

GCSE

RELIGIOUS STUDIES B

B4 / 40554 Religious Philosophy and Ultimate Questions
Report on the Examination

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General Comments

There was an improvement in the standard of work this year, both in terms of the quality of responses and the thorough preparation students had been given by schools and colleges. The full range of ability was evident, and the paper was accessible to most students. Once again the most popular questions were 1, 3, 4, and either 5 or 6.

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, eg 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.

Some schools and colleges seemed to have dealt with the topics more generally and responses from these students were not focused sufficiently on the questions asked. For example, in Question 1, some students merely repeated arguments about whether or not God exists, rather than focusing on the relative merits of First Cause, design or moral arguments in proving God's existence. Technical terms were not as well-known this year, particularly 'rebirth' (often confused with 'reincarnation'), 'dualism' or the difference between 'religious truth' and 'scientific truth'.

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. Some of the more able students wrote far too much for these questions, which may have cost them valuable time. The six-mark questions were generally well answered, apart from question 10. Most recognised that two sides of an issue were required, and religious perspectives were evident throughout. Some of the most able students demonstrated high evaluative skills, producing in-depth critical discussion of the issues more typical of AS-level answers. These students departed from the 'On the one hand... on the other hand' style to a more complex style of 'Some might argue but I would counter with this...' throughout the answer. 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 subject knowledge needs to be used in support of the argument, not in place of it.

Fewer students infringed the paper's rubric by answering more than the required four questions. Those who did so usually did not score well.

This was the second year in which spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) were assessed in addition to the Quality of Written Communication which has been part of the 6-mark answers. Students need a reasonably good standard of English to access philosophical questions and arguments. Many students did not use capital letters for some proper names such as 'God' and 'Bible' or at the start of sentences. Specialist terms such as 'atheist', 'miracles', and 'conscience' were commonly misspelled. Although handwriting is not part of the criteria, some handwriting was so poor that it was difficult to assess whether or not SPaG reached the threshold mark.

Question 1 The Existence of God

01 Many students knew the First Cause argument by heart (eg everything that exists has a cause, the universe exists, so it must have a cause, there had to be something eternal that was not caused by anything, that eternal first cause is God) and gained the full four marks. Some left out a step in the argument, that there had to be something eternal or uncaused, and only gained three marks. Others gained two marks for giving two relevant simple points, that everything has a cause, and that cause is God. A number did not know the argument and wrote their own ideas about whether God exists, the Genesis creation story or Design argument instead.

02 Most students argued that if everything has a cause, ‘what caused God?’ and they offered the Big Bang as an alternative explanation. Many neglected to mention that the Big Bang was a random, uncaused event, but since the question was only worth two marks, the mention of Big Bang was accepted without this qualification. The strongest responses talked about the argument contradicting itself and the universe itself being eternal.

03 The design argument was well known and most achieved the full three marks by arguing for and / or against design.

04 This question was well answered with a range of religious experiences cited, along with reasons why they would convince someone (and others who heard about them) that God exists. A number used the conversion of Saul as an example of how a religious experience could cause a total change in someone’s life; others used Near Death Experiences or miracles to illustrate a personally convincing experience that had no other explanation than God’s intervention.

05 This question required students to evaluate whether or not morality (having a sense of right and wrong) proves that God exists. The strongest responses were from those who argued from a theistic perspective (some quoting CS Lewis and JH Newman) that people have an inbuilt sense of morality found across all cultures and very similar to the commandments ‘do not kill’/‘do not steal’. This moral sense comes from a source outside of people, an ultimate authority who can only be God. Yet, on the other hand, morality is socially conditioned (Freud), dependent on a child’s upbringing or the laws of the society in which one lives and useful from an evolutionary perspective. The lack of consensus about moral issues and the fact that some people seem to have no conscience or guilt shows that morality is not derived from God. Some students confused morality with free will and tried unsuccessfully to link God-given free will to the argument.

