



GCSE

# Religious Studies A

8062/2A Paper 2A Thematic Studies (excluding textual studies)

Report on the Examination

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## General Comments

It is pleasing to see that the numbers taking this examination has increased again this year. Most students taking this subject were well prepared and attempted answering all the questions for the four themes which they chose. Most students understood the subject matter; most using the religions they had studied as the foundation for their answers. It was clear that the religion studied was not a barrier in attempting to answer any question. Only a small minority broke the rubric and attempted to answer more sections than they are allowed.

Centres are encourage to teach students good exam technique to prevent loss of marks from writing too little or too much in their answers. The number of marks for each questions is an indication of the volume of content required by the student. Hence less should be written in response for a two mark question compared to the five mark question.

A number of students are failing to read the questions carefully enough and are losing marks as a result. If the question asked for religious beliefs, then no marks are given for the part of the response where they have written 'atheists believe or non-religious people believe...' etc. This restricted the amount of marks which could be given, usually to half marks.

Many appear to think that .4 questions have to be a contrast (possibly because they have been asked to do so in many of the .3 questions). None of the .4 questions asked for a contrast but religious beliefs, reasons or views. A contrast may have been appropriate, but some struggled to find one and it wasn't necessary to do so. Where many students are still missing out with the five-mark questions is that they are required to name a source of authority to be able to gain the fifth mark; not naming the source caps the answer at four marks. Students do not need to give chapter and verse but could, for example, say that in the Ten Commandments it says that 'Do not steal' or mention the Bible or 'Jesus' says, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. The best students use a wide range of appropriate teachings, and they correctly name the source.

Centres are encouraged to teach and embed the student's knowledge of key terms. For some students not recognising key terms was a barrier to their gaining marks. Also, please note that stating that something is right or wrong, is not where credit is given, rather the explanation for that view is where credit lies. In addition, many students wrote about freewill and suggested that it gave everyone the opportunity to do exactly what they wanted irrespective of religious beliefs and teachings. In this context such points did not receive many marks.

An improvement this year was there were more good attempts at genuine evaluation. Many students now follow the pattern of presenting an argument, then its counter, and adding an evaluation of the two – which one is stronger/better. They then repeat this process once or more times, providing a final overall conclusion. This proved an effective way to bring evaluation into an answer.

**Theme A**

This was a popular theme.

**1.1**

There were few issues with this question requiring knowledge of the definition of an extended family, most choosing the correct option.

**1.2**

The question asked for two religious beliefs about human sexuality. Those who gained full marks usually wrote about the acceptancy of same-sex relationships or not, and the expectancy of heterosexuality. A number of students wrote about marriage, adultery, the sex act and procreation – none of these were usually valid, as they were not phrased in terms of their link to human sexuality, so for example, ‘men and women should procreate’, rather than ‘the purpose of human sexuality is to procreate’.

**1.3**

Several students had limited or no understanding of the term ‘polygamy’. It was possible to gain full marks by offering two different reasons why polygamy is frowned upon, but most students tried to explain why it was accepted, contrasting with why it was rejected. Students mainly chose to write about Islamic practice in explaining an accepting view, but many students wrote about Buddhism as well, given there are no rules regarding marriage in the faith (marriage law is cultural in Buddhism). A minority did write about Mormonism, unaware that polygamy was banned in the Mormon church in 1890, and only some sects outside the church still practise it. Historical examples of religious leaders practising polygamy were credited. Most students gave a Christian view to show polygamy was unacceptable, usually on the grounds of the ‘Adam and Eve’ formula, or that polygamy is deemed a form of adultery.

**1.4**

This question on gender discrimination was generally well answered. Students were able to explain different positions on gender prejudice, or the views of different religions/denominations. Where students wrote from a wholly Christian perspective, St Paul’s ‘Women should be silent in church’ was a well-used quotation as an alternative to Christians opposing gender prejudice. Students writing about Christianity, Buddhism or Islam usually gave the view that religions oppose gender prejudice, but may welcome it in the guise of ‘different roles’. It is important that students are taught that there is often a diverse range of attitudes within each religion they study and so it is better to say ‘some Christians or some Muslims etc’ rather than implying that all Christians or Muslims have the same belief.

