

GCSE

Religious Studies B

Unit 4: Religious Philosophy and Ultimate Questions
Report on the Examination

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General Comments

The full range of ability was evident again this year. The paper was accessible to most students and even weaker students were able to gain a reasonable number of marks. The most popular questions were 1, 3, 4, and either 5 or 6. It was pointed out last year that marks for AO1 questions could vary each year to allow greater flexibility in examining different aspects of the specification. This year the 1, 3, 5 combination of marks was very successful. Almost all students were able to gain 1 mark at the beginning of each question which gave them confidence. The five mark questions produced excellent responses as there was quite a lot of detail that could be brought into the topics covered in these questions: arguments against the existence of God, what revelation teaches about the qualities of God, the problem of evil for believers, religious beliefs about immortality, arguments against miracles and the theory of evolution's challenge to religious beliefs.

It was clear that schools and colleges have prepared students well, both in terms of the specification's content and in the skills demanded. Technical terms were well known, particularly qualities of God. Some students had been so well coached in last year's paper that they tried to bring material such as the Genesis creation story, the first cause argument and explanations for the origins of evil into questions where they were not relevant.

The three-mark evaluation questions were again very well done, with well-developed reasons, or several brief reasons being offered in support of the student's opinion on one or both sides of the issue. This year students seemed to write at the correct depth and in sufficient detail for three marks rather than writing lengthy answers that could cost them in terms of time to complete the paper. The six-mark questions were well answered. Most recognised that two sides of an issue were required, and religious perspectives were evident throughout. Again this year some very good students did not reach the highest levels because their answers were not coherently argued. They listed the positions taken by atheists, agnostics, theists, and particular groups of believers without using them in an argument for or against the stimulus statement. It is important to remind students that evaluation skills are being tested in these questions, so that subject knowledge needs to be used in support of the argument, not in place of it.

Again this year some students took the emphasis on evaluation into AO1 questions, expressing their opinions or giving two sides to the question asked, to the detriment of their marks. This was particularly evident in question 13 on the problem of evil, where a number of students defended God's benevolence, omnipotence and omniscience.

A number of students continued to infringe the paper's rubric by answering more than the required four questions, usually not very well. The four highest scores are counted, but schools and colleges should advise students to choose the four topics about which they know the most and concentrate on those. This would allow them to gain a higher overall score by writing more thoughtfully and in more detail instead of wasting time trying to answer every question. In contrast to this, there appeared to be an increase in schools and colleges teaching only four of the six topics as every student in a school answered the same four questions. Although this narrows the field of study for these students, it allows more in-depth consideration of the topics, sometimes resulting in high quality responses.

This was the first examination in which Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) were assessed. Students need a reasonably good standard of English to access philosophical questions and arguments. Those who can write fluently and with clarity are at a great advantage, both in terms of gaining higher levels for their answers and gaining the highest mark for SPaG.

Students whose written English is insecure have difficulties on both counts. The best advice schools and colleges can give students is to write at least one of their six-mark answers very carefully, checking it over for errors, making sure it is clearly expressed in sentences and includes some specialist terms where appropriate. Handwriting is not part of the criteria, many students do not use capital letters for some proper names such as 'God' and 'Bible'. Specialist terms were commonly misspelled such as 'atheist', 'miracles', and various qualities of God. Some handwriting was so poor that it was difficult to assess whether or not SPaG reached the threshold mark.

This year, for the first time, there were five mark AO1 questions. This did not prove to be a problem because the topics examined enabled students to use a wealth of material. As we have stated each year, schools and colleges should be aware that whole questions on topics will consist of four or five parts, making up a total of 18 marks, 9 marks for AO1 and 9 for AO2. There will always be two AO2 questions, one a 3-mark question and the other a 6-mark question. Marks for individual questions for AO1 may differ from year to year, but, for each whole question, there will always be two or three questions for AO1, totalling 9 marks. Therefore any combination is possible, e.g. 2, 3, 4, or 1, 3, 5, or 3, 3, 3 etc. Whichever combination is chosen will apply to all whole questions on the paper. This enables examiners to examine the AO1 assessment objective in relation to the specification in the most appropriate way, depending on the content being examined from year to year. This is fairer to students. It enables technical terms, or more challenging parts of the specification to be examined appropriately and provides students with opportunities to write at greater length on issues where there is a greater body of knowledge or explanation available.

