



GCSE

RELIGIOUS STUDIES B

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

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General Comments

Examiners reported that this year's standard of work was the highest they had seen, both in terms of the quality of responses and the thorough preparation students are being given by schools and colleges. Although the full range of ability was present, there again seemed to be a trend towards higher ability students being entered for this paper. However, the paper was accessible to most students and even weaker students were able to gain a reasonable number of marks. Again this year 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 2, 2, 5 combination of marks was used very successfully. More able students could demonstrate the depth and breadth of their knowledge and understanding over 5 marks and the 2 mark questions required a brief explanation or two simple points which students of all abilities were able to do well.

The traditional arguments for the existence of God were generally well known by students as were religious teachings about the origins of evil and life after death. Although Hume's arguments against miracles were not required, it was pleasing to see how many students were able to use those arguments in evaluation of Question 25. Technical terms were generally well known (eg transcendence, dualism, evolving truth, absolute truth, 'psychological phenomenon') and this year a higher proportion of students used technical terminology in the course of answering questions, particularly qualities such as omnipotence, benevolence, omniscience, immanence, etc. when referring to what could be learned about God from miracles (Question 24) or scripture (Question 10).

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. The six-mark evaluation questions were generally well-answered. 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. However, an unfortunate consequence of this technique for some was that they ended up arguing about the arguments rather than debating the stimulus statement. There was also the danger of repetition in this style of answer. Some made a point and criticised it, made another point and criticised it, and then when they tried to argue for an alternative viewpoint, they ended up repeating all of their criticisms. This lack of coherence limited marks to Level 5 rather than Level 6. Other students merely stated 'This is a strong / weak argument' after each point they made without actually saying why. This wasted time without adding to the merits of their case. Again this year some students 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. Many still sum up their arguments at the end by repeating what they have already said. This does not increase the marks they earn since they have already been credited for salient points. Some students declared in the course of the evaluation answers, 'I am a Muslim, so I think...', or similarly 'I am an atheist' or 'I am a Christian'. A more worrying feature of some scripts was that some students said they were all of these in the course of one examination script. Schools and colleges should remind students that the course is open to all faiths or none, so there is no credit to be gained merely by declaring an allegiance to a particular faith or ideology.

Fewer students infringed the paper's rubric by answering more than the required four questions. Those who did so usually did not score well. Some students answered the parts of questions out of order, for example by starting with the six mark evaluation and then going on to the rest. Unfortunately this resulted in them missing out a question or not benefitting from the 'flow' of the question as it was devised.

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 or 1, 4, 4 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

Throughout this topic, students needed to refer to the actual arguments mentioned in the questions, rather than merely repeat arguments about whether or not God exists. The Design argument was generally well known. It was not necessary to mention Paley, Newton, Aquinas, etc. but those who could outline both Paley and Newton's arguments gained a sure five marks in 01. Those who argued more generally usually left out a step or two which limited their marks. For example, an answer such as 'the world is complex, complex things need a designer, the designer is God' would have gained Level 3. In 02 the reasons given needed to be clearly linked to the Design argument to gain credit. The best arguments against design were suffering and evil as flaws in the design, and evolution giving the appearance of design. Unfortunately too many students referred to the Big Bang theory rather than evolution. Credit was only given if they clearly referred to the random nature of the Big Bang which could suggest a lack of design. Weaker answers merely gave reasons why people did not believe in God. In 03 those who knew the First Cause argument were able to outline it as reasons for agreement, and those who knew the flaws in the argument could oppose it successfully. Many gave two-sided responses which, while not required, ensured the full three marks. More able students tended to write too much for this question such was the depth of their knowledge. The moral argument for God was better known this year, and with only two marks allocated to it in 04, it was successfully explained by saying that all people have an inbuilt sense of morality and therefore this sense must have come from an ultimate authority, God. Some students are still mixing this argument up with arguments about free will. Quite a few misread the word 'morality' as 'mortality' and tried to discuss life after death. Question 05 was well-argued by those who said that a direct religious experience was most persuasive to the person who has one. The number of such experiences, their impact on individuals and religions, evidence from scriptures (with examples like Paul on the Damascus road) all argue for their importance as evidence for God. On the other hand, their subjective nature, difficulty of proof, unreliability of witnesses and element of wishful thinking all militate against their validity. A number argued that other evidence was more convincing, eg the traditional arguments for God's existence. Some students seemed to think that 'religious experiences' were confined to visions or dramatic special revelations. Some argued that 'miracles' were more convincing than religious experiences, yet a miracle is a religious experience, so this was not an argument against the statement but supported it. This approach lost marks if students had not presented an alternative viewpoint.