**1.5**

The question asked for an evaluation of the statement: ‘Marriage is not important in today’s world.’ The key to the highest level of marks for this question was to explore the phrase ‘in today’s world’ – many students did not, restricting their response to a discussion of the importance of marriage itself. The wording of the question allowed for humanist and non-religious responses, and many students took advantage of this. Most students could give a range of points of view in their response. The most common comparison tended to be between religious and non-religious attitudes, with, for example, Christian and Muslim views presented as (usually) wholly in favour of marriage’s relevance today, and non-religious as wholly not.

## **Theme B**

This was the most popular section with most students answering this section.

### **2.1**

There were few issues with this question, asking for a term used to express the belief that human life is sacred and special.' Most chose the correct option of D 'sanctity of life'. Those who did not usually selected C – Quality of life.

### **2.2**

A small number of students read the question, which asked why some religious believers support animal experimentation, as being against animal testing, so their response was invalid. Most students used two ideas from dominion, primacy of human life, testing of medicines or lesser of two evils in their responses to gain full marks.

### **2.3**

This question, asking for two contrasting religious beliefs about the origins of human life, was not always well answered. Many students wrote about the creation of the world/universe and Big Bang and about the interpretation of the Genesis creation story and/or theory of evolution. As these responses were not focused on the question of human life origins, they only indirectly or partially answered the question, thus being credited at the level of 'simple explanation'. Some students put the Big Bang theory in the context of non-believers which could not be credited at all as the question asked for 'religious beliefs'.

A number of students did not explain the points they made and it is very common to see students repeat the question at the start and/or end of their response, but this is not a sufficient explanation to then be credited as 'detailed explanation'. Centres who teach students to write the question as part of their answer, must also teach students to make a point and develop it thereafter to gain the second mark.

### **2.4**

This question asked for reasons why religious believers should help to reduce pollution. Many students could provide a relevant teaching and usually accredited it, for example, that the creation story where God creates the world is found in Genesis (or the Bible). If students failed to gain full marks, it was usually because they did not focus on reducing pollution (gaining credit for a simple explanation only), rather on the fact the world is special in some way or a generalised 'God made the world' response and everyone should look after it. Students needed to take their answer further and apply this idea of specialness to clearly state its meaning for pollution.

### **2.5**

This question was not whether abortion is ever the right action or not, nor was it a comparison of religious against non-religious views. Answering from either of these interpretations led to reduced marks, because the question asked whether religious believers should be against abortion or not. However, many students wrote very good responses and so scored good marks in answering this question. Most students were able to give very well-argued anti-abortion arguments backed up with many relevant teachings; the alternative view was often weaker and based around situation ethics. Better responses showed how some teachings worked for both sides, dependent on interpretation.

## **Theme C**

This theme was answered by a minority of students this year.

### **3.1**

Only just over half of those who answered this theme chose the correct option for this question which required an understanding of General Revelation.

### **3.2**

Many students found this question, about why many religious believers think that God is impersonal, straightforward and around half picked up two marks although a minority confused impersonal with personal.

### **3.3**

On this specification, enlightenment is the realisation of religious truths, which is possible in all religions. Where a student understood the term, they invariably got full marks. Many used Buddhism as one of their religions when attempting this question but they could answer using any religion. Around a third obtained all four marks.

### **3.4**

This question sought ideas about scripture as a source of knowledge of the divine – was it a good, bad or indifferent source? Did it help believers, and how much? Where students had recognised this in the question, they were able to write freely and well. Many supported their points by giving a relevant teaching. Most named the scriptures that they were writing about, with the Bible and Qur'an being the most popular. Around a quarter obtained the full five marks.

### **3.5**

The question asked for evaluation of the statement: 'the Design argument does not prove that God exists.' A number of students found this difficult, because they did not recognise it was simply asking for the pros and cons of the Design argument. The First Cause argument was referenced by some students, and credit was given for the idea that the designer had to have had a cause or have been the First Cause of all. Often students using this argument did not make this explicit, and so left the examiner working out the links. Those students who had studied Design argument(s) wrote eloquently in describing the argument, but often had only limited things to say about the pros of the argument. Good reference was often made to the problems of a chaotic world, and of evil/suffering to question any sort of design; students also referred to the Big Bang and evolutionary theory. Hence there was often more said in terms of the flaws of the argument compared to its strengths.