Question 1 The Existence of God

01 Most students knew that Barry was expressing an agnostic view.

02 The argument from religious experience for the existence of God was not well known. Most students could give some examples of dramatic religious experiences, for example, visions, miracles or conversion experiences, but fewer of them could explain how these events were evidence for God's existence. Some did not know the argument and gave the Design or First Cause argument.

03 Most argued that it was perfectly possible to believe in God without a personal experience of God (and by this most meant a dramatic special revelation) because someone might be brought up in a religious family, accept arguments for God's existence (e.g. Design / First Cause) or take the word of others (e.g. ministers of religion / friends / people who have experienced a miracle). Conversely, some argued that until one had a personal experience, one could never believe as atheistic arguments are too strong, people need more than just someone's word, 'seeing is believing', etc. Those who failed to gain marks were confused about what a 'personal experience' might involve and said contradictory things, e.g. 'You do not need a personal experience of God to believe in him because you might have experienced a miracle' / '...you might feel God's presence when you pray'.

04 This question was tackled very well. Some students gave a range of atheistic arguments against God's existence, e.g. no proof, the problems of suffering and evil, faults with particular arguments (design, first cause, religious experience, miracles, morality) and the supremacy of scientific explanations (Big Bang, evolution) over faith in God. Others concentrated on one or two of these and explained them fully. Two or three points with some development of two reached level 5. There were some outstanding responses here, and even the weaker students could gain two or three marks.

05 Students had to evaluate whether or not God designed the world. This proved a challenge for those who used 'design' and 'create' interchangeably. Many weaker students merely rehearsed arguments for and against the creation of the world by God, without reference to design. They were usually able to gain one or two marks by mentioning the Big Bang and random chance as evidence of a lack of design but retelling the Genesis creation story was not credited nor were references to God being the first cause. The best responses argued that some people believed God designed the world because of its beauty and complexity which could not have happened by random chance, and then gave examples of Paley's watch, Newton's thumb or Tennant's anthropic principle. On the other hand, suffering and evil, flaws in the design of the earth like earthquakes, and the apparent design that was merely a product of evolution all argued against God designing the world. There is a precision of language required here that students should practise so that they can spot the trigger for the question's target.

Question 2 Revelation

Again this year fewer students chose this question.

06 Most correctly identified the picture of a prophet having a dream as special revelation.

07 Most students could identify a vision or dream from scripture or religious tradition. A wide variety of examples was given, e.g. St Paul, Bernadette of Lourdes, Gabriel's visit to Mary, Muhammad's revelation and the dream which prompted the Hindu man to offer the statue of Ganesha milk. Some examples were neither scriptural nor from a widely held religious tradition and were not credited, e.g. Nicky Cruz, Ellen G. White. Students still seem unsure of the meaning of 'Give an account of...' which means 'tell the story...' in the context of this examination. Some wrote more about the consequences of the vision or dream or what it taught about God than the actual story. Students who merely mentioned an example and did not give any details of the circumstances surrounding the vision or dream failed to gain marks.

08 Most students successfully argued that religious and visions are not real as they have no proof, are subjective, have no witnesses and could be a result of psychological factors or drugs. Others argued that visions and dreams were real to the person who experienced them, were believed in by many, and often caused major changes to someone's life, e.g. St Paul. There were very good answers here.

09 Students were asked to explain what revelation teaches about the qualities of God. The technical terms omniscience, omnipotence, benevolence, immanence, transcendence and personal as applied to God were well known. Those who were able to explain some of them or place them in the context of revealed scriptures gained full marks. For example, 'Revelation teaches that God is omnipotent as the Bible describes how God created the world' or 'Revelation shows God's power because God can break natural laws to give someone a special revelation', etc. Those who merely listed the qualities without much explanation were limited to lower levels, depending on how much they said.

