

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

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International GCSE

Religious Studies
(4RS0) Paper 1

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Introduction

This new Specification, with consequent new exam format, was examined for the first time this year.

The examination was in 2 parts. Part 1 consisted of 4 sections and candidates were required to answer one question from each section. Part 2 consisted of 6 sections, each asking questions from the perspective of a specific religion. Candidates were asked to answer two questions from Part 2.

All questions included sub-questions that were designed to assess both AO1 and A02.

Some candidates displayed an excellent detailed knowledge and understanding of specific religious teachings and practices and were able to look at other points of view objectively. At the same time, there were candidates who appeared to have only limited knowledge and understanding of the specification, and who sometimes wrote a great deal of general knowledge surrounding a topic, without directly addressing the specific question. Specifically in relation to (d) questions in Part 1 and (c) questions in Part 2, some candidates seemed unable to consider the topic from more than one point of view. That meant they were only able to achieve Level 3 (out of a possible 5) for these questions.

By far the vast majority of answers were from the perspective of Christianity and Islam.

Report on specific questions

It is not possible to report on answers to all the questions on this year's examination because not all of them were answered, and some were answered by very few candidates, making objective comment on such questions impossible. However, this report will try to illustrate both specific and general strengths and weaknesses wherever possible.

PART 1: Beliefs and Values

Section A: The universe, human beings and their destiny

Question 1(a)

This question was answered quite well, though some candidates wrote of ignorance in general, and did not relate it to wrong doing.

Question 1(b)

Some candidates confused predestination with human destiny (Q2b). Although there is some cross over, they are distinct concepts and needed to be addressed as such.

Question 1(c)

This was quite a well answered question, with candidates offering both a religious and non-religious perspective, which was allowed in the framing of this question.

Question 1(d)

Again, both religious and non-religious arguments were offered. Some candidates lost marks because they did not refer to a named religion, others because they were so certain that people should worry about the state of the planet that they didn't offer an alternative point of view.

Question 2(a)

Most candidates who got full marks used the definition from the specification.

Question 2(b)

Same comment as for Q1b above

Question 2(c)

Candidates offered a good range of answers to this question, some of them religious (for example, about the influence of sin) and others more secular (such as referring to Hobbes' views about human nature).

Question 2(d)

This was answered mainly with reference to the philosophical discussion between the Design argument and evolution, with many candidates scoring full marks for a balanced answer. Some candidates lost the final mark by failing to explain why they would support one point of view over the other. This was also a question in which a number of candidates failed to refer to a specific religion.

Section B: Ultimate reality and the meaning of life

Question 3(a)

The full concept of religious salvation was not so well understood, some candidates equating it with being forgiven, others simply saying that it was to do with being saved without that having a religious context.

Question 3(b)

This question was answered from a number of different faith perspectives. It appeared that candidates were quite familiar with the various religious teachings on this topic.

Question 3(c)

Some candidates answered this question well. However, some chose to write about both cause and design, whilst others seemed totally unfamiliar with the meaning of causality or how it might influence religious belief.

Question 3(d)

Some knew why a specific religion such as Islam or Christianity was monotheist, but seemed ill-equipped to offer reasons why polytheism might be equally or more rational.

Question 4(a)
Generally well answered

Question 4(b)
A number of candidates failed to read this question properly and offered religious ideas about the meaning of life. Some who read it correctly offered quite a limited set of reasons, appearing to be 'thinking on their feet'.

Question 4(c)
This was a well answered question overall, with many candidates able to offer a range of ways in which religious belief may help in times of suffering, including the promise of an afterlife, the notion of God having a plan, ministers offering support and so forth.

Question 4(d)
This produced a number of well-balanced answers, comparing the benefits of the nurturing community and clear values in childhood against the fervour and commitment of the convert.

