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**Mistaken Identities:  
*Creed, Country, Color, Culture***

Kwame Anthony Appiah  
***Reith Lectures 2016***

**Lecture 1: Creed, London**

**SUE LAWLEY:** Hello and welcome to the 2016 Reith Lectures. We begin the series at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It was founded in 1895 for the “betterment of society” and boasts President Kennedy and Mick Jagger among its alumni.

The subject of our lectures this year is Identity. What is it that makes us who we are? Our country, our colour, our religion or our culture? Is it none or is it all of these things?

Tackling these questions is a philosopher who’s written extensively on subjects such as ethics, honour and cosmopolitanism. He’s also, by the way, written a handful of highly entertaining detective novels.

His parents made headlines when they married here in 1953. Theirs was said to be the first inter-racial society wedding and an inspiration for the film ‘*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*’. His mother was the daughter of Sir Stafford Cripps, the post-war Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his father was an independence activist for what was then called the Gold Coast, now Ghana.

His own marriage also made a small piece of social history when four years ago he married his long-term partner within days of same-sex marriage being recognised by the state of New York.

So - born in the UK, a childhood spent living in Ghana, back and forth to boarding school here in England, onto Cambridge, a teacher at some of the world's top universities - Yale, Cornell and Harvard – and now Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University.

Here, then, is a man who's successfully crossed so many different boundaries, someone *qualified* to opine on the nature of identity in all its forms.

Ladies and gentlemen, to deliver the first of four lectures under the title of *Mistaken Identities*, please welcome the BBC 2016 Reith Lecturer Kwame Anthony Appiah.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Thank you, thank you very much.

Often over the years, London taxi drivers, wondering about the combination of my accent and my appearance, have often asked me where I was born. And I've told them: "Here in London." But that wasn't what they usually wanted to know. What they meant to ask me was where my family came from "originally." Some guessed from the way I look that I came from South Asia; that I was merely *pretending* not to understand them when they addressed me in Hindi! (*laughter*)

Prodded further, I'd have had to answer that I come from two families in two places pretty far apart. My mother grew up on the edge of the Cotswold Hills, in a tiny village on the border of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

When she met my father, she was working in London at an organization called Racial Unity, dedicated to promoting racial harmony throughout Britain and her empire. You could say that her principles were put into practice, because my father was a law student from the Gold Coast. He was an anti-colonial activist, the President of the West African Students' Union, and a representative in Britain in those days of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who was to lead Ghana to independence.

So the other side of my family came from Ghana: more precisely from the region of Ashanti. My father's lineage, as he taught us, could be traced back to Akroma-Ampim, an eighteenth-century general whose military successes had won him a great tract of land on the edge of the Ashanti kingdom. His name is one of the names my parents gave me; and my father raised us with stories of his family. There's a wrinkle here: My mother's people traced family through fathers, my father's through mothers: So I could have told those taxi drivers,

then, that I really had no family at all. Naturally, of course, I've been embraced and absorbed by both.

Well I begin with family stories because I want, in these lectures, to explore the ways in which stories like these shape who and what we are. Your sense of self is shaped by your family, but also by affiliations that spread out from there, like your nationality, gender, class, race, and religion.

Nowadays, we talk of these affiliations as matters of "identity." That's historically a rather recent use of that term, though. When George Eliot writes in *Middlemarch* that Rosamond "was almost losing the sense of her identity," it's because her sense of self has been shaken by the revelation that the man she thinks she loves is hopelessly devoted to somebody else. So identity here is utterly personal. The identities we often think of today, on the other hand, are shared, sometimes with millions or billions of others. So they're social.

I'm not going to try to explain why identity talk has exploded through my lifetime, though I agree that's a fascinating question. Instead, I've set myself the task in these lectures of trying to challenge some of our settled assumptions about how identity works. Each of my four lectures focuses on one species of the phenomenon: next time, in Glasgow, I'll be talking about *country*; after that, in Accra and in New York, I'll be taking on *color* and *culture*. But today, here in London, I'm going to start with *creed*, because religious identities so often connect us with some of the very oldest stories that we have.

When my parents got married in the 1950s, they were warned that their "mixed marriage" was going to be difficult. And my parents agreed—because, you see, my father was a Methodist and my mother an Anglican. (*laughter*) They made a home together in Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, for the rest of their lives, but, true enough, they were always members of different churches. One reason their marriage worked, I think, was that they were each sustained by these slightly different variants of their faith. What some counted a burden, they counted a blessing.

And religion wasn't something they practiced only on Sundays: it infused their lives. In that way, it was like many other religious traditions over the millennia. Take Judaism, the oldest of our Abrahamic creeds. For thousands of years, everyday dietary and hygienic practices; rituals, public and private; and forms of dress have played a central role in distinguishing a Jewish community from its neighbors. The Jews of Alexandria in the first century BCE looked different from their neighbors because of their hair and their beards, the clothes they wore; because of the foods they ate, the way they prayed, the scriptures they held holy. But of the things that set them apart, which were matters of custom and which were matters of creed? They would have been hard pressed to say. Pulling religion out of all this to articulate a notion of Judaism as distinct from what we would now call their Jewish identity would not have made much sense to them or to their neighbors.