10 Students evaluated whether or not the best way to learn about God is through worship. The best responses came from those who argued that worship was a very good way of learning about God because it deepens the relationship with God, helps people to know God's will, reinforces faith, and is intimate and personal. On the other hand, there are better ways of learning about God, e.g. scriptures, religious leaders, nature, etc. Those who argued that there is no God, so there are no good ways to learn about God were also credited. A number of students did not seem to understand the value of worship or what worship is. Some used examples of charismatic or sacramental worship without understanding what these words meant.

Question 3 The Problems of Evil and Suffering

This was a very popular question, but it presented a challenge to many.

11 Most were able to identify the tornado as natural suffering.

12 Most students answered well by putting a case for the positive aspects of suffering (strengthens character / faith, brings out the best in people, allows people to show compassion, helps people appreciate life, teaches a lesson) or by arguing that God allows suffering as a punishment for sin / karma or for reasons no one can know. Others felt a benevolent God does not 'allow' suffering, it is just part of life, humans cause suffering not God, there is no God, etc.

13 The 'problem of evil' was not universally understood as meaning the philosophical problem of evil for believers in God, i.e. that an almighty, all-loving, all-knowing God could allow evil to exist without failing to live up to one of God's qualities (the inconsistent triad). Those who understood the target of the question did very well, unpacking the terms 'omniscient', 'omnibenevolent' and 'omnipotent' with a clear explanation of why in each case evil made people question God's knowledge, love and power. Some also added the problems of innocent suffering and loss of faith. Others lost marks by talking about the origins of evil, e.g. Lucifer's fall from heaven or Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden. 'The problem of evil' (or suffering) should be taught as a technical term. Some students seemed to think of it as merely a phrase in common parlance that meant the problems people face when confronted by evil or suffering. However, even these responses occasionally gained a mark for mentioning loss of faith as a result of evil as it implied that the person doubted God's power and love for them.

14 a majority of students did not have a clear understanding of the description of evil as an 'impersonal force'. Again the phrase is a technical term with a specialist meaning. Those who knew it gained full marks by saying that evil appears to be a force that draws people into wrongdoing, like a magnet, beyond a person's control. They used the example of addicts who, although they knew drugs were bad for them, could not stop themselves from seeking them out. Some also correctly contrasted this description of evil with other ideas like a devil / personal being, or psychological explanations for bad behaviour. Those who did not know this description of evil tried to guess at its meaning and were not credited. The most common incorrect idea was that evil was not directed at anyone personally. Many students started well by describing evil as a force making people do wrong but then immediately said it was the devil taking over someone's mind, or that it was because of one's upbringing, thereby conflating the various descriptions of evil. Others wrongly assumed evil to be natural evil or suffering, and therefore it was impersonal since everyone experiences some suffering in life. However this was not accepted because the descriptions of evil as an impersonal force / a personal being (devil) / a psychological phenomenon refer to moral evil not natural evil or suffering. It would be helpful to students if schools and colleges did not refer to natural evil at all. In this specification, 'suffering' refers to natural suffering (that caused by natural disasters or events, e.g. tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.) and man-made

suffering (deliberate acts that cause suffering, in other words, 'evil'). 'Evil' is always deliberate and means moral evil, unlike an earthquake which in itself is not evil but which causes suffering to people.

15 There was confusion among some students about what 'taking action against evil' involved. The more sophisticated thinkers addressed the issue immediately by saying that it depended on what 'taking action' meant. Some excellent answers came from those who argued that all religions require adherents to fight evil, in their own lives and in society at large, but that this did not necessarily mean violent action, although even that was sometimes necessary in the case of a just war. 'Love thy neighbour' required action to help those suffering as a result of evil, and many students cited religious organisations that provided care in the developing world and fought against the evils of poverty and injustice. It was nice to see, in some cases, their learning from Unit 2 applied here. On the other hand, if taking action was violent, it could make matters worse, put people's lives in danger and go against the teachings of many religions. Some also validly argued that it was up to God to take action against evil, people would get their just desserts eventually and evil was part of God's plan for an individual so it would be wrong to interfere. A number of students failed to gain the top level as their answer lacked coherence. They made a number of creditable points but failed to draw them together in a sensible argument.

