

Secular Mutations: Law and the Political Regulation of Sikh Gurdwaras in British Columbia

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Abstract

Over the last twenty years, courts across the Canadian province of British Columbia have rendered more than 70 judgments in cases related to the political leadership of local Sikh temples ('Gurdwaras'). While these disputes typically originate in fissures between putatively 'moderate' and 'traditional' groups of Sikhs, the *legal* issues addressed in these cases concern the proper administration of religious organizations that have been incorporated as not-for-profit 'societies'. The alleged violations in these cases include inadequacies in the paperwork used to enrol new members in the Gurdwara societies; the procedures that have been used to elect members to the executive committees of societies; and the media that have been used to advertise annual meetings of these societies to its members.

To examine how law intervenes in the affairs of these Gurdwaras, despite recognition of their religious autonomy, this paper explicates the specific legal and secular logics that are invoked to differentiate matters of politics from matters of religion. More specifically, this paper draws on critical theories of secularism, religion, and media to explain how the agentive status afforded to media and other technological objects blurs and complicates these distinctions between religion, politics, culture, and civil society. By situating these legal cases in broader changes to the political circumstances of Sikh communities in British Columbia, this paper also examines how law has become a principal means by which different religious and political actors have redefined the cultural, political, and religious boundaries of Sikhism.