As the Reconstructionist theologian Mordecai Kaplan once put it, Judaism is the folk religion of the Jewish people. And the notion here that identity might precede doctrine is for many people a startling one. There's a reason why we refer to religious identities with words like "faith," "confession," or, indeed, "credo," from the Latin word for "I believe." It's that we've been taught to think of religion principally as a matter of beliefs.

Now I want to argue that this simple idea is deeply misleading, in ways that can make understanding between religions seem both harder and easier than it really is. I want to persuade you that religion is *not*, in the first instance, a matter of belief.

Every religion has three dimensions: there's what you do—call that practice. There's who you do it with—call that community, or fellowship. And, yes, there's a body of beliefs. The trouble is that we tend to emphasize the details of belief over the shared practices and the communities that buttress religious life. We all know the word "orthodoxy": it comes from a Greek word that means correct belief. But there's a less familiar word, "orthopraxy" which comes from another Greek word, *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*), which means action. So orthopraxy is a matter not of *believing* right but of *acting* right.

So consider again our Alexandrian Jews. Philo of Alexandria, an eminent Jewish philosopher of the time, discusses atheism. True, he was against it. But he was plainly contesting a position that was tempting some in his own community. So already, more than two thousand years ago, it was possible to belong to that community without believing in God.

We can approach the matter from the other direction. Maimonides, the greatest of the medieval Torah scholars, decocted the essence of Judaism into Thirteen Principles: tenets such as the "the unity of God," the existence of prophesy, and the divine origins of the Torah. Suppose you sat by yourself in your study and persuaded yourself of these principles. You would not thereby become Jewish. These abstract beliefs mean very little if you lack a direct relationship to traditions of practice, conventions of interpretation, and communities of worship.

What's easy to miss is that even an avowal of faith is a performance as much as it is a proposition. I think of Gore Vidal's wonderful novel about the last of the pagan Roman emperors, Julian the Apostate, and his line in that book about temple priests reciting verses by rote in an ancient language that everyone has long since forgotten, including the priests. Would that have rendered the rites meaningless? I don't think so. Many of us have witnessed the power of ceremonies in a language we do not understand. The gravity of the Jewish Kaddish, the prayer pronounced at funerals and memorials, may even be heightened by the fact that this prayer is in Aramaic, a language that modern

congregants mostly don't understand. The things we do together, in fellowship, are at the core of religious experience.

If we distort the nature of religious identity by a fixation on faith, this fallacy is entwined with another: that I'll call scriptural determinism. Often, we're told that our religious beliefs repose in our sacred texts—so that to be a believer is to believe what's in the scriptures. As if one could decant from them, like wine from a pitcher, the unchanging nature of a religion and its adherents.

To evaluate claims like these, it helps to recall what scriptures are actually like. So let me take, more or less at random, a passage near the beginning of Isaiah. See if you can understand it. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider." (Isaiah 1:3.) Much of scripture is written in language like this that is poetical, metaphorical, or simply obscure. Much consists of narratives, some, like the parables told by Jesus, overtly fictional. Scripture, in short, requires interpretation.

Thinking back again to our Alexandrian Jews, let's turn to something that looks altogether cut and dried: kashrut, the dietary codes that spell out what's kosher and what's unclean. This would seem to be the ultimate case of "Read the manual, stupid." (*laughter*) The relevant passages from the Torah are either specific rules or even more specific lists of foods. For example, the fish you eat must have scales: okay check. But what about fish that have *weird* scales, like sturgeon? Rabbinic authorities disagree. The Torah helpfully lists the specific birds it forbids. But they aren't unfortunately given the names you will find in a Bird Identifier from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. One bird name translates as "vomiting." (*laughter*) We think that's a pelican, but we're not sure. Another bird's name means "purple." A flamingo perhaps? Perhaps a purple swamp hen? Nobody really knows. Then there's the prohibition on the *anaqah* (אַנְקָה), which means *groaners* or *moaners*. Some think these are geckos. Others say ferrets.

This is in a way the most straightforward part of the five books of Moses, and it's a blizzard of uncertainties. We want the clarity of "Eat This, Not That." Instead, we could be explicating a symbolist poem.

And frequently the stakes are greater than whether sturgeon will be on the menu. In the New Testament, for example, St. Paul uses the word ἀρσενοκοῖται (*arsenokoitai*) twice in a list of wrongdoers. Translators have tended recently to treat ἀρσενοκοῖται as a word for homosexuals, and if you are hostile to homosexuality, you'll take this as proof that St. Paul endorses this modern view. But the scholarly tradition is divided on this, for reasons that most Christians don't know ... beginning with the fact that this word is not known in Greek before St. Paul and these two passages are not cited by the early fathers of the church on the rare occasions when they discuss sexual relations between

men. The condemnation of homosexuality, in other words, reflects the power of everyday traditions of sentiment: it helps interpret the text, it isn't simply derived from it.