Question 2 Revelation

06 Most students could describe conscience as an ability to tell right from wrong, and many added that religious believers may think of it as the voice of God guiding them. A number limited their marks by describing conscience as a decision-making ability but did not say what kind of decision, so their answer lacked any moral dimension.

07 This question was interpreted in two different ways by students. The target was whether or not God can be revealed in the lives and work of people, and the stimulus pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa were intended to guide students to thinking about how people’s lives and work could show something of God’s nature or qualities to others. Many students grasped this and used the two people pictured successfully as examples in arguing that they were inspired by their faith in God and showed in their work and way of life God’s compassion and love for people. On the other hand, people make their own decisions about the kind of work they wish to do and this has nothing to do with God. They may just be good people who want to help others. Some students merely wrote about the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa without

giving any insight into how or whether God could be revealed through their work. Other students interpreted the question to mean whether or not people could have a revelation of God in their lives. This interpretation was accepted and responses were credited for giving examples of special and general revelations that people might have in the course of a lifetime.

08 The most successful answers were descriptions of Saul on the Damascus road and Muhammad's Night of Power. Many students still seem unsure of the meaning of 'Give an account of...' which means 'Tell the story...' in the context of this examination. Most students were able to gain a mark by identifying a special revelation, but then went on to explain why it was a special revelation instead of giving details of what happened. Any example of a special revelation was accepted, including personal and / or contemporary examples, the more popular being miracles and Near Death Experiences, but often students gave insufficient details of these events so were unable to access the highest levels of the mark scheme. It would be advisable for students to learn a famous miracle or special revelation in detail so that they could produce a full account for questions of this type.

09 This question was well-answered, with most students able to give a broad range of reasons why special revelations might be considered illusions. The strongest answers talked about the subjective nature of such revelations, hallucinations, wishful thinking, tricks of the mind and the influence of drugs or medical conditions on the person experiencing a revelation. The word 'illusions' did not confine the answers to mental states. Responses were also accepted that dealt with fraudulent claims for fame or money and the conflicting revelations between religions.

10 This was the least well-answered question on the paper. It required students to consider whether or not there were too many different ideas of what God is like for them all to be true. The target of the question was directed at the different qualities of God that seemingly contradict each other, eg personal / impersonal, immanent / transcendent, the different ideas of God in different religions, and descriptions of God as all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing when suffering and evil exist. Many responses appeared to not understand this emphasis and instead wrote about conflicting rules in religions, eg different acceptance of use of alcohol or sexual mores. These responses seemed to overlook the phrase 'what God is like' and write only about too many different religions or too many 'gods' for any of them to be true. Some strayed into whether or not religious experiences were valid rather than ideas about what God is like. Others interpreted the question as meaning what God looks like, so concentrated on different images of God in Hinduism compared to other faiths. Some excellent answers came from those who pointed out the seeming contradictions in descriptions of God, but who said that God is beyond human language and then discussed the religious pluralism of John Hick.

Question 3 The Problems of Evil and Suffering

This was a very popular question and generally well done.

11 Most students knew a range of religious teachings about why there is suffering in the world (eg karma, free will, original sin from Adam and Eve's disobedience, test of faith, punishment, to build character) and they explained and expanded these ideas sufficiently to gain four marks. Weaker responses gave secular rather than religious reasons for suffering (poverty, natural disasters, etc.) and gained no credit.

12 Most students gained full marks by saying that a loving God should not have created a world with suffering, especially innocent suffering, but that suffering is caused by people or nature, not God, and that God would not be all-loving if God intervened to take away free will from humankind.

13 The strongest responses concentrated on **how** believers could help those who are suffering, rather than **why** they should do so. Students gave a range of help, including prayer, raising or giving money to charity, volunteering, the Sikh langar sharing food, the Muslim practice of zakat, and more contemporary examples of food banks and soup kitchens. However, there were fewer practical suggestions of help than anticipated, with many students concentrating on prayer and advice to the sufferer that God would help them eventually or reward them in the afterlife. While comforting the afflicted was accepted, some suggestions were questionable in terms of their helpfulness to someone in dire need.

