

Examiners' Report Summer 2007

GCE

GCE Religious Studies (8560)

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6581: Unit 1 - Foundations

Introduction

This was the first sitting of the AS examination from the new specification. Candidates had a shorter time to answer (35 minutes per question) and the examiners were impressed by the fact that most responded well - offering crisp, precise answers. It was encouraging to see evidence that so many had used the new Edexcel AS Textbook. As with the legacy specification, the most popular topic areas were Philosophy of Religion and Ethics.

Philosophy of Religion

Question 1(a)

Most candidates made a good attempt at this question. Many stuck to a basic account of Paley and Aquinas - some with lengthy accounts on Paley's watch. A few tried to write about too many versions of the argument and the answers became superficial. It is important for candidates to comment on the point of view in the question and not merely to give an account of the weaknesses of the argument. There were some good responses to part (ii), particularly on modern critiques from Richard Dawkins, Stannard, Swinburne and Ward.

Question 1(b)

Most candidates displayed a sound knowledge and understanding of this topic. Most stuck with Aquinas' three ways, others went further and included Craig, Kalam and others. Many of the best answers offered modern forms of the argument including reference to Copleston, Swinburne and McCabe. Most candidates offered a good range of knowledge, though not necessarily all the key terms. Many wrote lucidly on the weaknesses of the argument, however did not really address the question and failed to write about the extent to which they considered it to be a weak argument.

Question 2(a)

In general, candidates had a sound understanding of the problem and many were able to distinguish the theological and philosophical problems, a few even made reference to metaphysical evil. However, a number of candidates wrote too much for part (i). There were excellent accounts of Augustine and Irenaeus, but few were able to core well on process theodicy. The more able candidates offered sound critiques by Schliermacher and others, though not always drawing their own evaluations.

Question 2(b)

Answers to this question were sound rather than spectacular. Many candidates offered too much information on different types of miracles and laboured over examples such as Holland's train analogy. Some responses were good accounts of the different definitions of miracles, but sometimes candidates omitted the different strengths. A few candidates misread the questions and wrote about reasons not to believe in miracles. Many spelt miracles incorrectly.

Ethics

Question 3(a)

This was the most popular question within this topic area and offered a wide range of responses. The more able candidates were able to explain the theory and put it into context well and offered useful modern critiques. Less able candidates simply wrote all they knew about the theory or just listed the strengths. A number spent too long on the background at the expense of an exegesis of the theory.

Question 3(b)

This was another popular question and generally produced better responses than the question on Utilitarianism. More able candidates displayed a good knowledge and understanding of the theory and offered imaginative responses, though few were able to offer any other scholars beyond passing reference to Robinson. Less able candidates simply wrote all they knew about the theory.

Question 4(a)

There were relatively few really good answers to this question. Those who did produce a good response knew the material well and offered a clear understanding and evaluation, together with the views of scholars. It was observed that less able candidates tended to leave this question to the end and, consequently, there were a number of short or half-finished answers from these candidates. Less able candidates were unable to apply religious beliefs to the issue and instead concentrated on listing strengths and weaknesses.

Question 4(b)

There were very few good responses to this question. Most concentrated on homosexuality and answers tended to rely heavily on GCSE-type analysis. Only the most able students were able to evaluate successfully in part (ii). A number wrote about Utilitarianism, but did not really know what Mill and Bentham thought and simply applied the hedonic calculus.

Buddhism

Question 5(a)

This was a popular question within this topic area and the better responses gave a full examination of both the religious and social context and focussed on the socio-economic changes, the hierarchical structure and developments in religious practice and belief. Weaker responses tended to be biographical with a lack of evaluation of the issues involved.

Question 5(b)

There were few answers to this question. Most offered good knowledge and understanding of the period of asceticism in the life of the Buddha, but only the best were able to explore and discuss the development of the 'middle way'. Less able candidates tended to present narrative material and lacked any understanding of the importance of the enlightenment.