The priests and the scholars often want to insist that doctrine, which they are, after all, the masters of, drives practice. So it's easy to ignore the reverse process, the way doctrine is often *driven* by practice —by forms of worship, familiar feelings, traditions of social regulation. Practice changes, of course, over time, sometimes slowly, sometimes swiftly. And changed practice can lead to changed belief. Scriptural passages can get new interpretations. And if they can't adapt, they're often abandoned. That passage in the Psalms about how blessed you will be if you dash Babylonian babies on the rocks; the passage in First Peter about how slaves should submit themselves to their masters, however cruel—these we can usefully look away from. St. Paul's powerful move was to hold on to the Jewish scriptures while instructing the followers of Christ that they could ignore large parts of them because they were only binding on the Jews. In short, if scriptures were not subject to interpretation—and thus to re-interpretation—they wouldn't continue to guide people over long centuries. When it comes to their survival, their openness is not a bug but a feature. A burden, perhaps, but also a blessing.

This feature cuts in various directions. Because among the most vehement of the scriptural determinists are *fundamentalists*, consumed with dragging others into a single version of one of the great religious traditions. These movements—whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, or Muslim, or anything else—all aim to defend and promulgate the One True Way, imagined as the way things were understood in the earliest days when the Truth was first revealed. The movements have something else in common: though they venerate the old, they're all *new*, being reactions to the modern world. The great paradox of fundamentalism is that it relies on precisely what it repudiates: interpretive latitude. Today, many Iranian Shi'ites believe that the *ulama*, the recognized Muslim scholars, should hold ultimate political power; and despite the fact that this tenet is new in Shia tradition, they claim that this has always been true, and that every Muslim should accept it. Others around the world believe that all truth is with the Dalai Lama or the Pope or the pastor of some independent church in Brazil or in Kenya. And yet whether the label you are claiming is Islam or Buddhism or Christianity, sincere committed people who have also claimed that label have believed other things. Fundamentalists insist that those people weren't *really* Muslims or really Buddhists or Christians. In their view most of the people who have affirmed these labels were simply mistaken ... so they don't apply to most of the people who have claimed them, though they have claimed them in all sincerity.

Once you recognize these perplexities, some of the things people regularly say about religious identities should appear in a new light. For example: the place of women in Islam. You often hear an argument that goes like this.

The Qur'an has passages that clearly treat women as inferior to men. Take the Surah (4: 11) that says that men should inherit twice the portion of women, or the Surah (2: 282) that says that the evidence of two women in a dispute over a commercial contract can replace the evidence of one man, or the lines (4:34) that say "men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other." These passages show that Islamic societies are bound to continue to treat men as superior to women.

Well, that's how it goes. And scriptural determinism of this kind, you'll notice, is mobilized both by outsiders to indict Islam and by insiders to defend practices they favor. Now let's put aside the fact that this argument ignores lots of other relevant evidence, such as the fact that Pakistan and Bangladesh, countries where Islam is the state religion, have had women prime ministers, and have a larger percentage of women in their legislatures than does the United States. Gender inequality certainly remains the norm there, as almost everywhere else in the world. But notice that this scriptural argument could be met with parallel arguments about Judaism or for Christianity. "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord," St. Paul says in Ephesians. In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century, based on a reading of the Bible and a study of religious traditions, I don't think anybody would have predicted that, by the end of that century, there would be either women rabbis or women Anglican bishops.

And yet the first woman was ordained as a rabbi in Offenbach-am-Main in 1935. Her name was Regina Jonas and she died in Auschwitz. In the United States, where I live, there are women rabbis in each of the major branches of Judaism, including among the Orthodox. The senior bishop of the American branch of the Anglican Church has been a woman: the primate. The fact is that religious communities shift their views about gender over and over again.

Scriptures survive, then, in part precisely because they aren't just lists of beliefs or instructions on how to live. But even religious documents that *are* lists of beliefs and instructions require interpretation ... as I learned from my Anglican mother. When she was preparing for confirmation, she mentioned to her father that she was having difficulty with some of the Thirty Nine Articles of faith that the Anglican Church has affirmed since the reign of Elizabeth the First. "Well," grandfather said, "I have a friend who can help you with that." That friend was William Temple, who was soon to be Archbishop of Canterbury. As my mother went through the articles with him, every time she said that something was difficult to believe, the Archbishop agreed with her. (*laughter*) "Yes, that *is* hard to believe," he would say. So she decided that if you could be an Archbishop with these doubts, you could surely be an ordinary Anglican, so she was confirmed. (2776)

*[World Service break here]*

What I am seeking to show is that the story of sacred and ecclesiastical texts is the story of their readers: of shifting and often clashing interpretations. There are many more cases one could mention: the disputes over whether the Qur'an requires women to cover their faces in public places; the attitudes of different Christian denominations to gay sex and marriage and to women's role as priests; debates within modern Hindu communities about the proper way to think about sex and sexuality.

Some Buddhists don't think female monks ever outrank a male, but Buddhism has traditions of holy women going back to its beginnings. In the Buddhist *Vimalakirti Sutra*, some two millennia old, a goddess changes Shariputra, one of the Buddha's original male disciples, into a goddess, into a woman. Then she says to him:

Shariputra, who is not a woman, appears in a woman's body. And the same is true of all *women*—though they appear in women's bodies, they are not women. Therefore the Buddha teaches that all phenomena are neither male nor female.

