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GCSE

# RELIGIOUS STUDIES B

B5 / 40555 Religious Expression in Society  
Report on the Examination

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4055  
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## General Comments

This year's examination paper tested students' knowledge and skills very well, so that students of all abilities were challenged, and able to demonstrate their learning in the subject. Teachers should be pleased by the way they prepared students for the paper, as it was clear that students wanted to do well, and could engage with every aspect of the paper.

In previous years, Topic 6 – Religion in Contemporary Society – has been the least popular topic. This year, it had a significant increase so that nearly half of all students opted to answer it. They were well rewarded, as the average score for the topic was the highest of all topics. The most popular topic was Topic 1 – Religion and Art, with about two-thirds of all students choosing to opt for it. The least popular topic this year was Topic 3 – Religion and Literature. The topic with the lowest average score was Topic 4 – Religion and Media.

In terms of the range of examples used in answering questions, schools and colleges, in the main, are clearly teaching set examples to their students, which are then referred to by all students. Some schools and colleges additionally choose to encourage students to find their own examples, so that a range can be seen. It is often the case that where students use their own examples, they write in a more detailed and meaningful way, engaging more fully with their subject content, and also using examples more freely across the paper – not just where asked for an example. Examples tend to be from a Christian tradition, though any religious tradition may be used, and even within a question, several different traditions could be referenced with credit. There is no limit to the number of examples which might be offered nor the number of religious traditions which might be used on this paper.

All schools and colleges should work with students on the development of answers. It is certainly the case that many students demonstrate a range of knowledge in their answers, providing several / many points in most answers. However, many students do not push on from there, so that their responses read as lists – either of words/phrases, or of sentences – hence not reaching the higher levels for marks.

It was most pleasing to read the quality of answers, particularly of the six-mark evaluative questions at the top end of the range. Examiners read some truly sublime answers showing excellent insight, and teachers should take great pride in how they have nurtured this quality in their students.

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.

## **Topic 1 – Religion and Art**

This was the most popular question, and the third best answered in terms of average mark for the topic.

The stimulus was an example of calligraphy outside the house of a family who had completed hajj.

01 – The stimulus for this question aided students, giving them a good example of calligraphy, which a number used to argue that people can or cannot, from a personal point of view, understand calligraphy or its significance. A number of students seem to think that calligraphy is only used in the Islamic tradition, and this sometimes skewed their responses.

02 – Students coped well with this question, with the majority suggesting the viewer would be moved, even to conversion.

03 – Many students struggled with this question, which asked about the spirituality of the sculptor, not of the sculpture. Hence many students scored reduced marks for this question.

04 – There was a wide range of examples of painting used in answering this questions, and students were able to write fluently in describing the symbolism of a piece.

05 – Religious icons is a key term for the topic, but many students confused it with cultural icons, or with founders of the faith, or with God. This meant their answers did not fit well with the question and marks were affected. Where students clearly understood the term, they scored well. The best answers explored the use of icons as a focus on religious truths and a conduit to God, contrasting with the issues of idolatry and blasphemy. They also used examples to illustrate their arguments and knowledge.

## **Topic 2 – Religion and Architecture**

This topic was answered by half of all students. However, it was one of the lowest two scoring questions, with students averaging only 9.62 marks on it.

The stimulus was a monument at Yad Vashem commemorating the emptying of the Warsaw ghetto in January 1943.

06 – Many students answered this as ‘Religious monuments should...’, or ‘contain a message’ – both of which meant they missed the point of the question. Where students grasped the statement, they answered easily and freely, bringing in examples of monuments which are not at all religious, but also pointing to the fact that many so-called non-religious monuments are tinged with spirituality, eg a war memorial suggests sacrifice and hope as well as remembrance – all of which are certainly spiritual if not religious concepts.

07 – This was the best answered four mark question. Most students found it very straightforward and scored highly.

08 – Where students did not score well on this question, it was usually because they tried to describe symbolism, whereas the question was seeking how gravestones physically demonstrate religion. Those who mentioned shape or what was engraved usually got full marks.

09 – A number of students struggled with this question. Many students in this situation wrote about the creation of edifices over tombs, but did not include the relevance of revelation in their answer. This should have been their starting point. The best answer began by suggesting a person had had a revelation, which led to an instruction from God to build, or the inspiration to build, or a need to show devotion by building. If schools and colleges teach the three terms – revelation, devotion and inspiration – together, students will often find it easier to write flowing answers, as was certainly the case this year.

10 – Many students struggled with this question. The term ‘religious architecture’ was often only explored in a very limited way – ignoring the whole range met on the paper. ‘Teach about God’ often morphed into ‘teach about religion’, which is a very different question, and actually an opposing view to the statement (so that a student’s answer, which they had thought to be two-sided – was actually only one-sided). Additionally, a number of students took the word ‘God’ as referring only to Christianity – which skewed their response in the wrong way. A number of students referred to atheists being offended by the whole idea. However, they would have been better served by arguing that for atheists, it made no difference!

### **Topic 3 – Religion and Literature**

This was the least popular question in 2015; students averaged 9.8 for their answers.

11 – There seemed no issue with this question, and students were able to bring the full range of genres studied in the topic into their answers.

12 – Most students followed the argument that the writers are role models, so people are more inclined to read / listen. Very few students considered that this kind of literature is designed to demystify the holy books, and so is clearer to read. As with all two mark questions, students tended to do well.

