

2024 ASSESSMENT REPORT

REL315124 STUDIES OF RELIGION

General Comments

2024 was the first year of a new course for Studies of Religion Level 3. Teachers and students are to be commended for working hard to accommodate the considerable changes in focus and emphasis in the new course after a long period of courses similar in content, scope and design. This report aims to emphasise the nuanced differences in this new course to support teachers and students moving forward. 176 candidates sat the three-hour written paper this year. As with other years there were three distinct sections of one hour duration on the exam. Overall, students followed the exam directions and labelled and answered each section correctly addressing the specific demands of each section. Whilst Criteria 1 and 3 are assessed on each section of the paper; Criterion 6, Criterion 7 and Criterion 8 were specific to each of the examined modules. It will be essential for students and teachers to ensure that the specific demands of module-specific criterion are addressed during 2025 and beyond as that criterion is only assessed once in the external examination and only within the module itself internally. To enjoy success, students need to ensure that they are attuned to the specific requirements of the criterion of each module.

In Module 1, with its focus on the variants of a religious tradition, students need to ensure they are prepared to write on the historical emergence of variants; the similarities and differences between variants in beliefs, values and practices; and where there has been conflict and cooperation between variants. All this needs to be prepared for, and addressed within, Section A, along with maintaining strong links to an unseen stimulus. The layered tasks of Section A and the unseen stimulus makes this a challenging section of the examination.

In Module 2 students are drawing on their knowledge of the core beliefs, values, and practices of a second religious tradition to evaluate and consider how adherents of the tradition critically analyse, understand, and respond to suffering or, alternatively, respond to an ethical issue. Knowledge of core beliefs, values and practices is the foundation on which a deeper understanding of how the tradition as a whole and specific variants (where relevant) have made sense of suffering or the ethical challenge.

In Module 3 students need to apply the learning from their researched Depth Study topic to explain, analyse and highlight credibly sourced and differing points of view and perspectives within the religious tradition selected in Module 1 or Module 2. Given students have spent a significant amount of time on their Depth study in Module 3, a wide range of differing religious views within the tradition can be contrasted and compared where applicable. This rich bed of knowledge needs to be selectively drawn upon to specifically meet the demands of the exam question provided and display the consistency and coherence of varying points of view within a tradition.

As a transdisciplinary course sociological, philosophical, historical, and theological insights are part of the design of the course and can be incorporated into student responses with confidence.

This year there were a good number of scripts of a very fine standard which were a pleasure to read and mark. Evidence of thoughtful preparation for the Studies of Religion external examination was apparent in a sizeable number of scripts, which was heartening. The strongest responses

used their knowledge and understanding of key learning areas and crafted an essay response that specifically met the demands of the exam question. Stronger responses highlighted wide knowledge of the core beliefs, values and practices of their chosen traditions and the different responses by variants, individual adherents, and specific communities within the tradition in crafting their response to the questions.

In contrast, lack of preparation and lack of engagement with the actual demands of the question was sadly evident in some responses too. Markers are aware of the prepared response and the inclusion of prepared information that is not tailored to the specific demands of the question (or new course) is a trap in the exam setting. There is a great deal of content in this course, and it needs to be fully committed to memory, which is particularly challenging. Markers were encouraged by students who provided a range of supporting quotes and cited reliable primary and secondary sources to support their points. There were some errors in knowledge of traditions' core beliefs, values and practices and some wide sweeping generalisations about beliefs, values and practices within traditions and variants within traditions – aim for precision and clarity. It is worth students naming up in their responses that there are layers of complexity even within variants and one cannot make the claim that “All Protestants believe...” or “All Orthodox Jews practice...”, for example.

Section A

Question 1

107 candidates selected this question.

As with all Section A stimuli, it was essential to find ways to quote, address and reference the specific demands of the question not only in the introductory paragraph or in conclusion but in the framing and response to the question throughout. Students were able and encouraged to draw on knowledge of more than one variant, especially as they needed to outline differences in doctrine (belief) and practices between variants and where that may have led to conflict and cooperation. Candidates were not explicitly asked to discuss the historical reason for the origin of the variant within the tradition and therefore were not penalized for not referencing it as the question did not guide candidates to do so. However, references to the reason for the historical emergence of a variant were rewarded when included within the response. In general, this external assessment requires candidates to apply their knowledge of religious traditions in an essay response to a specific question. In this section, the criteria and questions require candidates to discuss more than one variant of the selected religious tradition, and to compare and contrast variants. The study of the Islamic tradition lent itself well to this section, as did the study of Buddhism or Judaism. Candidates had more difficulty with Christianity with its many subvariants, and many would have been well advised to stick to the response of two variants in total within the Christian tradition.

Criterion 1

The best responses structured a thoughtful, supported, and consistent response to the question, effectively using relevant terminology and demonstrating a good command of language and appropriate style. The study of variants within a tradition is a requirement of this new course and candidates who failed to reference the stimulus at all or to discuss variants within the tradition did not succeed on this section of the examination. It is difficult to achieve well on a question that is

concerned with relevance, purpose, appropriateness, and effectiveness of variants within a tradition when variants are not addressed at all.