Section C: Relationships, families and children

Question 5(a)
Remarriage was well understood overall

Question 5(b)
Again, a number of candidates failed to read this question carefully, some offering only one viewpoint on adultery, others offering religious points of view.

Question 5(c)
There were many good answers to the question about celibacy. However, such arguments as that some choose to be celibate because they prefer not to have children could only be considered religious reasons if properly explained in a religious context.

Question 5(d)
There were some well-balanced answers, contrasting the value of children having a supportive community and value structure as against the rights of children to a value free upbringing and the right to choose.

Question 6(a)
Most candidates learnt the complete definition and were able to score full marks.

Question 6(b)
Religious teachings about divorce were generally well and fully understood. Within Christianity, for example, many were able to point out that denominations have differing points of view or differing emphases.

Question 6(c)

Most candidates were able to offer a range of well understood religious arguments for and against homosexuality, many quoting from various religious texts. Some lost marks by not offering two different perspectives, usually by explaining only why some religions condemn homosexuality.

Question 6(d)

Some very balanced discussions, and usually a specific religion was named. Some candidates find it difficult to offer balanced answers when the perspective of some religions is apparently clear cut.

Section D: Rights, equality and responsibilities.

Question 7(a)

Disability bias was generally well understood, though some candidates gain only partial marks by giving an example rather than a definition.

Question 7(b)

Some candidates seemed to find this a challenge, not least because it called upon some specific knowledge of texts and/or particular teachings. Not all candidates have that level of detailed knowledge and some tended to deal in quite vague generalities.

Question 7(c)

With some notable exceptions, freedom of speech and opinion was not a well understood topic. Reasons tended to be vague and well padded. Some candidates were able to refer to specific religious teaching as well as to offer an explanation of various UN declarations.

Question 7(d)

Most candidates found it difficult to offer a balanced discussion of this question. Many simply offered some religious teachings about the value of charity and did not directly address the question.

Question 8(a)

Freedom of religion was well understood overall.

Question 8(b)

There were some vague answers to this question about the growth of rights and opportunities for women. The question specifically asked for examples, but this was quite widely ignored. Some candidates interpreted the question as asking for religious teaching about why women should have equal rights.

Question 8(c)

A good number of candidates were able to quote specific religious texts and teachings to explain why many religious people support religious pluralism. Some did not distinguish between religious pluralism and a multi-ethnic society.

Question 8(d)

Again, the difference between multi-faith and multi-ethnic hampered some candidates but, overall, this was a well answered question.

PART 2: The Religious Community

Not all questions, or even all sections, of this part of the paper were answered. Indeed, by far the vast majority of answers related either to Christianity or to Islam. It will therefore be more useful to offer some general observations on how the questions were approached, and illustrate them with reference to some specific questions.

(a) Questions

These questions asked for knowledge about certain aspects of the beliefs and practices of religious communities. With ten marks available the answers needed to be fairly detailed and comprehensive. In fact, some answers were very full and gained high marks. Some showed an admirable command of the detail of events and teachings. However some of the responses were far too short and/or general to gain more than half of the marks. There were also examples of questions not being read thoroughly or only partially understood.

For example:

Question 12(a)

This question asked for an outline of three events leading up to Jesus' death. In order not to penalise those who have comprehensive answers, candidates describing only two events were marked out of less than ten. Also, it should have been clear that the events needed to be those that immediately led up to Jesus' death (such as the events of Holy Week) or that had a direct bearing on his death (such as his disputes with religious leaders). Such events as Jesus' baptism could not be counted in this context.

Similar comments could also be made about answers to Q17(a) about three activities performed by Hindus when they visit the source of the Ganges.

Question 13(a)

This question asked for an outline of Jesus teaching on fasting from the Sermon on the Mount. That could not include other topics from the Sermon on the Mount, such as that of almsgiving.

Question 19(a)

This question asked about Muhammad's final sermon on the matter of the unity of the Islamic community. Some candidates wrote about the final sermon in general, and not only about the topic raised by the question. Others wrote about the unity of the Islamic community and of its importance, but without offering much of what Muhammad actually said.