The same St Paul who says women should cover their heads in church and men shouldn't told the Galatians: "there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." And the Qur'an stresses, in a famous Surah (33:35), that the rewards of submission to Allah are there for both women and men, in a passage that is often cited to stress the fundamental equality of the sexes. So these traditions do not speak with a single voice. To have mastery of the scriptures is to know which passages to read *into* and which to read *past*.

When it comes to interpretation, we can always consult context. When St. Paul says women should keep their heads covered in church, it's reasonable to wonder what the customs of dress were in Corinth in his day, since he was addressing the Corinthians. If it turns out that no respectable woman in that Roman city would have gone around with her head uncovered, you could conclude, as my mother did, that you should dress respectably by local standards when you are in church. And that meant the standards of Kumasi, where she went to church, not of Filkins, the village where she grew up, let alone of first century Corinth.

The same applies even to capital offences. The Torah says adulterers must be stoned to death. Jewish law required that death sentences should go to the Sanhedrin, a rabbinical court of appeal in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the first century, with the destruction of the temple, the Sanhedrin ceased to exist. So some rabbis said: No Sanhedrin, no stoning. For Christians, there's the story in St. John's Gospel, in which Jesus, when asked if it was permissible to stone a woman "taken in adultery," told the Pharisees that one of them who was without sin should "cast the first stone." When none of them was willing to condemn her, Jesus said he wouldn't condemn her either.



An episode like this does not carry its meaning, so to speak, on its face. Nowhere in this account, for example, does Christ actually reject the Mosaic Law. Could have said “I reject the law.” Indeed, in the Sermon on the Mount, he actually says that he has come to “fulfill the Law,” not to destroy it. What does this mean? Well interpreting what Jesus says takes Christians back to the Torah and forward to St. Paul. It’s natural to think that, like some of the other rabbis in first century Palestine, Jesus doesn’t have much sympathy with capital punishment, at least for adultery. And one might venture the same actually about Muhammad, since the Qur’an requires four witnesses to convict a woman of adultery (and penalizes anyone who makes an accusation without producing them). Given the character of the offense, that’s a rather high bar. (*laughter*)

All of us are conscious today of interpretations of Islam that are wielded in support of violence against Muslims and non-Muslims; that incite terrorism and murder and destruction. And you can, indeed, find sources in Muslim tradition that sustain these ideas, because you can find such sources in all the great religious traditions. The notion that because some Muslim texts speak of warfare, Muslims must be engaged in endless bloodshed is no more sensible than the same claim made for any other religious tradition. You might as well argue that because there is a popular Christian hymn that begins, “Onward Christian soldiers,” Christians must be against peace. When critics of fundamentalism say a religious identity requires a fixed set of beliefs or some fixed reading of its scriptures, they themselves have fallen for the fundamentalists’ fallacy.

These phantom fixities will not help Muslims in this country or their non-Muslim neighbors as they seek together successful forms of cohabitation. In ways largely unknown to the traditional ulama who shaped Islamic ideas about politics, British Muslims are living through a modern experiment. Like the Muslims of much of Europe and North America, they have chosen to settle permanently in non-Muslim lands. Questions of gender, in this new setting, will be only part of the challenge. In meeting it, the recognition that identity endures through change—indeed, that it only endures by change—will be a useful touchstone for everyone involved. Religious identities, like all identities, as we shall see in the next three lectures, are transformed through history: that is how they survive.

Several weeks ago, in a faraway Ghanaian village, far away from here, I found myself in the company of various local chiefs doing as we Ashantis do: pouring libations to our ancestors. One was to the founder of my father’s lineage, the great warrior Akroma-Ampim. *Nana Akroma-Ampim, begye nsa nom*: Grandfather Akroma-Ampim, come take this alcohol to drink, I said. Another was to my own father: *Papa Joe, begye nsa nom*.

Among the Ashanti, your ancestors are spirits who can help or hinder you, and you supply them with food and drink out of prudence as well as out of

the fullness of your heart. Doing so is a part of daily life, because daily life is where you interact with spiritual beings. Nobody is warned against faltering in their faith; because nobody is very much tempted by infidelity. And these practices are taken by most people (Ashanti Catholic bishops and imams included!) to be perfectly consistent with having other confessional allegiances, with being Muslim or Christian.

That was certainly true of my own father. He was an elder of the Wesley Methodist Cathedral in Kumasi. But his Methodism had to live with the fact that he was also an Ashanti. And so whenever my father opened a bottle of spirits, which was splendidly often (*laughter*), he poured out the first drops in a libation to his ancestors, and asked them to watch over the family; as an Italian Catholic might call on Mary, mother of God, or an Indian Muslim might call on a Sufi saint at a shrine. The missionaries who converted my grandfather might have complained that this was a reversion to idolatry, but this complaint would have been regarded by my father and my grandfather as absurd. Philo of Alexandria, expounding Exodus, had some well-judged counsel for them: to be loyal to your god, he said, you need not revile the gods of others. And so there I was, in my father's ancestral village, pouring those libations—a practice embedded within a spirit of community and fellowship.

