Sikhism in the United States

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Abstract

Sikhism is one of the world’s most overlooked religions. Originating in Punjab, a holy city straddling Pakistan and India, Sikhism began in the fifteen hundreds by Guru Nanak. Over 300,000 Sikhs live in the United States today, yet they are being persecuted daily and mistaken for radical Muslims. E. Cosby, a sophomore enrolled at Dalton State College, is fascinated with Sikh-American beliefs and culture. Cosby researches and analyzes the topic of Sikh-American misidentification from three scholarly sources that provide current statistics, personal observations, and academic studies concerning Sikh-American identity and persecution. In addition, C. Eaton, an expert in Sikh-American culture, contributes to Cosby’s research by sharing his own knowledge and observation. The researcher’s personal experiences and observations combined with an anonymous survey administered to a group of fourteen Dalton State College students draw connections to support a disheartening, yet extremely intriguing thesis about Sikh-American misidentification.

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Imagine yourself grocery shopping at your favorite supermarket. You are familiar with some of the cashiers, you can never leave without spotting someone you know, and you know the market’s floor plan like the back of your hand. You are in your comfort zone. Suddenly, a man with a long dark beard and a tall turban secures a spot behind you in the checkout line. With him is a woman who is wearing long flowing skirts and a sheer scarf draped over her hair, holding the hands of two young ones, who seem to be sporting some sort of miniature turbans. They converse with one another in a language that is nothing like you have ever heard before. Do you smile and turn back to your cart, hoping they do not notice you staring? Are you afraid of them? Do you wonder if they are part of some radical religious group? Could they be harmful?

In the United States of America, Sikhs are rarely identified as Sikhs. But primarily, what is a Sikh? The term “Sikh” simply refers to one who follows the religion of Sikhism; it in no way defines an individual’s background, ethnicity, or nationality. Sikhism is a religion that was started by Guru Nanak in sixteenth century India. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that teaches world peace, gender equality, hospitality, and protection for weak ones. Males and females who chose to follow the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhism’s holy text, are technically required to wear head coverings of some kind, especially in a Sikh temple, or gurdwara. The head coverings and turbans, often combined with dark complexions, unshorn beards, the occasional dagger, and long, flowing garments usually set Sikhs apart from most other Americans. Some Americans are afraid of Sikhs, some may be angered or feel threatened, and some may be intrigued. Regardless of the emotions one might feel upon encountering a Sikh, the researcher strives to study how the average American identifies a Sikh by answering the question, “On average, are Sikhs incorrectly identified and/or labeled in the United States?”
In order to properly begin her research, E. Cosby sought out scholarly sources and studies that could potentially answer her question as to whether Sikhs are correctly identified in America. One article, titled “How Many U.S. Sikhs,” explores the United States’ population of Sikhs (Rosentiel, 2012). Rosentiel gathered statistics from The American Religious Identification Survey since the U.S. census does not ask citizens about religious affiliations (2012). The researcher found this article’s information to be valuable because it not only provides numbers for U.S. Sikh citizens, highlighting their scarcity in the U.S., but the article also sheds light on the fact that Sikhs are often mistaken for Muslims. Additionally, journalist Joseph Lui writes in his article titled “Sikh-Americans and Religious Liberty” that due to their outer symbols of faith, such as the turban and the kirpan (a small dagger), Sikh-Americans were widely persecuted after the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, though Sikhs were not affiliated with the attack in any way (2009). Lastly, the researcher located an article from the Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology that delves into the marginalization of Sikh men based on their appearance, even comparing them to the marginalization of young African-Americans who wear hoodies on their heads as opposed to turbans (K. K. Arora, 2013). Using these valuable and scholarly sources, the researcher was able to get a better grasp on incorrect identification of Sikh-Americans.

The researcher feels that studying Sikhism, particularly Sikhism in the United States, is an intriguing and valuable topic. As aforementioned, Sikh-Americans are far too often persecuted because other Americans mistake them for radical Muslims. American persecution and fear of Muslims is an atrocious issue within itself, and it is far too complex for this assignment. However, the researcher hopes to educate fellow non-Sikhs about the unfair and frankly criminal treatment of Sikhs based on incorrect identification. The researcher even has
firsthand proof of persecution against Sikh-Americans from two young women who claim they are regularly bullied in school and incorrectly labeled as “followers of ISIS” (personal communication, September 3, 2017). It is ethically important to educate others on how to identify a Sikh versus a non-Sikh, as well as expose the atrocities of American citizens who wrongly judge and persecute Sikhs based on their outer symbols of faith.

The researcher then designed a method of creating a study that might answer the question as to whether Sikhs are widely persecuted in the United States today. C. Eaton, a close friend to the researcher, has been avidly seeking Sikhs and building relationships with them for over four years. Eaton has travelled all over the country, from Washington State, to Texas, to Ohio, to Atlanta, to Nashville, to Knoxville, and most recently, New York in order to immerse himself in Sikh-American culture. The researcher interviewed him shortly after he arrived back in Chattanooga from spending the weekend in Queens, New York in one of the most highly populated Sikh cities in the country. Cosby pressed Eaton about Sikh persecution, bullying, misidentification, and the reasons behind each. Immediately, Eaton responded with, “They’re [Sikhs are] usually identified as radical Muslims” (personal communications, May 1, 2018). C. Eaton also mentioned that although Sikhs are really the only religious people that use turbans as an outer symbol of faith, “Americans mistakenly associate turbans with Islamic terrorists” (personal communications, May 1, 2018). Cosby also tied Eaton’s personal interview in with a personal observation she recalled from the Fall of 2017, when the researcher would often visit and converse with young Sikh-Americans at a gurdwara in Atlanta. She had many conversations with the young worshipers about the unfair bullying they endured in grade school and the feelings of isolation that followed suit (S. Singh & J. Kaur, personal communications, September
10, 24, October 1, 2017). The personal interview, along with the researcher’s own observations, aided her research immensely.