Question 2 Revelation

Again this year fewer students chose this question. In 06 most could say that nature's beauty inspires awe at its creation by a powerful God, but many were unsuccessful at developing this with reference to God's power. Few referred to the idea that nature is outside of human control, and sometimes the force it demonstrates may make humans acknowledge the supremacy of a divine being. Most could give two examples of special revelation in 07, eg visions or dreams. Examples that could be considered general revelation like prayer were not accepted unless the student made it clear that in prayer God was speaking directly to the individual. In 08 many were able to give a good range of ways in which revelation might impact the lives of believers including conversion, change of behaviour, beliefs and lifestyle, etc. Examples of conversions were popular (eg Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) and Paul on the Damascus road) and these developed the answers to reach five marks. The meaning of 'transcendent' in 09 was not clearly known except by the most able students. Two marks could be gained by saying that God is beyond time and space and does not interfere with his creation. However many seemed to think that transcendent meant God was 'all-seeing' or even 'invisible' to humans, or that God was 'all around us' (which hints at immanence rather than transcendence). Question 10 was less well answered by those who interpreted the question as 'scriptures are not very reliable' instead of whether or not scriptures could reveal anything about God. However, some credit was given to those who talked about the unreliability or outdated quality of scriptures. Even more credit was given to those who went on to talk about the contradictory descriptions of God in scriptures or their dependence on interpretation. What scriptures had to say about God and God's attributes were not well known and most answers remained very general without specific examples. The best responses mentioned specific passages like Moses crossing the Red Sea as an example of God's power and love for his people, or the revelation of the Qur'an as Allah's actual words.

Question 3 The Problems of Evil and Suffering

As usual this was a very popular question and generally well done. In 11 the best responses came from those who knew the story of the Fall in Genesis, Muslim beliefs about Iblis / Shaytan, and Buddhist ideas of the three poisons and karma. Some students wrote about all of these and easily gained the five marks. Some students ignored the word 'origins' in the question and wrote about the purposes of evil or different explanations for evil rather than its origins, including secular notions like 'psychological phenomenon' which appeared in the next question. Some incorrectly talked instead about the benefits of suffering (makes you stronger, tells you when something is wrong, helps you to appreciate life more, etc.) In 12 the best way of gaining two marks was by saying that evil arises from a person's mind and is influenced by upbringing / society. Those who were not sure said it was a force within people (not clearly distinguishing the description from an impersonal force) or said that it is 'just in your mind, so not real' (suggesting evil was imaginary, or a fantasy). Question 13 provided a challenge to some who concentrated on whether or not trying to explain anything was important. However most were able to argue that religious believers should try to explain why God allows suffering in order to make sense of it, particularly to those who might lose faith because of suffering. They went on to defend God with detailed theodicies. Others argued it was not important to try to explain suffering, it was just a fact of life, there wasn't a God anyway, and most suffering was natural or caused by people whose behaviour was not controlled by God. In 14 most were able to give two examples of man-made suffering, eg murder / war / rape / terrorism. Some examples of natural suffering were not credited unless the student specified how human actions had contributed, eg 'cancer caused by smoking' was accepted.

Question 15 was well done by those who concentrated on whether or not suffering was just. Most argued that innocent suffering was unjust as was suffering on a massive scale irrespective of whether people had done anything to deserve it. Examples of these injustices were used to develop the arguments. On the other hand, suffering's positive benefits, its usefulness as a test of faith, or justly deserved punishment for sin (karma) justifies its presence in the world. Some students ignored the word 'just' and argued about what people should do to prevent suffering or digressed into a discussion of moral evil by saying that human beings should not make other people suffer. Occasionally there was a lack of religious argument in the answers as students confined their examples of the positive benefits of suffering to the birth of a baby or climbing a mountain.

