

Pluralism Project and Andover Newton Theological School Co-Host Interfaith  
Leadership Seminar, June 2012 | Site Visits

Student Reflection: Milford Gurdwara Sahib



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Jason Smith is a master of theological studies candidate at Harvard Divinity School, where he is pursuing a degree in comparative religion. Prior to his time at HDS, Jason served for two years as the Youth Program Director for Youth LEAD in Sharon, MA and he currently sits on the Board of Directors for the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN) and as co-chair of NAIN's Young Adult Committee.

*In his reflection Jason comments on the sensory experience of visiting the Milford Gurdwara Sahib—seeing the respectful treatment of the Guru Granth Sahib, hearing the recitation of hymns, smelling the langar meal—as a way of highlighting points of continuity and divergence among site visits during the seminar. Here he expands upon the post-langar meal discussion that focused on the growing presence of Sikhs in interfaith efforts.*

Our discussion also provided a helpful reminder that we need to expand the paradigm of “interfaith” to encompass a broader variety of participants. The interfaith movement has been successful at engaging Abrahamic traditions in dialogue, and I think we are currently in the process of moving toward a more successful engagement with what are often labeled the “five major world religions” of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Sikhism is beginning to play a more active role in the interfaith movement but the inclusion of other faith traditions often ends here. I think that one of the biggest challenges for the interfaith movement in the next ten years will be finding ways to include traditionally marginalized voices from Native American traditions, African and African diasporic religions, Pagan traditions, and the list could certainly go on. Of course, even when the movement begins to take wider notice of these traditions, we will have to face yet another challenge of finding ways to integrate these voices into the movement without tokenizing their traditions. For instance, many would protest the structure of a panel in which a Catholic priest represented “the Christian perspective,” yet similar protests are not made when single voices are asked to represent more marginalized traditions as a whole. We will also need to broaden our traditional paradigm of what constitutes a religious tradition. Many traditions, for example, do not have houses of worship or religious leaders as one would conceive of them when using an Abrahamic religious paradigm; thus, such voices are automatically precluded from participating on an interfaith panel of “official” religious leaders, a structure that often appears at interfaith conferences and events. Ultimately, I think that starting this kind of conversation is necessary to push the interfaith movement forward and continue to make “interfaith” a label that truly encompasses practitioners of all traditions and successfully creates a space for traditionally marginalized voices to play a more active role.