Question 4 Immortality

16 Immortality as a memory of others should have been straightforward to explain as the picture showed different generations of a family looking at photographs together. Those who used the stimulus were able to say that it meant living on in the memories of friends and family, but some confused it with leaving a legacy, for example Shakespeare's plays or a building. The specification makes a distinction between these terms, so a legacy was not accepted.

17 Most were able to gain full marks by saying that Near Death Experiences (NDEs) might not be good evidence for life after death as the person had not actually died, NDEs could be hallucinations / a result of oxygen starvation to the brain / drugs, and some accounts might be made up for publicity. There were many very good answers covering all options in the mark scheme.

18 Students were asked to evaluate whether or not religious scriptures provide the best evidence for life after death. Those who agreed said scriptures were God's word, therefore trustworthy, and supported their argument with examples from scriptures (e.g. Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament, teaching about judgement by Allah and the resurrection of the body from the Qur'an). Those who disagreed criticised scriptures for being written long ago, before medical science had advanced, and argued that they contained contradictory beliefs across the world's religions making it impossible to say which were correct. Some validly argued for more convincing evidence, e.g. channelling, ghosts, NDEs, etc. Some students erroneously thought scriptures were 'made up', 'fake', and 'written while on drugs'. It seemed that students were mixing up criticisms of religious experiences such as dreams, visions or miracles with arguments against the validity of scriptural evidence for immortality.

19 Religious beliefs about immortality were generally well known. Many described beliefs in resurrection, rebirth and reincarnation and developed two of these, gaining the full five marks. Others concentrated on just one, but described it in detail with examples, so gained full marks as well. For example, some described Christian and Muslim beliefs about life after death using specialist terminology and showing they grasped the differences and similarities in their beliefs. A number of students wrongly attributed rebirth to Hinduism and reincarnation to Buddhism, but they

were not penalised if what they said about the beliefs was accurate. It was pleasing to see Jewish and Sikh responses here as well. As last year, some students are still using the terms 'resurrection', 'reincarnation' and 'rebirth' interchangeably to mean 'life after death'. Others did not read the question carefully and described secular views rather than religious ones, for example, discussing immortality as a legacy, memory of others or through passing down one's genes.

20 Students were asked to evaluate whether or not anyone would want to live forever. This provided wide scope depending on the interpretation of 'live forever', whether on earth or in some spiritual realm. Students who made a clear distinction between these alternatives were most successful in writing a cohesive argument. Others who merely thought of a number of positives and negatives for living forever tended to score less well. Many were at least able to argue that living forever on earth would be boring, sad when everyone else died (although some cited overpopulation as a problem, so presumably others might not die), would be terrible if one's life was unhappy or full of suffering and would be personally unpleasant as old age created more health problems. On the positive side they argued that those who feared hell might want to avoid immortality as do those trying cryonics as a means of a painless, healthy immortality. From the religious perspective, many argued that eternal happiness with God, union with Brahman, nibbana, etc. were goals of the religious life and gave meaning and purpose to individual existence so religious people would want to live forever in that sense. One common error was that some thought that Hindus merely want to keep on living over and over again, whereas a Hindu's goal is release from samsara to attain moksha. The stimulus statement did not specifically mention religion, so students were expected to provide religious arguments and most did so by considering eternal life in the religious sense, but quite a few neglected to include a religious perspective on the question, particularly in the case of those who interpreted 'living forever' as merely existing eternally on earth.

Question 5 Miracles

21 Most students correctly said that the birth of a baby was a common occurrence that could be explained by science so was not a miracle.

22 Many argued successfully that humans cannot perform miracles without God's help because only God is powerful enough to break the laws of nature, and God works through humans to perform miracles, for example Jesus. Others thought miracles were performed every day by skilled doctors, it depended on the definition of 'miracle' and some religions believe humans can harness the energy of the universe or the power of the mind to perform miracles.

23 'Give an account' was not sufficiently adhered to, with students failing to gain marks for not telling enough about the circumstances in which the miracle occurred. Some merely mentioned a miracle and left it at that. Others mentioned miraculous events that did not derive from scripture or tradition, for example a woman lifting a car off her trapped child or the miracle of Stairwell B on 9/11.