14 Most students gained two marks for the difference between evil and suffering, although some merely said that evil causes suffering and left it at that.

15 Students were asked whether or not there will always be evil in the world. Most could argue forcefully that evil will never be overcome, due to the ignorance, greed and mean-spirited attitude of human beings. Religious disagreements, wars and terrorism were cited as examples of this as well as the fact that natural evil (earthquakes, etc) would always be part of life on earth. Students found it more difficult to argue for the other side of the issue, but stronger responses mentioned people following religious values, for example, the commandments or the Eightfold Path, and the triumph of God over Satan when the Kingdom of God or Judgement Day occurred. Some excellent answers came from those who argued that greater understanding of the psychology of criminal behaviour (that of serial killers, for example) would help eradicate this form of evil from the world. A number of students took the line that, while evil would never be eradicated completely, human beings could do a great deal to lessen the amount of evil by greater care for each other or by stricter laws and punishments for criminals.

Question 4 Immortality

16 The idea of rebirth was not sufficiently distinguished from reincarnation in many cases. Many students used 'rebirth' to mean any form of life after death at all. The idea of rebirth is a technical term in the specification which requires study and needs to be distinguished from reincarnation and resurrection. The stimulus picture of a flame being transferred from one candle to another was intended to give a steer in the right direction. Most had a general idea that it meant to live again after death on earth and that the quality of the next life would be influenced by the kamma attained in the previous one. However, many talked about the soul passing into a new body and this was not credited. There were some excellent answers from those who knew the Buddhist belief and described it perfectly, mentioning that Buddhists do not believe in a soul so that it was a person's character or consciousness that survives in another sentient being until enlightenment is achieved.

17 Most students were able to gain four marks by giving scriptural evidence for life after death in Christianity, Islam and/or Hinduism. Most discussed Jesus' resurrection, heaven and hell in Christianity, an angel interrogating the person, barzakh and Day of Judgement in Islam, or reincarnation, karma, moksha and the cycle of samsara in Hinduism. The strongest responses answered the question more precisely by showing the evidence for these ideas in scriptures, for example, by quoting Jesus ('I am the resurrection and the life'), by telling of Thomas's doubts and touching Jesus after the resurrection, and of Jesus eating fish to prove bodily resurrection. A number of students talked about purgatory in this context, but this was not accurate as it is not evidence from scripture. Quite a few students quoted Genesis, 'God created the heavens and the earth', and said that this was evidence of life after death, however this was not credited as 'heavens' in this case is referring to space or the sky rather than a realm of the dead.

18 Most students were able to argue that immortality to a religious believer means life after death, but being remembered by others does not count since the person is dead. Stronger

responses went on to say that once the last people who knew the person had died, the memory would die with them. Others argued that while it was not immortality in the strict literal sense, there was a sort of immortality for a person whose memory (and legacy, like that of Shakespeare) would live on. Some students found it difficult to phrase their answers sufficiently differently from the statement, eg 'Being remembered is not immortality because it is just being remembered'.

19 The term 'dualism' was either known or not known. Those who knew it gained two marks by saying human beings have a body and a soul, and at death the body decays but the soul lives on.

20 This question was well-attempted as all students had opinions about whether or not there was an afterlife. Not all students entirely understood the meaning of 'afterlife', as quite a few incorrectly argued that Buddhists and / or Hindus did not believe in an afterlife because they were coming back to live on earth over and over again. Others merely outlined the views of various religious believers about an afterlife without using them in evaluation. Some rightly used what evidence there might be for an afterlife, eg channelling, ghosts, or Near Death Experiences, but if they did not incorporate any religious arguments into their answers they could not be credited beyond Level 3.

Question 5 Miracles

21 As in 08, 'Give an account...' means 'Tell the story...' of a miracle from personal experience. Since all miracles are from someone's personal experience, any miracle was accepted, apart from metaphorical 'miracles' such as the birth of a baby or winning the lottery. Miracles in this context should be religious miracles which people believe to be the work of God. Again some merely wrote the 'title' of a miracle (eg 'Jesus feeding the 5000' or 'Moses crossing the Red Sea') and gave insufficient detail about what happened to gain further credit, or they spent time explaining why the example given was considered a miracle.