Question 20(a)

This question asked about three activities that Muslims perform when they fast. Again, in fairness to those who answered the question accurately, those who

mentioned more than three activities could only be rewarded for the three they outlined most effectively. By mentioning more, they often diluted the detail of their answer.

(b) Questions

These questions asked for an explanation of specific religious teachings or activities. Again it should be noted that each question is worth ten marks, and they need to be slightly fuller than answers to (c) questions in Part 1. Many candidates displayed a good understanding of beliefs and practices, sometimes (for example, in the question about conscience in the section on Christianity and that about Shari'ah in the section on Islam) at a very sophisticated level indeed. There were, however, some recurring weaknesses that might usefully be illustrated.

For example:

Question 12(b)

Asks why the temptations of Jesus are still significant for Christians. Whilst there were some excellent answers, some looked upon this as another 'knowledge' question and simply outlined the temptations, occasionally with some fairly slight comment. Often what was meant to count as an explanation of significance was no more than a paraphrase of the description. "Jesus said that man cannot live on bread alone. This is significant because it is true today that man cannot live on bread alone." This may be an extreme example, but it does illustrate how many candidates were unable to explain the significance of something, as opposed to explaining what something means.

Similar comments could be made about Q20(b), with many descriptions of what kinds of things are Haram, but far less about why some things are Haram, as well as Q22(b) on Jewish dietary laws.

Question 13(b)

This is a good example of a question that was not read carefully. The Tenth Commandment is about coveting, but many answers wrote about stealing.

Question 19(b)

This question asks about the importance of knowledge of the Prophet's life for Muslim's today. Too little effort was made by some to speak about the 'today' aspect of this question, many candidates preferring to answer why such knowledge is important at all. There are a number of such questions possible on the specification, and candidates need to be prepared to answer from a current perspective.

A similar point could be made about some answers to Q10 (b) about the Noble Eightfold Path and its importance to Buddhists today.

(c) Questions

These are very similar to (d) questions in Part 1 and in fact carry the same number of marks. They ask for a balanced answer, with reasons for two points of view and a clear indication of why the candidate favours one or the other.

Many candidates could do this effectively, though quite a large number only gave reasons for one point of view. The other main weakness in answers was that candidates sometimes responded to an abbreviated version of the question, or one that they found it easier to answer.

For example:

Question 9(c)

'A monk's life is a selfish one' was sometimes answered as though it said 'Monks are important in Buddhism'

Question 17(c)

'Every religious person ought to go on pilgrimage' was often read as 'pilgrimage is important'.

Question 19(c)

'What religious leaders teach is more important than how they lives their lives' was sometimes interpreted as simply 'Religious teachers should be listened to'.

Of course, often there was still relevant material in the answers to such questions, but it limited candidates from accessing the full range of marks.

HOW TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Following from this report, it is possible to suggest a number of simple ways in which candidates can be helped to improve their performance:

For most, it is best to learn the definitions of key words as many struggle to offer an accurate paraphrase.

Candidates should be encouraged to be aware that questions can be asked from a religious or a non-religious perspective, or both.

They should look out for questions that ask about 'different' points of view or reasons. Such questions require at least two perspectives.

When asked to discuss an argument or proposition (in (d) questions in Part 1 and (c) questions in Part 2) they must give reasons for and against. Failing to do so means they will be marked out of 3 (rather than 5 marks). They also need to indicate which point of view they support and why.

Candidates should allocate sufficient time for Part 2. It is worth almost 40% of the total marks. Also, both the (a) and (b) questions carry 10 marks each and should usually be answered at some length.

Candidates need to be prepared to answer questions that ask about the relevance of religious beliefs and practices in the modern world.

They should also be reminded that it is best to try to answer the question set, rather than to answer a slightly altered version of their own making.

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