So here's one thing we can agree with the fundamentalists about: Our ancestors *are* powerful, though not in the ways the fundamentalists imagine. For none of us creates the world we inhabit from scratch; none of us crafts our values and commitments save in dialogue, or debate, with the past.

Dialogue is not determinism, though. Once you think of creedal identities in terms of mutable practices and communities rather than sets of immutable beliefs, religion becomes more verb than noun: the identity is revealed as an activity not a thing. And it's the nature of activities to bring change. Our ancestors, as I say, *are* powerful then. They grip us in ways we scarcely realize. But pouring those libations, I found myself reflecting that in the ethical realm—whether civic or religious—we have to recognize that one day we, too, shall be ancestors. That we do not merely follow traditions; we create them. Count that a burden, and a blessing. Thank you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**SUE LAWLEY:** Many thanks indeed, Professor Appiah. Much meat to get our teeth into there. Let's see what our audience thinks about it. Actually I'm going to pounce on our first questioner because she's tweeted before now that she's 'always up for a polite chat about the big stuff'. (*Appiah laughs*) She is Elizabeth Oldfield and she's just over there. She's director of a think tank on religion and society. Elizabeth, have you got a question?

**ELIZABETH OLDFIELD:** I have. Thank you very much, Professor Appiah, for your lecture. I have to say I take it as a bit of a given that the vast majority of religious believers don't think their faith is necessarily one thing and understand that sacred texts are open to, and indeed require, interpretation. I don't think many people would in fact actually argue with that. My question is doesn't everyone, every human being, religious or otherwise, crave if not certainty a sense that there's some basis for the things that they believe, and is that such a problem?

**SUE LAWLEY:** It's true, isn't it? We need something to hang our hats on. It's what gives us strength?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I draw on a philosophical tradition in which one of the central thoughts is the recognition of human fallibility, and I think that one of the ways in which we're fallible is that we seek for certainty in places where it's not to be found and where the correct attitude is one of not of disbelief, not of certainty that it's in the opposite direction, but of relatively relaxed convictions of one sort and another which we leave open for challenge and revision if new ideas, new stuff comes in. And I think there is a problem when people are so certain of things that in the nature of the case seem to be exactly the sort of things that someone who is committed to them should see are the sorts of things you shouldn't be certain about. Nothing is clearer, I think, than the difficulty of coming to the truth about theological questions, for example. Everybody in the world agrees that most people in the world have incorrect religious beliefs.  
*(laughter)*

**SUE LAWLEY:** Elizabeth, come back on that.

**ELIZABETH OLDFIELD:** Yes I'm always nervous when we try and make conviction itself something to be nervous of. Isn't the proper test not how strong someone's belief is, but the fruit of it: does it serve or hinder the common good?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** For me the ultimate test for belief is do you have grounds for thinking that it's true ...believe what you have grounds for thinking is true and you should disbelieve what you have grounds for thinking is false. But in this area, in the area of religious belief, I think it's very hard to say what's true. I think that most reasonable believers think it's really hard to figure out what the truth is about these things that they feel very strongly about.

**SUE LAWLEY:** But Catholicism, if you like, keeps its believers closer because it has great certainties, doesn't it – no to abortion, no to women priests, no to contraception?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Except the vast majority, for example, of American Catholics who still identify as Catholic reject the church's teaching on many of these topics.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Who wants to come in on this?

**GILES FRASER:** My name is Giles Fraser. I'm a priest in London. I'm also a canon of a cathedral in Sefwi-Wiawso in Ghana ...

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Oh great.

**GILES FRASER:** ... so I know a little bit about both of the places you come from. I think you played a trick with us tonight, and one of the tricks that you played is that you wanted us to historicise religious understanding of the scriptures but what you weren't prepare to acknowledge is that religions themselves have had varying and historically changing understandings of those scriptures from ... they've not always been fundamentalist from sort of the mid rash of the second century all the way through, and that you presented religion as having a very 20<sup>th</sup> century fundamentalist approach to scriptures which was actually a dehistoricised understanding of how religions actually understand their scriptures. If you were going to be generous to religions, you would accept the fact that actually they've agreed with you over time quite a great deal.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** The criticisms I was making on that front were criticisms of fundamentalism which identify it as a modern phenomenon, so I don't think of myself as having committed myself to the view – which I don't hold – that I think it's precisely the historical character of interpretation, precisely the fact, as I said, that religious identities have survived in large measure, precisely because texts have been reinterpreted and understood to be reinterpreted by many of the most enduring and flexible traditions, so I don't want to deny that at all. That's really what the fundamentalists misunderstand. They misunderstand the fact that the traditions that they're trying to box in in this way have long, sophisticated bodies of practice in relation to interpretation. Think, just in the case of Islam, think about how much the development of sharia is like the development of something like the English common law because it's a legal system and it develops in response to the challenges in particular communities of trying to solve particular problems. And that's why, like the common law, it's extremely difficult to extract from it some stuff you can take across contexts very easily.

**SUE LAWLEY:** I'm going to interrupt you and go to a question I've got at the back there. Yes?

**ANDREW BROWN:** My name's Andrew Brown. I write about religion, mostly because I don't understand it. *(laughter)* There are some things that only work because people believe in them. I mean money's the best example. Isn't religion another one of these? If people don't believe the truths to which religious practices give them access are eternal, unchanging and supremely important, they're not going to bother? But you've shown that religions are contingent, they're changing, and that they have to be in order to survive, so how do you stick these two understandings together?