**Theme D**

This was a popular choice this year.

**4.1**

There were few issues with this question on knowledge of a term to describe the belief that all violence is wrong, most choosing the correct option. Those who got it wrong were clearly just guessing, and opted for any of the other three.

**4.2**

Most students were usually able to give two ways in which believers can work for peace. Many chose to write from an individual in their own life's perspective, which was valid and credited. Others wrote on a nation-scale, such as negotiating peace. Some wrote about why it is important to be a peacemaker rather than what actions they might take to bring about peace. The question asked for 'ways' not 'reasons'.

**4.3**

Some students did not understand the term 'nuclear deterrent'. This question was about having/possessing a nuclear deterrent, and not about using nuclear weapons – that difference cost a number of students' marks, as they answered solely about its use as a weapon. Just over a third of students gained full marks.

**4.4**

Students generally did well with this question, which was asking why religious believers should help victims of war. They were able to give many detailed explanations in their responses, usually including teachings, and often naming the source of those teachings. Around 60% obtained four or five marks. A minority of students read the question as seeking how believers help, or asking them to describe the work of charities – neither of which responses answered the question, so gained no marks.

**4.5**

The main issue met in responses to this statement that 'Self defence is the only good reason for going to war' was that students understood the question to be a discussion of whether war was ever acceptable or not; this limited their marks. Many responses could give detailed arguments to support the idea of self-defence being the only good reason for war, but sometimes blurring the lines between self-defence and retaliation. The alternate view was usually around Just War or wars to defend the faith, including Holy war. A number of students did reference Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, though many of these inaccurately believed that Britain joined WW2 because of the Holocaust, rather than the treaty with Poland. It was rare to see references to modern or current wars. Current wars are in the news, and provide a good resource for teachers to use in class, making the subject up-to-date and directly relevant to students.

Many students did present a third point of view of war being absolutely wrong, usually arguing from a Quaker or Buddhist perspective. Some students tried to argue all different reasons for war, explaining why greed and aggression were not acceptable – this was sometimes not relevant to the question in the way it was written. A small number, usually writing for and against war, made no reference to self-defence, and so gained limited credit (capped at 6 marks as a one-sided answer).

**Theme E**

A very popular question.

**5.1**

Nearly all students selected the correct option (hate crime) for this question as to which term is given to 'a crime which involves violent actions against someone because of their race or religion'.

**5.2**

Most students found this question straightforward and were able to give two reasons why a believer might oppose an unjust war. Reasons were a mix of religiously-motivated, and secular such as an unfair law, as well as some making personal reference.

**5.3**

The general pattern of answers to a question on religious views about sending criminals to prison was to say that prison was acceptable as a place of reform, or as a place to deter or to bring safety. Some students argued against prison in the terms that it is not supported by religious law (Shari'ah), or is not harsh enough or is a school for crime. Many students wrote Christians believe in forgiveness for anything and everything over punishment and argued that Christians completely disagree with prison. This was not credited, as it is inaccurate to say that Christianity (or any religion) disagrees absolutely with the use of prison; and it is also inaccurate to say that punishment and forgiveness are mutually incompatible. Where students showed that prison was inappropriate for certain crimes, credit was given when correct.

Credit was given when a response gave an alternative punishment, if prison was referenced and the crime merited alternative punishment. For example, some students argued for community service or corporal punishment as better alternatives to prison.

**5.4**

This question concerned two religious views about theft. Most students were able to explain well, using teachings and sources such as the laws of the Commandments, and the Qur'an. Their second point was often on the same lines, so that they would first argue from Christianity 'Do not steal', then from Islam 'Cut off the hands of thieves'. They usually gained full marks as they named the source. Many students tried to give contrasting views, even though the question did not seek that. In this case they offered a mitigation argument, for example, that stealing might come from extreme poverty. However, most giving this view mixed it up with the idea that stealing was deemed acceptable or fine by (usually) Christians if it was to feed a family. This is inaccurate – theft is always wrong, but at times may be understandable, though potentially still punishable. Very few students made this particular distinction. Some students did make the point that stealing out of survival in the UK is unnecessary and wrong because there are food banks and religious groups and charities will always help those in need.