22 Students argued against the statement by saying that there are no miracles, just events that cannot yet be explained scientifically, there is no God to perform them, Buddhists who accept miracles do not believe in God, and since miracles are only offered to some people, this goes against the notion of a just God. In support of the statement, students discussed the way miracles showed God's power and compassion for his creatures, and that there is no explanation for miracles except God. Some responses were unable to reach the highest levels of the mark scheme as they argued that miracles are not the only way God works in the world and so digressed from the target of the question.

23 Most students gained two marks by saying that God appears unfair by picking and choosing people to help via a miracle, and a believer might ask for a miracle and not get one, and so lose faith.

24 Students who had studied Hume's arguments against miracles produced excellent answers, usually gaining three or four marks. Others, who were unfamiliar with Hume, tried to give general arguments against miracles, citing luck and coincidence but these were not accurate and received no credit.

25 Some students misinterpreted the question and discussed where one might find the best miracles, rather than whether or not the best evidence for miracles is found in scripture. However, the question was well done by many students who argued for the relative reliability of scriptural miracles, giving a number of examples of these and why they might or might not be true, and on the other hand, arguing for the greater reliability of modern investigative methods for contemporary miracles, including the efforts made to investigate miracles at Lourdes before accepting them.

Other correct arguments were based on the idea that a personal experience was most convincing, rather than putting one's trust in a book written thousands of years ago.

Question 6 Science and Religion

26 The theory of evolution was well-known by more able students who described development from simple to complex life forms, genetic mutation, species adapting to the environment, natural selection and survival of the fittest. Other responses stated that humans came from apes. Some used the word 'evolve' to describe evolution, so did not clearly show they understood the process. It may help students to use words such as 'develop', 'change' or 'adapt' in order to demonstrate their understanding.

27 Both 27 and 30 caused difficulties for those who did not focus on the actual question asked. In Question 27, many spent time discussing whether it was possible to believe in Genesis and evolution rather than God and evolution, although some credit could be gained from talking about a non-literal interpretation of creation stories. Some confused evolution with the Big Bang theory. Stronger responses came from those who said that God designed the process of evolution and that it was part of his plan that human intelligence and adaptability helped human life to prosper. On the other hand, evolution is natural, without need of God, and only appears designed because creatures have adapted to the environment. Also the environment was not designed to suit the needs of creatures, but creatures adapted to it.

28 This question was generally not answered as well as expected, as there were many ways in which a belief that God created the world might influence the way believers lived their lives. The emphasis of the question was on belief in the creation of the world with its implication that believers would want to care for the world God created, but many students answered as if the question was about belief in God and said that they would 'go to church' and 'pray a lot', without focusing on creation. Others who understood the question's target, mentioned care for the world but did not expand their answer by giving any practical measures a believer might take, eg recycling, campaigning for sustainability, taking part in conservation activities, cycling rather than driving, etc. The strongest answers mentioned all of these things in the context of the belief in stewardship and responsibility for creation as a religious duty.

29 The focus of this question was the difference between two technical terms: 'religious truth' and 'scientific truth'. Unfortunately many responses gave examples of these types of truth (creation v evolution) without actually explaining the difference between the types. The strongest responses said that scientific truth was based on experiments/evidence and has proof; religious truth is based on faith / the authority of a religion.

30 This question was reasonably well done, although some compared Genesis to evolution rather than the Big Bang theory. Others argued that one was a better theory than the other, without actually arguing about whether or not they can both be true. Stronger responses were able to compare the timescales in Genesis with the Big Bang and the contrast between divine command and random spontaneity. Reference to non-literal interpretations of Genesis moved the argument up into the higher levels of the mark scheme. Responses which lacked coherence in their arguments and merely listed what a fundamentalist, a liberal Christian or an atheist might think of each theory, without giving reasons for these opinions, were less successful.

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