


Knowledge and Religion: Evidence of the Sacred 3

Lesson 3: Listening Task

Focus: *Can religious knowledge be evaluated without shared definitions, agreed-upon evidence, or universal standards of truth?*

Objectives	Analyze Kwame Anthony Appiah's critique of how religion is defined and debated. Explore the cultural and historical differences in how religion, science, and knowledge interact. Use the video to generate new claims and counterclaims about the nature of religious knowledge and evaluation.
Steps	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Introduction (5 mins): Guiding Question: "Can religious knowledge be evaluated without universal definitions of religion, truth, and evidence?"2. Pre-listening Activity (5 mins):<ul style="list-style-type: none">Briefly recap the concepts of truth and evidence, and how they can be explored within the contexts of religion and science.Ask students to consider:<ul style="list-style-type: none">What do you think makes something a "religion"?Can religious knowledge be evaluated in the same way as scientific knowledge?Do different societies treat religious knowledge the same way?3. Listening:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students watch the video  Kwame Anthony Appiah: Is religion good or bad? (This is a trick ... and take notes on the speaker(s)' key arguments and counterarguments. In the interest of time, videos can be assigned as homework prior to the class discussion.During note-taking, students should analyze the strength of each argument presented, relating this to their previous research.Students may also find this article useful: Scepticism gets you only so far. Even nonbelievers need to have faith.<ul style="list-style-type: none">If necessary, students should seek additional sources to support their analysis.Key Points to Listen For (Slide 9):<ul style="list-style-type: none">What is Appiah's main argument about the concept of religion?How does he challenge traditional definitions of religion, especially those based on belief in God?What role did European colonialism play in how we define and categorize religion?What does Appiah say about the historical relationship between science and religion?How do we treat religious knowledge and truth?Note-Taking Framework (Slide 9):<ul style="list-style-type: none">Main arguments for defining religion: There is no single, universal definition of religion. What we call "religion" is a constructed category shaped by Christian colonial perspectives.

- Main arguments against: A broad enough definition (e.g., belief in something greater, ritual practice, moral guidance) could still apply across traditions and justify using “religion” as a general category.
- Science-Religion Divide argument: The separation of science and religion is a recent, Western phenomenon. In many cultures, religion still serves as the explanatory system for natural events.

4. Kialo Discussion (30 mins):

- In small groups, students create a **new** Kialo discussion around the guiding question "Can religious knowledge be evaluated without universal definitions of religion, truth, and evidence?".
- Alternatively, if students require more structure, clone and share [this ready-made discussion](#) based on the starter claims below, using the suggested pros and cons as prompts for students.
- Students should use their analysis to ensure they select the strongest arguments from the listening task.
- They should add these to the Kialo discussion as arguments, counterarguments, examples, and evaluations.
- Encourage students to refer to the concepts of evidence, truth, and certainty in their arguments.
- Key questions for note-taking:
 - What are the main arguments for and against defining religion?
 - How relevant is the science-religion divide? Which power structures perpetuate this divide?
 - What are the impacts of cultural relativism on how religion is defined across different societies?
 - What is the role of rituals and practices in supporting religious knowledge?

Example Claims:

Title: Can religious knowledge be evaluated without universal definitions of religion, truth, and evidence?

Thesis: Religious knowledge can be evaluated without universal definitions of religion, truth, and evidence.

Starter claim: We can evaluate religious knowledge by using overlapping features of religion.

- PRO: While definitions vary, most religions include some combination of belief, ritual, moral code, and cosmology.
- PRO: These common features allow for meaningful comparison.
 - Example: For example, Pew Research studies show common patterns across religions in moral guidance and belief in a higher purpose, suggesting the feasibility of general frameworks for evaluation.
- CON: Focusing on common features oversimplifies the depth and diversity of religious knowledge and risks marginalizing less conventional practices.
 - Example: For example, a focus on belief excludes non-theistic traditions like Buddhism or purely ritualistic forms of Judaism.