**5.5**

This question about the use of the death penalty was well answered with many writing in length. Most students were able to give many religious reasons for and against support of the death penalty, and so fulfilled the questions requirements. 'Do not kill' and the sanctity of life featured in most answers. Some students did just argue for and against the death penalty, rather than mentioning whether or not

religious believers should never support the use of the death penalty. This had the effect of restricting their mark to Level 3 maximum. The differentiator was usually the level of detail, and how clearly the points were linked to the statement. Unfortunately, some students posited the idea that the death penalty could be substituted for a lesser punishment like community service. Some students got lost in their arguments, so failing to make much of an attempt at evaluation.

It is the case that a person can be forgiven by the victim/their family and still receive the death penalty, because the authority behind the death penalty is not the victim/their family. Similarly, a person in Western countries where the death penalty is used has time to reform and to change before they are executed as they spend years in prison ahead of their execution. It was extremely rare to see these points made, and when they were it was only in the best responses. It was also rare to see current references to the use/none-use of death penalty, or the discriminatory practice in its use in many countries. Any unfairness almost always centred on the potential to execute an innocent, often referring to historic UK cases. Reviewing current news stories in teaching to provide up-to-date examples, and to explore the unfair/unforgiving nature of the death penalty would benefit students responses.

## **Theme F**

This section was reasonably popular than Theme C..

### **6.1**

The question asked which of the following best describes the meaning of prejudice and the correct answer was 'Judging someone without knowing them'. There were few issues with this question, most choosing the correct option although quite a number opted for A – An action that treats someone unfairly.

### **6.2**

Two ways in which religious believers work for social justice was the focus of this question. Whilst many students struggle with the term 'social justice', the nature of this question was such that most could gain full marks, as a very wide range of responses were valid.

### **6.3**

This proved to be a very straightforward question for most students. Whilst often with 'similar' questions, students struggle, on this occasion the nature of the topic – racial prejudice – made it easy to give similar views, almost always that it is wrong. Most commonly used teachings included 'love thy neighbour', 'all one in Christ', 'made in God's image', that is to say Christianity was the most commonly seen view.

### **6.4**

Generally, there were few problems with this question which asked for two religious beliefs about attitudes to wealth. Many students wrote about the dangers of greed, including referencing 'love of money is the root of all evil'. Where a student did write about greed, they had to link it clearly to wealth to gain good credit. Often students stated that having money was incompatible with being a Christian, which is inaccurate, thus gaining no marks. However, where it was put in the context of extreme wealth can be a hindrance to getting to heaven eg Matthew 6 : 21 or 19 :24 or the Parable of the Rich Fool, it was very relevant and marks were awarded. The best responses stated that wealth was a privilege, which

meant that a person had to share their wealth. Most answers which referred to Islam mentioned that wealth should be used to support others through the payment of zakat.

## **6.5**

Evaluation was required on the statement, 'The right to follow a religion is the most important human right'. It was necessary to engage with 'most important' to achieve the highest mark level, and some students just argued about the importance of different rights. 'Human right' in the statement did not specify UNDHR, and so students could write much more broadly. Many students chose to write about the rights suggested by WHO, which are all about survival and a basic standard of living (food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, employment). Common UNDHR rights were freedom of speech and education. Students usually wrote about the right to religion from an individual's perspective – how important it was for that person, giving them hope and purpose.

The best responses argued that the common abuse of that right - for example a religious country banning a different religion on pain of death to its citizens, or the Crusades - is a reason for its non-primacy. They also showed how the right to religion delivers a huge range of other rights because of the values held (for example, sanctity of life leading to the WHO's rights), and making it a foundation of human rights.

Where students were aware of the many different human rights, there were some very good answers but some struggled, because of their lack of knowledge of alternatives to be able to follow a religion, usually just arguing that all human rights are equally important.

## **SPaG**

Most scored either 2 or 3 for SPaG. Many are using technical language where appropriate but there are still those who spell 'believe' incorrectly and some other fundamental words which are repeated frequently during a Religious Studies exam.

Overall, most students found this a very accessible paper and made a serious attempt to do well.

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

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