24 Most students tackled with great gusto reasons why miracles do not happen. A significant number understood Hume's argument against miracles, and although this added to their marks, it was not required. Students could obtain the full five marks without mentioning Hume. Reasons such as no proof, biased witnesses, lack of scientific explanations, lack of personal experience of miracles, the seeming contradiction of a benevolent God picking and choosing people for whom to perform miracles were credited. Those who knew Hume wrote sophisticated responses to the question and often gained full marks.

25 students were asked to evaluate whether or not miracles showed God's love and care for all creation. The more successful responses included arguments that miracles help people or save lives, bring about good for the person as well as others who witness it, showing God's love and care for creation. Examples from particular religions were given too, such as Allah's love shown through the miracle of the Qur'an, or the fact that all of creation is a miracle showing God's love. On the other hand, God can appear unfair in choosing only some people to have a miracle as there is much natural suffering that could be prevented by God without using miracles. In addition, God does not exist, miracles are not performed by God so do not show God's love and care. Some students failed to gain marks by merely arguing whether or not miracles are possible without addressing what they might show about God's love and care.

Question 6 Science and Religion

26 Almost everyone understood the meaning of 'scientific truth' and identified Eddie as its proponent.

27 Most could explain the theory of evolution and knew that it challenged some religious beliefs generally. However, the best answers came from those who could identify exactly which beliefs evolution challenged, for example descent from apes rather than made in God's image, the fact that creatures changed to suit the environment rather than being placed in the perfect environment by God, the timescale of the Genesis story compared to evolution, the fact that evolution works by random chance rather than by the design or intervention of God.

28 Students were asked to evaluate whether or not the Cosmological Revolution proved that religious beliefs were wrong. This required knowledge of the Cosmological Revolution's scientific findings. While this topic was well known in some schools and colleges, it was clear that in others students had not grasped that the Cosmological Revolution was not about the Big Bang theory or Darwin's theory of evolution, but rather the findings of astronomers such as Galileo and Copernicus. A number of students talked generally about the challenge science has made to religion but this was adrift of the target of the question. Again the most successful answers contained reference to specific beliefs that were proved wrong, e.g. the fact that the sun was the centre of the universe, not earth, challenged the idea that God had a special relationship with humans, the fact that the planets moved in their orbits according to natural laws and not as a result of God, etc. Others validly argued that the findings of the astronomers did not challenge all religious beliefs, e.g. it was still possible to believe in God and in moral precepts of religion, and indeed the findings served to confirm belief in God as creator of such a majestic universe.

29 Students seemed to relish this question as many wrote well developed answers to why some people favour science over religion in the modern world. Science's emphasis on evidence, testing and repeated observations, being open to change, its explanations for things formerly not understood, and its general trustworthiness because of all the scientific advances in medicine and technology that have improved people's lives were credited. Religion's dependence on faith rather than proof, the secularisation of modern society, the idea that science has now explained things so religion is no longer needed, the antipathy towards religion which has too many rules were also credited.

30 students were asked to evaluate whether or not it was important to believe that human beings were created by God. The most common error was made by those who ignored the word 'importance' and wrote generally about whether or not human beings were created by God. This limited their marks. The target of the question was whether or not believing that humans were created by God makes any difference to people's lives or has any impact on the way they behave.

The area of the specification being tested here was this: ‘the question of whether humans were created or evolved, and its impact on human attitudes and behaviour within society and to the rest of the world generally.’ The best responses talked about the importance of knowing that God created people, giving meaning and purpose to their lives, encouraging respect for all of God’s creations, other people and nature, acting as stewards, cherishing and protecting human life, etc. On the other hand, for people who did not believe in God, life still had meaning and purpose, it made no practical difference to the way people lived and behaved, and humanity was all in the same boat so it paid to look after each other anyway. Some students erroneously thought that people could still believe in God, but just that God did not create them. They were confusing an essential part of faith in God with belief in a literal interpretation of Genesis.

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG)

Most students gained 3 or 4 marks from the 4 marks available. Students should be reminded to use specialist vocabulary where possible, write coherently, use paragraphs and appropriate punctuation and ensure that key words are spelt correctly.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

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