	<p>Starter claim: Knowledge in religion serves a different purpose than knowledge in science, so does not require universal definitions for evaluation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRO: Religious “truth” often aims at existential or spiritual meaning, not empirical accuracy. Evaluating it by scientific standards misses its purpose. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example: For example, the creation story in Genesis isn’t necessarily a scientific account, but a moral or metaphysical one. • CON: Without a shared understanding of truth, any belief could be labeled as “religious truth,” making critical engagement impossible. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example: For example, Flat Earth beliefs or faith-healing claims could be insulated from scrutiny under the guise of religious truth. <p>Starter claim: Religious knowledge is shaped by cultural context, which challenges the application of universal standards of truth and evidence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRO: What counts as “truth” or “evidence” varies significantly across cultures. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example 1: For example, ancestor worship may be accepted as a valid religious truth in one culture, yet dismissed as superstition in another. ◦ Example 2: For example, in traditional Chinese culture, rituals for ancestral spirits are expressions of spiritual continuity and moral obligation, deeply embedded in social values. • CON: If all religious truth is relative, meaningful dialogue or evaluation becomes impossible. • A complete rejection of shared standards can lead to moral relativism and epistemic conflict. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example: For example, clashing truth claims (e.g., exclusivist salvation doctrines) highlight the need for some common ground in evaluating religious knowledge. <p>Starter claim: Ritual and community can define religion independently of belief, which complicates how we assess the truth of religious knowledge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRO: Many people participate in religious life for cultural or communal reasons rather than theological belief. • PRO: This suggests that religious knowledge may reside more in practice than in propositional truth. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example: For example, secular Jews may follow kosher laws or attend synagogue without belief in God, valuing tradition and identity over metaphysical claims. • CON: Without sincere belief, religious rituals risk becoming empty gestures, making it harder to see them as sources of genuine knowledge. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Example: For example, in Islamic contexts, performing rituals without Iman (faith) may be viewed as hypocrisy, reducing the perceived authenticity of religious knowledge.
<p>Reflection</p>	<p>Whole-class discussion (10 mins)</p> <p>Example reflection questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stood out to you most in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s argument? Why? • Did this talk challenge how you define religion? How so? • What role does culture play in shaping what we accept as religious knowledge?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can something be “true” for one community and not another? Is that still knowledge? • What kinds of evidence do different cultures use to justify religious beliefs? • Do you think religious claims should be tested with empirical evidence? Why or why not? • If a belief is meaningful to someone but cannot be proven, is it still valid knowledge? • Can truth exist without a shared definition of what we’re discussing (such as “religion”)? • How does not having a single definition of religion affect our ability to discuss it as knowledge? • Should knowledge always require certainty? What does religion show us about uncertainty? • Is it possible to be confident in something without being certain? Does this apply to religion?
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson Slides • Debate video: ▶ Kwame Anthony Appiah: Is religion good or bad? (This is a trick question) • Supporting Article: Scepticism gets you only so far. Even nonbelievers need to have faith. • Kialo discussion: Can religious knowledge be evaluated without universal definitions of religion, truth, and evidence?
TOK Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence: How do different cultures use different kinds of evidence to support religious beliefs, and should religious claims be tested using scientific evidence? • Truth: How can we understand the difference between truth based on scientific evidence and truth based on personal belief or faith? • Certainty: Should knowledge always require certainty?
Critical Thinking Concepts	<p>Confronting Biases and Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying Perspective Bias: Students recognize how their own cultural or religious background shapes their assumptions about what “counts” as religion, religious truth, or valid belief systems. • Questioning Objectivity: Students examine whether the categories we use (e.g., “religion,” “belief,” “truth”) can ever be neutral, or whether they are always shaped by dominant cultural or historical narratives — particularly Western ones. • Challenging Authority Bias: Students reflect on how religious institutions, colonial histories, and Western academic frameworks have shaped global understandings of religion — often marginalizing or misrepresenting non-Western traditions. • <p>Exploring Contexts and Expert Opinions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power and Definitions of Religion: Students explore how definitions of religion have been historically influenced by colonial encounters, and how power structures determine what gets included or excluded from official lists of “world religions.”

- **Case Study Evaluation:** Using Appiah's examples (e.g., Asante rituals, Judaism, Buddhism), students examine how different societies construct religious knowledge, and how these systems challenge dominant Western paradigms.
- **Assessing Credibility:** Students evaluate whose perspectives are considered authoritative in defining religion — e.g., anthropologists, theologians, philosophers — and what biases or worldviews those perspectives carry.

Responsiveness and Flexibility of Thought:

- **Adapting Arguments:** Students revisit earlier assumptions (e.g., that all religions must involve a god or sacred text) and revise their views after encountering Appiah's arguments and cultural examples.
- **Weighing Contradictory Perspectives:** Students compare viewpoints that treat religion as a fixed, definable category with those that see it as fluid, contextual, and culturally constructed — and consider the implications for religious knowledge.
- **Recognizing the Role of Context:** Students reflect on how religion functions differently in societies where science and religion were never separated, and how these contexts challenge Western approaches to evidence and truth.

Extrapolation and Reapplication of Principles:

- **Applying Concepts to Global Contexts:** Students consider how Appiah's critique applies to real-world issues: interfaith misunderstandings, religious discrimination, or curriculum debates about world religions.
- **Transferable Skills:** Students develop the ability to critically assess how definitions, labels, and categories can obscure complex realities — not only in religion, but also in politics, identity, and ethics.