**SUE LAWLEY:** It's a contradiction.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Yes, but it's not *my* contradiction. *(laughter/applause)* Well look, I think that let's say cosmopolitan, fallibilist interpretations of the traditions have been available in all the major traditions pretty much all along. It has rightly been said that the history of faith is the history of doubt. The earliest fathers already deal with the possibility that they're wrong about things, and they were pretty serious about their Christianity, the early fathers of the church, but that didn't require them to deny that they had doubts, it didn't require them to think that they were in touch with the whole truth. Look if the whole truth is available, love to be given it, but the human situation I think is that it's very hard to figure out what the whole truth is, so a little bit of modesty about what you yourself know I think is natural.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Somebody aching to pick you up on this here. Yeah?

**CHRISTINA REES:** Yes my name is Christina Rees and I've been an activist in the Church of England for women's equality and women's ordination. My question is following on some of what you're saying right now: it's about truth. You've talked about different traditions, the Abrahamic faiths, and you've explained to us how everything goes into our actions, our lives, what we do, who we do it with. What I'd really like to ask you is that above and beyond the truths that may be contained in these three major faiths you've been discussing, do you think there is one truth, there has to be one truth because if there isn't one truth in which everything everyone believes in makes sense then nothing is true? So is there a truth beyond the religions you've been discussing that either incorporates them or is something other?

**SUE LAWLEY:** Well there's a nice, easy question.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** So that's a nice, easy question.

*(laughter)* I mean the short ... I'll tell you what I think about this, but this is a complicated question in metaphysics and epistemology, which is supposed to be one of my businesses. *(laughter)* My own view is that once you've got a system of representation, once you've got a way of talking, then you can say true things and false things in that way of talking and that that can be true about sentences where you have no idea which it is. It can be very hard to figure out what the truth is even if you think you're clear about what the claim is. So yes, I think there are truths about all the things that I can understand that religious traditions say. I also think that they tend to be the kinds of things that is awfully hard to come across the truth about and that's why I favour a sense of modesty in the face of that difficulty. Put it this way: I think reasonable people can come to a very wide range of different pictures of the world. I like the formulation of this that Sir Richard Burton, the 19<sup>th</sup> century traveller, first Christian I think to get into Mecca because he was able to pass for a Pashtun, he said "Truth is the shattered mirror strown in myriad bits, while each believes his little piece the whole to own".

**SUE LAWLEY:** A reminder that you're listening to The Reith Lectures on Radio Four. I'm Sue Lawley. A question at the back there. Yuh?

**MICHAEL AMOAH:** My name's Michael Amoah. I'm from SOAS. I'm also from Ghana, by the way.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Excellent.

**MICHAEL AMOAH:** It's interesting that the title for this talk is *Mistaken Identities* and you talked about orthodoxy that's the right doctrine as well as orthopraxy - that's doing right. It's also interesting that you did say that you actually talked to your ancestors – you poured libation, you spoke to them – and I mean these are deities and we know that deities when you talk to them, they also talk back to you. I just wondered if you've perceived in any of the interactions between you and the deities that you've poured libation to, that perhaps they might be suggesting that in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that it's usually male and female that marry and that perhaps maybe you haven't perceived that the orthopraxy of your own personal life is not actually the orthodoxy which the deities might be suggesting to you?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Well my ancestors mostly didn't declare themselves on the question that you're raising (*laughter/applause*) because they didn't have a conception of homosexuality. They didn't think about homosexuality because they didn't think of sexuality in the way we moderns have come to do and so they couldn't have had an attitude towards it because to have an attitude towards a thing, you have to have the concept of a thing of that kind. So I think here is a case where there's perfect freedom to do what you like with the ancestors' views since they're empty. (*laughter*) I will say though that one of the things that strikes me about modern expressions of hostility to homosexuality both from often Wahhabi inspired Islam and from American evangelical inspired Christianity, that these seem to me actually very good examples of things that have come in recently from the outside and that on the whole, though it's hard to generalise about thousands of cultures and that's what you're talking about in Africa, on the whole it looks historically as though there was either very little interest in this kind of orthopraxy in relation to these things, in relation to gender and sex, but also that in some places there were attitudes that were quite relaxed. There isn't a general answer to the question how traditional Africans regarded sex between men or sex between women because there are lots of different answers depending on the different cases. Sir Richard Burton, whom I mentioned, had a friend called John Hanning Speke who visited one of the kabakas of Buganda who Speke observed - and Speke was shocked by this as a Victorian Englishman - seemed to be having sex with his pages, the young men around the court. Now people around the court didn't necessarily approve of this, but the fact is there it was – he was the King and that's what he was doing. So I think there's a very wide range of practice/praxis in relation to matters of sexuality in the thousands and thousands of traditions of Africa, but among my own ancestors I'd say there's very little evidence that they had any view at all until Christians came along. And even after Christians came along, they only developed a substantial view – more recently under pressure from evangelical Christianity from ... mostly from the country of which I'm now a citizen. (*laughter*)

**SUE LAWLEY:** I see a former Reith Lecturer, Grayson Perry himself, who's also a bit of an expert on certain kinds of identity. Hello Grayson.