Question 6(a)

More able candidates were able to offer interesting and well thought out responses to the roles of Dharma and Sangha within the context of the Triple Jewel and explored the relationship between the monastic Sangha and the laity and the meaning of the Dharma for the laity. Less able candidates simply wrote about the three refuges.

Question 6(b)

This was a popular question within this topic area with the most able candidates offering a full exposition of the types of meditation used in Buddhist practice. Most concentrated on samatha and vipassana. Weaker candidates focussed on the non-religious benefits of meditation and failed to explore the purposes within the traditions.

Christianity

Question 7(a)

This was well answered at the higher range, with candidates choosing from a range of historical periods and explaining the context of the debate and, consequently, addressing the significance in part (ii). Less able candidates resorted to re-telling textual narrative.

Question 7(b)

This was not a popular question within this topic area. Most responses centred on 4th and 5th century teachings regarding whether or not Jesus was fully human. The better candidates were able to unpack the material and discuss the significance of the nature of Jesus and linked the gospel teaching with a specific time or context - most often either liberation theology or Bonhoeffer. Less able candidates tended to give a basic historical account with limited evaluation.

Question 8(a)

Answers to this question tended to concentrate on the nature of God in the Bible, the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. The best answers to this question had candidates using scholars to expound and develop the teaching about God eg. Calvin was used to examine an aspect of Christian teaching. Other good responses used Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship. Less able candidates stayed at the general level of 'omnipotence' or 'creator'.

Question 8(b)

This was a popular question for this topic area. The more able candidates were able to examine key points and aspects of symbolism, particularly regarding such concepts as the sacraments. There was a slight lack of scholarly opinion and limited critical and theological analysis. Less able candidates offered bland, mainly descriptive GCSE level responses and did not examine the nature of a 'key practice'.

Hinduism

Question 9(a)

This question attracted a number of high quality answers and candidates included useful examinations of Aryan influences and the culture of the Indus Valley. Better answers focussed on various Hindu movements and the significance of their practices and beliefs.

Question 9(b)

This was a popular question for this topic area, though answers were variable. The best gave a full account of Vedic beliefs and how they influenced worship. AO2 was somewhat weaker, with limited evaluation of issues.

Question 10(a)

There were many detailed accounts with excellent use of religious terminology and an understanding of key teachings in response to this question. Less able candidates tended to confuse the teachings and were less able to show how teachings were reflected in practice.

Question 10(b)

Answers to this question were variable. The very best candidates were able to offer a range of useful knowledge and informed comment. Candidates were able to quote from scripture and use scholars to support their comments. Less able candidates offered largely narrative accounts of the Gods' features without showing sufficient understanding.

Islam

Question 11(a)

This was a popular question and higher ability candidates were able to examine the religious and social context of Arabia at the time of Muhammad. Some successfully looked at the religious and social features of Muhammad's ministry. Weaker candidates offered narrative accounts of the life of Muhammad.

Question 11(b)

This question produced a variable response. The better candidates offered clear knowledge and understanding of the prophetic and political features of Muhammad's life and work and were able to comment well on the significance to Muslims. Weaker candidates offered rather short narrative accounts of the call of Muhammad and the Hijrah.

Question 12(a)

The better responses to this question included detailed knowledge of beliefs relating to life after death and the effective use of the Qur'an. Candidates offered a sound understanding of the six beliefs. Less able candidates gave short

descriptive answers confirming their belief that life after death has great significance for Muslims.

Question 12(b)

This was a popular question for this section, in which the better candidates offered good knowledge and understanding of the five pillars and selected and examined their selected ones carefully, commenting on their significance for religious belief. Weaker candidates simply wrote all they knew about the five pillars.

Judaism

There were very few responses to this subject area.

Sikhism

There were very few responses to this subject area.

New Testament

Question 17(a)

Luke: There were some excellent answers on wealth and poverty, with candidates displaying clear knowledge, understanding and a range of scholarship. Weaker candidates tended to re-tell the narrative.