Question 4 Immortality

In 16 most gained two marks by saying that a ghost was meant to be a dead person's spirit, so seeing it would mean that the person was still living in some way. Some merely argued that ghost experiences were true or real without linking it to a belief in an afterlife as the question required. In 17 there were impressive answers from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic perspectives. Only one religion was required and the most able students wrote very well-developed accounts full of technical terms and including quotations from scriptures which merited the full five marks. Weaker responses came from those who failed to put in details and confined their answers to brief accounts of Heaven and Hell or reincarnation. In 18 there were some very good arguments why Near Death Experiences were insufficient proof for an afterlife including oxygen starvation, psychological reasons, and the desire for notoriety. Others argued successfully that many have described similar experiences, not all can be lying, and these may have had life-changing effects on the person. Some students lost credit because they confused a Near Death Experience (a technical term with a particular meaning in the specification) with a 'close shave' or near fatal accident. In 19 two marks could be gained by defining dualism as the idea that people have two natures, physical and spiritual, and at death the body dies but the soul lives on. Others gained two marks by saying that dualism is a belief that the body and soul separate at death and that this makes people less afraid to die. In Question 20 the best responses came from those who argued about whether or not there was enough evidence justifiably to believe in life after death. On one side there is no proof, no evidence for soul, heaven or God, the body rots, and the arguments for resurrection, reincarnation and rebirth can all be refuted (with examples). On the other side, evidence in scriptures, beliefs in major religions, evidence in support of resurrection, reincarnation and rebirth, channelling, NDEs, ghosts, all give support to such a belief. Some students misread the question and argued whether or not atheists 'have a right' to believe what they want, rather than whether atheists are right (correct) to argue against immortality.

Question 5 Miracles

Most students were able to define a miracle as a seemingly impossible occurrence that appears to break the laws of nature and gain two marks in 21. The most popular miracle from history in 22 was the Angels of Mons, although not everyone knew the details of that particular incident and some wrongly thought the angels helped the soldiers defeat the Germans in battle. Other offerings included 'Stairwell B', feeding of the 5000, statue of Ganesh drinking milk, Guru Nanak and the grazing buffalo, Buddha taming an elephant, and miracles at Lourdes. In 23 most were able to argue that performing miracles was helpful, so loving, that miracles strengthen faith and benefit everyone indirectly, but on the other hand show favouritism on the part of God, as God is picking and choosing whom to help, and raise questions about why God would make statues drink milk

instead of stopping great suffering from a natural disaster. The best responses to 24 came from those who knew many qualities of God and demonstrated with examples how miracles revealed those qualities. Others explained that miracles could teach negative things about God's selectiveness or capriciousness in the way God deals with human beings. Marks were mainly lost by students who did not illustrate what could be learned about God with examples or give sufficient development of the points they made. Responses which merely listed some qualities of God without explanation or development were capped at Level 2. Question 25 was well done in general and it was pleasing to see how many students used Hume's arguments that miracles were impossible in the course of their evaluation. Many took a considered approach that it very much depended on how one defined 'miracle': if a 'transgression of the laws of nature' then all of Hume's arguments came into play, but if a wonderful event that shows God working in the world, then not so impossible as there was much evidence in religious texts, traditions and recently publicised events that could support belief in miracles.

Question 6 Science and Religion

Most students attempted to describe the Big Bang theory in answer to Question 26. If they mentioned a big bang or explosion they received one mark. The best responses came from those who described a singularity that expanded rapidly and created a dust and gas cloud from which stars and galaxies formed. Some still erroneously think that the big bang occurred when two meteorites collided. Most were able in 27 to explain that an evolving truth changes as new discoveries are made and an absolute truth is fixed for all times. Some mixed up evolution with 'evolving truth' and failed to explain the difference. There were some very thoughtful answers in 28 as to why each truth was comforting: science because factually correct or based on repeated experimentation so reliable versus religious truth because it gave purpose and meaning to life and hope of life after death. Most chose the Genesis account of creation in response to 29, but there were good accounts of Hindu and Sikh creation stories as well. The marks related to how much detail was included. For the purposes of this question, Genesis chapters 1 and 2 were considered one creation story, so students who wrote about both were credited. Question 30 required a discussion of whether or not evolution shows that it is wrong to believe in creation stories. Most students chose to contrast evolution with Genesis, although there were some who mentioned other religious creation stories. Some students were distracted by the word 'wrong' and spent much energy arguing that no one was wrong to believe whatever they wanted as people were entitled to have their own views. The question intended discussion of whether evolution was incompatible with belief in creation stories and the better students were able to argue both sides of the issue. The best responses came from those who said that evolution had a great deal of evidence in its support, did not require a creator God, showed that humans developed over longer than 6 days, from apes rather than created individually and specially by God, and that creatures changed to fit the environment rather than the environment being created for humankind. On the other hand if the stories were not taken literally, the order of creation was generally the same with life beginning in the sea, God could have planned evolution to take place, and the religious meaning of such stories, that the creation is God's gift to humankind, still holds true.

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG)

This was the third 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. 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. Many students do 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 'transcendent' 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.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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