**GRAYSON PERRY:** Yes we're talking about religious identities and I wondered if atheists and secular people, whether they've got a hole, and I wondered what kind of things do you think fill that hole where they haven't got sort of religious belief and that culture? What kind of things are filling that hole for those people?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Well one thought you might have if you believe, with me, that belief isn't so central at least in all of religious life is that you could take up the community side of religion, you could take up the doings.

**GRAYSON PERRY:** But I wondered what non-religious things fill the hole for people. It wasn't that really. What I was interested in is what kind of things do you think atheists and secular people fill that hole somehow that I think we all kind of have in a way for community and identity?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I'm sceptical about the existence of the hole. *(laughter)*

**GRAYSON PERRY:** Okay, that's a good answer.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** That is to say I know lots of perfectly happy atheists who have lots of complicated views about lots of things and lots of commitments, but I'm not sure they would say that those commitments are filling a hole left by God.

**GRAYSON PERRY:** Yeah.

**SUE LAWLEY:** I've got a lot of people with their hands up, so I'm going to try and go a bit more quickly if we can. Yes?

**SHAHIDHA BARI:** I'm Shahidha Bari. I'm a lecturer at Queen Mary University of London. If we are to understand religion as a process, going into the future how do we ensure that women are at the vanguard of it rather than the victims of it, as they have been for so long?



**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** My guess is that the answer to that is not going to be an across the board answer. We have to figure out within each of the faith traditions, women and men together have to figure out how to move in a direction that makes it possible for everybody in the community to be enthusiastic about the place in the universe given to them in the religious understanding of that community. This has happened in communities where it wasn't true in the past, as I said. We now have women rabbis. There have been women priests in the Anglican communion for a while and there have been women primates now in the Anglican communion. Identities are ... People think of them as kind of trapping us and fixing us, but actually we are always free to move in the light of our best understandings away from the features of our identities that are dangerous. And clearly that's what needs to be done in the case of gender not just for religious traditions, but in all of our practices we're still woefully far from having reached proper gender equality.

**SUE LAWLEY:** But you seemed to be suggesting at one point in your lecture that there was a possibility that in Islam women could one day – we know not when – earn greater respect, earn greater regard. There was a footnote actually to your lecture which the listeners haven't heard because it's a footnote ...

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Yes.

**SUE LAWLEY:** ... but you talked there about the Prophet and the influence of women and his wives .... And that this could be interpreted by Islam as reasons for giving ...

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** (*over*) Yes what I think is that there are the materials in this tradition, as in any tradition, for a person with the right attitudes to take the materials ...not to stamp on the scripture, but to take it and to read (in the case of Islam) both the Qur'an and the surrounding materials, which include Hadith and stories of the Prophet's life, and out of them to build a very different view. The Prophet's first wife was a businesswoman who was older than he was. That doesn't sound like the behaviour of a man who thought that women didn't matter.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Dr Bari just wants to come back on that.

**SHAHIDHA BARI:** If you have a history of injury, by which I mean if you've lived in a faith that has caused you ... has been injurious to you, then it's not enough to say I think that just religion is a process. I think there has to be some sort of compensation... How do we reconcile people to faith as a process if they've been injured by their faith in particular ways – women in particular?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Well I mean that's a challenge for the leadership of the traditions that we're talking about. I'm not a leader of one those traditions and I urge it on them. I mean I urge ... that is I urge on them the recognition of this challenge – that however you think about what your tradition requires of you, it is also true, as I mentioned, that we've had Muslim women lead countries now. That's a very important fact and I think that any Muslim who's thinking about the place of women in public life, for example, has to take into account that we've now got this other form of experience. We have this other form of experience. The President of the Supreme Court Bar in Pakistan has been a woman, right, and Pakistan is constitutionally a Muslim country. So I think you need to build on the things that are already there, to move in the right direction. And my only point is there's always something there to work with. It's never the case that the tradition rules out an interpretation that can move you in a new direction.

**SUE LAWLEY:** I'm going to see if I can go a little bit faster. There, okay.

**DEMOLASH OMAKUN.** Hi, my name's Demolash Omakun. Brilliant lecture, thank you very much. I was wondering what role you think choice makes in all of this? One of the scriptures you use is obviously one where St. Paul says you know "Woman, submit your wives ... submit yourselves to your husbands" but actually the verse preceding that says "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church that he gave his life for it", so of course the church chose to focus on one and ignoring the other for a long time. So I wonder how much of choice actually plays in what plays out in religious practices? But also a follow up to that: if you had a choice ontologically, what three values would you actually ask of the world to hold onto, express and expound?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Well in a way the main thrust of these lectures will be that we have ...we always have choices; that identities are not a fate and that we have to figure out what to do with them. The question is who shall be master, as Lewis Carroll said? So I think we should be masters and mistresses of our identities rather than letting them master us. As for the identities that I think we should hold onto, I hope that that will be clear by the end of these lectures. *(laughter)*

**SUE LAWLEY:** Okay question?

**RABBI JANNER-KLAUSNER:** I'm Rabbi Janner-Klausner. You talked about fundamentalist fallacy and that lacks a fluidity and robustness of religion as a process. What experiences have you see unlock fundamentalism and open people to doubt and the possibility of change? Can we educate people in a way or open them or heal them or hurt them so that they can move possibly from one truth fallacy, as you call it, to doubt?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I'm not an expert on that, but we know that it happens. People who are raised in fundamentalist sects, communities, do escape. And I suspect that one of the reasons is that they find one way at least is that they find themselves injured by the ... by the practices or the rhetoric of the faith. I think many gay people have left many religious traditions for this reason. I think many women have either left or revised religious traditions for this reason.

