Singh, they have become like a

59. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 101.

60. Francis, *Lover of the Cross*, 503. Emphasis added.



stone that water has been unable to penetrate—beautiful on the outside, dry on the inside.<sup>61</sup> The objective of Christian *bhakti*, however, is to be radiant inside and out.

I have argued here that Christian *bhakti*, as exemplified by the life and thought of Sadhu Sundar Singh, is an Indian hermeneutic that is observed by many Indian Christians living in Canada. The challenge remains as to whether Canadians of European descent who also desire to read and understand the Scripture will take up the challenge of reading in this prayerful, faith-filled, and surrendered way. This is not a simple path. Reading in this way requires a conversion of cultures or, at least, an acceptance of an alternate cosmology. For the Hindu *bhakta* and the Christian *bhakta*, union with God is the purpose of human existence. Thus, at the very least, the reader of European descent living in Canada must challenge whatever assumptions they hold about what “union with God” may mean and take on a primarily Indian understanding. Following Singh, such union is spiritual, contemplative, devout, transcendental, universal, mystical, and blissful (*ananda*). Christian *bhakti* is also Christocentric. In Hindu cosmology, Gnosticism is not willful heresy; it is simply a way of understanding the world, reading the Bible, and encountering the Christ in an alternate—though still legitimate—way. Consequently, if one looks eastward and desires to know God and be one with God, then Christian *bhakti* is potentially a scriptural hermeneutic that can be embraced by all.

61. Moore, *Essential Writings*, 98.