Fourth Gospel: There were excellent answers on the 'I am' sayings, reflecting a range of scholarship and background information, which linked in well with the text. Weaker candidates wrote in generalised terms and often resorted to a simple re-telling of the narrative.

Question 17(b)

This question produced a variable response. The more able candidates were able to highlight the importance of the miracles for the ministry of Jesus and offered scholarship and useful comment. Weaker candidates simply re-told the textual narrative. Part (ii) was largely speculative.

Question 18(a)

Luke: This question was well answered. Candidates paid close attention to textual detail and offered a range of scholarship. Weaker candidates tended to concentrate on the Lord's Prayer only.

Fourth Gospel: Very popular and generally well done. Candidates at the higher levels were able to display knowledge and understanding of the textual narrative and could show how Jesus' attitude to women was different to Judaism. Weaker candidates concentrated on the narrative and weakly speculated in part (ii), offering a biased, inaccurate answer.

Question 18(b)

This was the least popular question in this topic area. The more able candidates were able to use the textual narrative to highlight the significant features of Jesus' teaching and there was some evidence of scholarship. Less able candidates resorted to naming the disciples and offering general discussion of the teaching and parables. Only the better candidates offered an evaluation of the importance of John the Baptist and the Twelve Disciples.

6582: Unit 2 - Investigations

Religious Studies coursework is an invaluable component of the specification that provides candidates with an opportunity for independent learning. This new unit (6582) has additional topics and titles compared to the legacy specification unit 6771.

Many candidates have seized the chance to research a topic of interest to them and as a result produced an interesting, scholarly pieces of work that exemplified a high level of sustained critical investigation and analysis. Some candidates made effective use of their studies and interest in the creative arts by submitting investigations on visual art, film studies and liturgical music, which is a new topic for GCE Religious Studies coursework. Another new topic, Religion and Science, attracted more candidates who produced very interesting work.

Successful candidates displayed skilful investigative techniques based around thorough literature searches, resulting in careful selection and adaptation of material leading to a clear exposition of knowledge and understanding. They maintained a reasonable balance between the demands of Assessment Objective 1 (AO1) and Assessment Objective 2 (AO2). Material for AO1 was presented in a scholarly fashion and fully justifiable through a sound referencing system and bibliography. It was encouraging to note obvious interest in the subjects selected evidenced through reading and research. The best work showed clear evidence of reasoning and sifting through arguments so as to highlight strengths and weaknesses of various views.

A larger number of centres are offering a broader range of titles and this suggests that students have a wider choice that meets the creative needs of more able candidates.

Some centres selected one title for all candidates and provide resources for their candidates. This approach sometimes means that it may be more difficult for the originality of the better candidates to stand out.

Other centres limit the range of titles for their students. This approach encourages greater originality and essays from these centres were usually well referenced and accessed a variety of resources and there were diverse responses to the same title. These centres often produced coursework which was original, well researched and critical. These investigations often allowed the candidate to explore a topic they were interested in or passionate about. However, a few centres that adopted this approach must be aware that a diverse choice of titles also demands a diverse range of appropriate resources which must be reflected in the bibliography.

Good practice was clearly evident in that centres have been marking efficiently and professionally referring to the Assessment Objectives in the mark scheme either on the essay or on the assessment form.

In general, essays that achieved the higher levels of AO1 used a range of appropriate sources and candidates demonstrated clear understanding of the issues involved through the perspectives/structure brought to their work. Those reaching the higher levels of AO2 clearly argued a case throughout the essay that culminated in a thoroughly justified conclusion.

Candidates must provide explicit evidence of meeting the requirement of both assessment objectives. This is particularly the case with attention to AO2; less able candidates tended to tackle the AO2 component in an 'add on' fashion which resulted in a one paragraph conclusion instead of considering a range of views, drawing out the strengths and weaknesses of arguments and then formulating substantiated conclusions.

A number of good candidates produced good research but failed to answer the question set. Candidates must pay close attention to the title of their investigations. In some cases there appears to be a tendency to write in general terms about a topic and only incidentally on the precise title.