**SUE LAWLEY:** I thought you wanted to come back on that?

**RABBI JANNER-KLAUSNER:** Well I wanted to ask if you can bring that about as an educator? What can ... what processes can we be involved in?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I'm a big believer in conversation across difference. I'm a big believer in that. But conversation (as I like to tell my students) is an activity that involves consenting adults, and some people don't want to talk to you and that means you can't talk them out of anything. So there are people who are unavailable to us because they don't want a conversation. But I would like to be open to conversation who's open to conversation. I would like you to be open to ... You know I'd like those of us who are on the side of conversation and toleration and so on to be willing to talk to anybody.

**SUE LAWLEY:** (*over*) But how do you deal with people who won't converse? What do you say to them?

**APPIAH:** If people won't converse, you can't say anything to them.  
(*laughs*)

**SUE LAWLEY:** Yes *you* can. They may not say anything back, but ...

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Well they may not say anything back. I mean I invite them in and I tell them that I'm ... Look in this sort of context, you talk a lot, but actually I'm quite a good listener too (*laughter*) and I would say to someone who had views like this, I really am interested in talking ... in understanding where you're coming from, so I'll shut up for a while. You tell me some stuff and I'll think about that.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Question up there?

**ANDREA IZLASS??** My name is Andrea Izlass (ph) and I was your student at New York University last year.

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Hello.

**ANDREA IZLASS??** So I want to ask: religion is such a polarising element in societies around the world today, but if religion is not just a body of beliefs but a matter of daily practice in our community with specific behaviours, can we still speak of religion at all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or should we rather speak simply of communities in public and political life? And would this make a difference?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I'm tempted by your proposal. *(laughter)* That is to say, I have sometimes felt that the right thing to do was to get people to stop using the word 'religion' and to start focusing on the people that they're interacting with and to not use the concept of religion to understand them. And one reason I think that might be useful is because actually I believe that the way in which we talk about religion is really the result of the fact that theories of religion in the West were basically developed in order to answer the following question: what have they got instead of Christianity? That's basically what, if you look into the early anthropology of Christianity, if you look at the works of the first professor of anthropology at Oxford, Sir Edward Tylor and so on, basically he's interested in the question ..So he knows what he has and then he goes out and he meets some Amerindians or some Mexicans and he thinks well what do they have? Hello, I know you're a Mexican, so welcome. So I think ... And that's ... that's the sort of weird question because people, communities put things together in their own way and that's why it's so hard, I think, to parse out what's religious in some lives or others. It's actually hard to parse out even in the history of the West because we have over the last couple of centuries done a parsing out in which we separated out much of our religious thinking, for example, from our scientific thinking. Isaac Newton didn't have to separate out his scientific and his religious thinking. Isaac Newton spent more time working on interpreting the Book of Revelations than he did writing the Principia. He didn't think that there was a big tension between his physics and his Christianity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for various reasons, there was a kind of big division of intellectual labour that developed in which theologians and people did one sort of thing and philosophers and scientists did something else, and it got harder and harder, I think, to figure out what the relationship was supposed to be between these two ongoing discourses. In many places in the world, that hasn't happened, there isn't the same notion that you can sort of separate out religious stuff from non-religious stuff, and if that hasn't happened our understanding of religion isn't going to work.

**SUE LAWLEY:** But you're defining during the course of these lectures identity on the basis of the four things we've talked about, which is creed, colour, country, culture. I wonder if the conclusion that we've been coming to here this evening is that in many ways religion is perhaps the least relevant of those four things to identity; it's almost for many people an also-ran to all the others as to how we define ourselves?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I think that might be true in this room, though I wouldn't guarantee it, but in the world I don't think that's true. There'll be people all around the world who would be very sceptical of the claim that their religious identity wasn't pretty important to who they were.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Have you got an order for the importance of them in defining identity?

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** I have a theory according to which what the order is going to be will depend on who you are. *(laughter)*

**SUE LAWLEY:** There we must leave it.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

**SUE LAWLEY:** My apologies to all of those of you who had your hands up and we couldn't come to you, but thank you very much for being here. I want to just thank our hosts, the LSE. Do check out the Reith website where you'll find transcripts, audio and much more in the Reith Archives.

Next time we're in Glasgow where Anthony will be telling the Scots that nationality isn't as important as they may think. *(laughter)* We look forward to seeing how that one goes down. In the meantime our thanks to our Reith Lecturer 2016, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and goodbye.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)