In order to assess the average college student’s proficiency in religious identification, an anonymous survey was administered to fourteen students enrolled Dalton State College (Sikhism in the United States Survey, April 23, 2018). (For a complete list of survey questions, see Appendix A.) The first four questions asked each student about his or her major, ethnicity, age, and gender, while the next three questions asked the students about international travel, religious views, and linguistic capabilities. This particular section was added in order to give the researcher a better understanding of not only ethnicity, but of background and international travel, as well as experience with marginalized cultures and ethnic groups. The following section of the survey listed seven different religions (Baha’i, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism), and required the students to list all religions that they had heard of before. The intention behind asking each student which religions with which he or she is familiar was to assess the group’s overall grasp of religious culture in the United States. The seven religions listed on the survey all have holy temples or places of worship established in the North Georgia and Chattanooga area.

Lastly, the students were asked to look at six different pictures and respond with what religion the photographed person appears to follow. The photographs showed five women (two Sikhs, one Hindu, and two Muslims) and one Sikh man. The photographs displayed a wide range of head coverings and outer dress, from a traditional Afghani burqa to a modern Sikh turban. The researcher wanted to accomplish two things within this section of her survey. Primarily, Cosby’s goal was to present a wide range of outer symbols of religious faith and study which religious
symbols were misidentified. Secondly, the researcher hoped to focus on the three Sikh photographs by assessing whether any students could correctly identify a Sikh upon first glance.

Unfortunately, the survey results showed that out of forty-two opportunities to correctly identify a Sikh, only three were correct. This means that only 7% of the Sikh identifications were correct, while 93% were incorrect. See chart below.

![Identification of Sikhs](chart.png)

The Sikh man pictured holding a traditional kirpan and wearing a turban was an area of controversy; when asked why they might be threatened by his appearance, 57% agreed that his dagger was threatening, while 21% answered that the look on the man’s face was scariest. One student even wrote, “He looks just like a terrorist” (Sikhism in the United States Survey, April 23, 2018). Additionally, ten of the thirty-nine misidentifications labeled Sikhs as Muslims, which was by far the most common misidentification. However, the survey revealed an interesting aspect of Muslim identification as well; over half of the students correctly identified the hijab-wearing woman as Muslim, but only 7% of students correctly identified the burqa-clad woman
as Muslim. Interestingly, females on average seemed to have a higher proficiency in correctly identifying people based on outer religious apparel.

Essentially, the results of the survey were disheartening, but they provided the researcher with valuable information that answered her question; yes, unfortunately, Sikhs are far too often misidentified in the United States. The researcher experienced a strange mixture of discouragement and pride when assessing her observations, survey results, and interview. When studying scholarly sources that discuss Sikh-American misidentification, Cosby was not aware of how badly the issue of religious persecution against Sikhs escalated since September 11, 2001, and has yet to diminish. The survey results supported Cosby’s original thesis, which meant that Cosby’s research was successful, but Sikhs are still being wrongly labeled today. One particularly discouraging survey answer was from a student who, instead of trying to identify each religious woman or man presented in the survey, claimed that she felt uncomfortable “assuming which religion they follow . . . they are all wearing hijabs, which does not tell me anything” (Sikhism in the United States Survey, April 23, 2018). One of the goals of the survey was to educate each partaker so that he or she might feel compelled to research other religions or cultures and eventually be comfortable with the mere fact that appearance, though it is not everything, can tell a lot about a person’s background and beliefs. Knowledge about outer appearances will open up doorways for conversation and friendship. One particularly devastating statistic from the survey showed that only two out of fourteen college students had ever even heard of Sikhism before, spurring the researcher’s interest in educating others about Sikhism so that misidentification and religious persecution can be avoided.

Essentially, the average American college student does a poor job at correctly identifying Sikhs, as do Americans of all ages, according to research. Some limitations of this study on
misidentification of Sikh-Americans may include a very small survey group and a strong focus on the strange relationship between Sikh-Americans and Muslim-Americans, particularly appearance. In the future, it is crucial to continue to conduct research on the common misidentification of Sikh-Americans in order to expose the religious persecution that they fall victim to daily. Educating others about other cultures and beliefs is important as well so that the large gap between the non-Sikh-Americans and the Sikh-Americans may be bridged greeting by greeting. It is the moral duty of every American to combat persecution, regardless of difference in belief or background. Start fighting today. All it takes is a smile.
References


Appendix A

Eva Cosby

Final Essay and Presentation: Survey

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1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your major?
5. Have you ever traveled outside of the United States before? If so, where?
6. Are you bilingual or multilingual? If so, what language(s) do you speak other than English?
7. Do you consider yourself religious? If so, what religion do you follow?
8. How many of the following world religions have you heard of? List all letters that apply.
   a. Hinduism
   b. Buddhism
   c. Islam
   d. Christianity
   e. Judaism
   f. Baha’i
   g. Sikhism
9. Based on her appearance, what religion do you think this woman follows? (Choose one of the religions listed above.)

10. (Same question as previous.)
11. (Same question as previous.)

12. (Same question as previous.)
13. (Same question as previous.)

14. What religion do you think this man follows?

15. Would you say that this man looks threatening or harmful in any way? If so, what about his appearance makes you think that? (You can be completely honest. These are anonymous.)