Too many candidates at the lower end used material that is more appropriate for GCSE work or relied overly on downloaded material from the internet. Internet sites must be used critically to avoid using material that is difficult to digest or that clearly does not meet AS requirements.

One of the distinctive features of coursework is the bibliographical skills required. Many candidates are competent in constructing bibliographies. However, there continues to be a few elementary mistakes. Page 64 of the specification contains a few basic rules such as the 'bibliography should include author, date, title and publisher and/or place of publication. The bibliography must be arranged alphabetically in order of the author's last name'.

Further to this a number of candidates constructed a good bibliography but there was too little evidence of referencing skills. Some candidates used references for primary texts such as biblical sources, but failed to provide basic references for secondary sources. One of the criteria for level 4 AO1 is 'excellent use of factual material, from a variety of sources, verifiable through references'.

Some essays could be improved by avoiding pithy paragraphs devoid of analytic content, or the editing of very long paragraphs, which show a lack of discrimination in the selection of material. Some candidates would benefit from learning how to sign post their paragraphs efficiently to relate to the overall essay plan.

Administration

Most centres sent their work in to meet the deadline and followed the procedures accurately.

However, there was a range of administration issues which centres should be aware of:

- The coursework was not sent until requested by the moderator. Coursework should be despatched to arrive with the moderator by the deadline published each series on the examination timetable.
- Work is sent to the wrong address. Please send work only to the address on the OPTEMS form.
- The work of the highest and lowest candidate was not sent if they were outside the pre-selected sample. Please ensure that the work of the highest and lowest mark is included with the sample if it is not already part of the sample.
- OPTEMS forms. The top OPTEMS form should be sent to Edexcel c/o Pearson Assessment and Testing. The yellow copy should be included with the sample sent to the moderator.
- Record sheets and statement of authentication forms for each candidate must be sent to the moderators. The record sheets can be found on page 100 of the specification.

Comments on Specific Topics

The Study Of Religion

Popular topics in this area included responses to the titles related to 'A study of creative expressions in religious life'. The studies of religious art were very interesting and addressed a clear theological theme. Some candidates offered studies of film, which were clearly thought out; however, weaker candidates could improve their study by addressing in more detail the theological theme that underpins the films/directors they are investigating. A few candidates investigated liturgical music and offered very interesting coursework on this theme.

Other popular topics included the psychology and sociology of religion with some candidates focussing on an in-depth study of important scholars related to these areas such as Marx, Freud and Jung. Less able candidates generally penalised themselves in the AO2 section rather than on the AO1 element.

Philosophy Of Religion

Popular topics included mind-body topics, existentialism, religious experience, religion and science and some candidates chose to focus on an in-depth study of an important philosopher such as Descartes, Sartre or Kierkegaard.

The better quality essays displayed evidence of philosophical analysis and reasoning. Most of these topics were thoroughly investigated by candidates with access to commendable sources. There were some exemplary investigations on Religious Experience that were superbly referenced throughout and tightly argued.

There were some excellent studies regarding religion and science, however a general area of improvement would be to update the range of sources accessed within the religion and science field.

Ethics

The coursework in this topic area ranged from work of a high standard to work which had made little progress beyond GCSE level. The best essays on medical ethics were well informed and explorative and offered a scholarly exegesis of how religious teachings and philosophical influences impact on ethical issues. There were more investigations on the issue of animal rights and equality that were well thought out and achieved a high level.

Essays on abortion and euthanasia were popular. On these topics candidates tend to present a great deal of information, but failed to focus on the philosophical and ethical arguments related to the debates or the demands of their selected study. Some candidates presented too much biological information or a range of definitions and pictures that were a prelude to a piece of work hovering around GCSE level. Some moderate candidates presented a very wide range of views such as several Christian denominations often accompanied by Islamic and Jewish perspectives. However candidates tended to get bogged down in the detail and AO2 suffered. Weaker candidates might benefit from focussing on a narrower range of views, but to explore and analyse these views in more depth. Many essays in medical ethics could have benefited from the use of an essay structure that lent itself to better quality analysis of key concepts such as autonomy, quality of life, sanctity of life, ensoulment and personhood.

