

What’s in a definition?



Photo by [Dollar Gill](#) on Unsplash

In 2018, newly minted national NDP leader Jagmeet Singh faced questions from reporters about his views of violence after videos surfaced of him at previous rallies supporting an independent Sikh homeland. In one video Singh was on a panel where a fellow panelist indicated that violence may be necessary for Sikhs to obtain their independence. When reporters pressed Singh about his views, Singh initially stated that the issue was too complex to answer with a simple response (Ballingall, 2018). But columnists continued to criticize his lack of “clarification,” although a CBC columnist hastened to add that the issue was not one of religion, but of politics (Urback, 2018). And therein was the problem.

The problem was the columnist’s definition of religion and the assumption that religion can so easily be separated from politics. Academics debate whether religion is an irreducible and unique phenomenon or a social construction. Some practitioners highlight belief while others emphasize practice. For some, religion is organized and experienced largely within institutions whereas others experience it as individual and experiential. The term “spiritual but not religious” is increasingly popular, although what people mean with the terms “spiritual” and “religious” is unclear.

Scholars who trace the history of the term “religion” claim that European colonizers took with them specific views of religion, in most cases modeled on Christianity. This had several implications: the Protestant elevation of belief became a defining and imposed characteristic of religion; religion came to be understood as interior and individual rather than communal; and institutional voices were prioritized.

CCRL The Centre for Civic Religious Literacy

CLRC Le centre de litt ratie religieuse civique

The institutional focus meant that “lived religion” received less attention, a form of religion typically engaged in by individuals who focus on practices, rituals, experience, mind, and body, and often practiced within everyday life. Some of these practitioners may prefer the term spirituality, although this term is equally ambiguous. For example, Overstreet (2010) interviewed undergraduate students at an American Catholic university who professed to be spiritual rather than religious but discovered that the students were redefining religion rather than rejecting it. Furthermore, given more recent foci on multiple identities and [intersectionality](#), an individual may have more than one religious and/or spiritual identity. This is in contrast to older understandings that conceived of an individual belonging to only one religious tradition at a time.

How a society defines religion matters. Most obviously, religions seen as “legitimate” often receive tax benefits while those believed to be illegitimate may be deemed as a cult, terrorist, or identified as holding views contrary to a society’s values. For example, those who self-identify as either religious or spiritual may apply their beliefs, actions, and/or rituals to all of life, viewing their beliefs and practices as comprehensive. Such adherents do not separate their religion or spirituality from politics and ethics, thereby pitting them against liberalism. Liberalism seeks a morally and religiously free public sphere by ensuring freedom of conscience and claiming not to advance any vision of the good life. Such visions are best left for individuals to practice in private life. But as some theorists claim, the elevation of the individual and of choice within liberalism is itself a vision of how people should live (e.g. Berger, 2018).

As important and comprehensive as religion might be for some of its adherents, others argue that religion rarely acts as an independent factor in explaining people’s actions (Hurd, 2015). Rather than seeing religion as unique and irreducible, these scholars see religion as embedded in all areas of life, including the social, political, aesthetic, biological, etc. Thus when religious people engage in life, and especially in conflict, religion may be only one among many motivating factors. Economic, social, and political realities are additional motivating factors and depending on the person and situation, may be more significant than religion. Scholars therefore advise us to avoid reducing people to their religious identities, to avoid a form of essentialism that ignores the totality of how people live their lives.

A columnist more aware of these complexities would not assume that a question about an independent state for Sikhs is merely a political question. Similarly, a humanist cannot separate their philosophy from the ethical question of how a society can best support the dignity of every human person. Worldviews, religious and non-religious, are often comprehensive, informing one’s economic, social, and political views. Questions regarding one’s views of violence are, and indeed must be, open to investigation. One of the roles of the media is to bring such views to the surface, especially those of our political leaders. But to think that complex questions like the ones posed to Singh have nothing to do with religion perpetuates the myth that religion is nothing more than private sentiment. The CCRL, with its focus on religious literacy, supports all Canadians in learning more about religious and non-religious worldviews, about definitions and why they matter, and about how we can better live together when we more thoroughly understand each other.

CCRL The Centre for Civic Religious Literacy

CLRC Le centre de litt ratie religieuse civique

- Ballingall, A. (2018). NDP leader Jagmeet Singh evades questions on Sikh political violence. *Toronto Star*, March 15.
<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/03/15/ndp-leader-jagmeet-singh-evades-questions-on-sikh-political-violence.html>
- Berger, B. L. (2018). Religious freedom in Canada: A crucible for constitutionalism. *Quaderni di Diritto e Politica Ecclesiastica*, 1. 111-125.
https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly_works/2748
- Hurd, E. S. (2015). *Beyond religious freedom: The new global politics of religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Overstreet, D. V. (2010). Spiritual vs. religious: Perspectives from today's undergraduate Catholics. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 14(2), 238-263.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1402062013>
- Urback, R. (2018). Jagmeet Singh keeps getting asked about Sikh extremism because he won't give an answer. *CBC News*. March 15. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/jagmeet-singh-1.4576838>



Written by: [Dr. Margie Patrick](#), CCRL Subject Matter Expert on Inclusion of religion and worldview in school curriculum