13 – Most students chose to write about the God of the Bible, and their answers would only have been improved by explaining the characteristics they named – it was commonly the case that students listed characteristics. A number of students elevated CS Lewis’s ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ to the status of holy book, which unfortunately did not gain credit. That this was not an occasional slip within several schools and colleges, but rather a common mistake, suggests that some teachers may need to rethink their teaching strategy in terms of what students are understanding.

14 – Most students found this a very straightforward question to answer, many choosing to cite a specific example which demonstrated their points. The use of examples is an excellent way to demonstrate understanding and to build the depth of answers, teachers should encourage it.

15 – Students did reasonably well on this question, which was a straightforward six-mark evaluation questions. The best students spread their focus to include different types of religious literature, which is always a better strategy as it broadens the range of answers possible. The best students used the fact that there are many religions, and many groups within each to demonstrate that this literature is far from easy to understand. They also argued that any literature can be read – it is the level of understanding which differs. As with other six-mark questions, the best answers were broad-ranging, full of insight, and very often making unusual points; contrastingly, the weakest lacked development or range.

#### Topic 4 – Religion and Media

Whilst this was the second most favoured topic, it actually accrued the lowest average mark, including the lowest average of all the four and six mark questions.

16 – This would have been a perfect question to use examples with, which is exactly what the best students did. A number of students used the widest interpretation of spirituality, which also helped their answer. Some students confused 'religious' with 'spiritual'.

17 – This was a well-answered question on the use of religious documentaries to strength faith.

18 – Many students gave examples of websites to support their point here, for example, an example of a website holding a holy book, or one which streams live services. Answers ranged from the generic reasons why – that the internet is available everywhere – to specific reasons why – unable to attend a place of worship, for example. Where students failed to get full marks, it was usually because they made only a single point, or made a list of points without any development.

19 – This was the lowest scoring four mark question. Two significant issues were that some students did not write about a film – rather a TV programme, including soaps; and that they described the symbolism within a film rather than its religious message (this was especially the case when writing about Narnia, which also suffered from purely descriptive answers). Schools and colleges should approach the study of film through these different elements – précis of story, symbolism within, and religious message(s) which can be interpreted. However, students need to be able to write the right thing in the exam, so preparation should help students differentiate to make the right information selection. Additionally, a number of students wrote about a film that they stated was blasphemous and anti-religion – questions which ask for a religious message will not give credit to answers doing exactly the opposite. This was usually the case when talking about 'Life of Brian', although some students were able to use this film in a way to accrue marks.

20 – Many students struggled with this question, as many wrote about newspapers generally and not 'religious newspapers'. Many also failed to explore 'influence on society', and rather focused on any influence on the individual. Hence marks were low for this question. It also seemed clear that few students could name or write about religious newspapers.

#### Topic 5 – Religion and Music

Almost two-thirds of students chose to answer this question, with an average score of 10.5 marks for the whole topic.

21 – Students tended to do well on this question, and were almost unanimous in saying that there is more blasphemy than spirituality. Many made the point of the level of immorality within music, rather than blasphemy – though it was credited because of the idea of offending religion (as a definition of blasphemy).

22 – Students struggled to get the precise demand of this question, and many wrote about the beliefs within the song, rather than **how** the composer showed their beliefs. The question sought answers such as through the words, or the mood created, or the devotion shown, etc. Credit, albeit limited, was given for those answers simply focusing on the beliefs.

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23 – This was a straightforward question, as most clearly understood the term ‘chanting’ and knew how it might be used in worship.

24 – Students did well with this question with most students gaining at least half the available marks. The best answers gave a range of ways – from bringing a person closer to God / their religion, to the development of a sense of community, to the sense of well-being felt from a good sing-song. As with all other four mark questions, where students’ scores were limited, it was usually because of limited or a lack of development of the points being made.

25 – This was the best answered of all the six mark questions. The best of the answers were very insightful as to the qualities of music to spread the word, to enhance the well-being of the singer, and many referred to (usually Biblical) quotations to support the primacy of music. Students seemed to find it easy to develop their arguments in this question. Interestingly, few students chose to examine the word ‘music’ – given ‘religious’ was not used, this opened a whole line of attack on the statement around which music might help or hinder the expression of beliefs. The ones who did this generally were the most able, and wrote fluently and insightfully.

### **Topic 6 – Religion in Contemporary Society**

For the first time, this was not the least popular question; again, it was the highest scoring question, boosting the overall score of anyone who chose to answer it.

26 – With an average of almost 2 marks, this was a well-answered question. Three mark evaluation questions can be answered exclusively from one point of view, and the subject matter of monks gave ample scope for such an answer. Many students still brought in the religious practice of others – nuns, priests, and ordinary people – to show how commitment is shown. Where students fell down in the question, it was often because they just discussed commitment, and not ‘full’ commitment.

27 – Students found this a very straightforward question. Some students understood ‘public acts of worship’ to be ‘acts of worship in public’ rather than corporate worship. Credit was still given for this interpretation, but the responses tended to be narrower, as if limited by the interpretation.

28 – Students coped well in explaining the meaning of a religious symbol.

29 – Students coped well with this question, whether focusing on the idea of belonging to a religion, or the more generic idea of belonging.

30 – The average for the question was just over half marks, and students clearly had much to draw on in their answers. The vast majority argued about society being un-welcoming, even dismissive or antagonistic toward religion, and gave good examples from recent media for that view point. Their arguments were clear and strong. The argument that it is easy to express spirituality was less well-made, and often limited to a notion of new technologies opening things up. The better answers often pointed to the protections under the law which exist in the UK, and at times noted this was not the case everywhere in the world.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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

## **Converting Marks into UMS marks**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)