Candidates answering the Martin Luther King and Malcolm X questions, with a few exceptions, tended to be too biographical/historical and did not include enough theological assessment in the evaluation and comparison of their lives. This topic required attention to the ethical issues surrounding human rights and equality and again the bibliography used by many candidates was of GCSE level.

Religions

Some candidates produced very well researched essays which displayed good investigative techniques of analysis of key concepts and beliefs with careful weighing up of evidence and reasoning; the best candidates supported their argument with careful critical scholarship.

Whilst there was an awareness of different points of view in titles which demanded a balanced knowledge of two religions there was a great deal of depth shown on one view and a limited view for the comparison religion - this one sided approach meant that the demands of the question could not be fulfilled. This was particularly evident in essays that were comparing the teachings of Islam with another world faith. Many candidates also included much irrelevant detail that was not required for the question they were answering. In these cases it should be noted that a key consideration for any candidate is the choice of title and then meeting the demands of that particular title throughout the investigation.

In some cases, for example, candidates presented a study of aspects of Christianity and Islam with evidence of balanced reasoning in the body of their essays. However, their conclusions presented a flurry of biblical quotations that did not reflect the judicious investigation as found in their essays. Some candidates had a tendency to offer too much doctrinal belief at the expense of available scholarship. This approach does not fulfil the requirements for AO2.

It can be noted that it is commendable for candidates to develop their own line of reasoning and presenting their own point of view, but this must be done in the context of academic study. A great majority of candidates appreciated differences in belief and their research conveyed the desire to understand in greater depth a view they did not ascribe to. Candidates offering an essay in World Religions produced work reflecting a serious interest in religious belief that was generally supported by well-informed teaching and good resources

Old Testament/Jewish Bible

More able candidates produced impressive pieces of work with commendable scholarship and use of an outstanding range of academic material. Less able candidates tended to use material that they did not understand or found it difficult to critically analyse.

New Testament

The coursework in this field was of a high standard, with excellent presentation and generally good use of scholarship and resources. The most popular topics were homosexuality and miracles. There were very few pieces seen on the ordination of women.

More able candidates produced scholarly work with an impressive attention to detail and focus on argument. Less able candidates relied on sources that are of GCSE standard.

Christianity And The Christian Church

The topics presented were varied, with good knowledge on aspects of church teaching. There were some outstanding essays on the influence of Christian thought, which employed a range of sources and arrived at a substantial conclusion. Roman Catholicism was studied with rigour and essays were well informed and argued. Less able candidates struggled to move beyond generalised views and found it difficult to distinguish between denominational views. A few candidates produced essays on Church history, whether the early church or the reformation. Generally, these were either excellent or disappointing; the best essays were scholarly, well-written and researched pieces of work and the weaker essays did not tailor their responses to the assessment objectives or the demands of the title.

Final Comments

Congratulations to so many candidates who displayed excellent powers of investigation, competent referencing and bibliographical skills. There was great evidence of genuine interest in Religious Studies and rigorous attempts to pursue this in greater depth. Coursework offers an opportunity for rewarding independent research. Good practice is evident in the majority of centres and candidates are aware of the dangers of plagiarism and have made efforts to substantiate their argument with properly referenced sources. Many candidates know how to address explicitly AO1 and AO2 objectives.

Statistics

6581: Unit 1 - Foundations

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	120	83	73	63	54	45
Uniform boundary mark	150	120	105	90	75	60

6582: Unit 2 - Investigations

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	50	40	35	31	27	23
Uniform boundary mark	150	120	105	90	75	60

Notes

Maximum Mark (Raw): the mark corresponding to the sum total of the marks shown on the mark scheme.

Boundary mark: the minimum mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

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