Criterion 3

Better responses discussed beliefs, values and practices that were directly relevant to the question or made them relevant to the question. The best responses selected beliefs, values and practices that illustrated differences or similarities between variants or had specific relevance to the stimulus. These best responses also included analysis of why these differences, similarities, cooperation, or conflicts occurred or arose. This criterion is not an invitation to recount as much random knowledge of a religious traditions as possible in an hour. The recount of random beliefs, values and practices of a religious traditions earns a candidate a 'C' rating at best.

Criterion 6

This criterion requires candidates to discuss, similarities, differences, conflict, cooperation between variants and origin of a variant. This year's question did not specifically mention the origin of a variants so candidates could not be expected to discuss this facet, though it should be noted that many did include this to good effect. It is not possible to obtain even a 'C' rating on this criterion without discussing variants.

Question 2

69 candidates selected this question.

Criterion 1

Most candidates referenced the visual stimulus and responded to the question, which was pleasing. The best responses structured a thoughtful, supported, and consistent response to the question, effectively using relevant terminology and demonstrating a good command of language and appropriate style, as was the case in Question 1.

Criterion 3

This was a difficult criterion for students to address accurately if they were unaware of how their particular religious tradition responded to the stimulus key terms "peace and love". The temptation was to simply provide prepared information or knowledge of their chosen tradition's beliefs, values and practices and ignore the visual stimulus. For example, essays on Islam made no reference to the word Islam deriving from Peace or the Muslim greeting Salaam. There was no real point discussing beliefs, values, and practices unless they were relevant to the discussion that the question asked for, carefully selecting the information required is a discipline required for success in the exam setting.

Criterion 6

One essay response of note focused on Sufism demonstrating impressive knowledge of this variant. The essays on Christianity were very mixed with a certain amount of confusion; for example, Anglicans are Protestants and the Great Schism was different from the Protestant Reformation. Not surprisingly, there was no mention of the three Historic Peace Churches in the Protestant tradition, but it was hard for students to grasp the enormous number of variants in Protestantism! Many students forgot to discuss variants or left them until the very end (which rarely worked well).

Section B

Question 3

166 candidates selected this question, with most writing about the Jewish response to suffering.

Criterion 1

There were some exceptionally fine responses to this question – with clearly articulated structured responses that addressed the specific demands of the question. The clearest advice for students is the priority and need to answer the question. The question was (and will always be) on suffering and so that should be the focus of the responses rather than the case study. Students who wrote on Christianity and Buddhism tended to do this well but those who did Judaism fell into the understandable trap of writing essays that were better suited to the previous version of the course where the Shoah was discussed as a challenge to Judaism both within and outside the tradition. Markers looked to reward any accurate use of terms and clear paragraphing. Generally, structure was intelligible, and writing was sound. However, in weaker responses essay structure lacked precision when it came to a clear contention to be pursued throughout the paper (in regard to the question), or a clear 'roadmap' in the introduction laying out the logic of the paragraphs.

The primary issue with this criterion was that a large majority of students did not tailor their material to answer the question (E1 & 3). This was especially true of those writing on Judaism, in that many essays spent valuable time laying out the intricacies of the Nazi Party's rise to power rather than Jewish responses to suffering. Those essays that were able to analyse specifically how Jewish beliefs and practices guided adherents through an experience like the Shoah or shifted their belief as a result of the Shoah scored higher in regard to answering the question.

Criterion 3

This criterion rewarded student explanation and analysis of relevant beliefs, practices and (though much less frequently identified) values for the chosen religion. Stronger candidates knew the intricacies of beliefs and practices and could support their analysis with evidence from relevant sacred texts and scholars. Weaker students tended to make simple statements about what their religious tradition believed or rituals they participated in without elaboration on the variations within the tradition or the significance or support the religious tradition provides for adherents in their response to suffering. Some errors in understanding were careless for example saying Jewish believers attended "chapel" or believed in reincarnation. Just mentioning beliefs, values and practices was not sufficient to achieve well on Criterion 3 – the question required candidates to move beyond the mere articulation of beliefs, values, and practices in isolation to always link back to the topic of suffering. Students used supporting evidence well which is to be recommended: writers, theologians, scripture and reference to case studies and individuals all make for good supporting evidence in the essay body paragraphs.

Criterion 7

Whilst Criteria 3 demands were met quite well, transitioning between explaining a practice (such as Shabbat for example) and how this guides an adherent responding to suffering (C7) was less well managed. Stronger responses offered extended analysis of how beliefs and practices led to specific and complex understandings, solace, and guidance in different cases of suffering. Weaker responses did not address this element of the question stem. Criterion 7 is only assessed once on this paper, students and teachers need to be aware of all the elements of the criteria and not to

particularise one or two elements as the question may well address all three elements. Element 1 requires understanding of the rationale or reason in response to a contemporary issue. Element 2 requires knowledge of beliefs, values, or practices and how these beliefs, values and practices reinforce the tradition's views on contemporary religious issues. Element 3 requires critical examination and evaluation of how a religious tradition has responded to contemporary religious issues to draw justified conclusions.

Question 4

10 candidates selected this question.

The students in this group wrote on the Christian ethical response to the environment and the shift religiously from notions of dominion over creation to stewardship of it. The essays were sophisticated and well prepared in the main. Markers were impressed by the wide range of quotes and contrasting views showcased within the Christian tradition. Students quoted a range of thoughtful writers and commentators across a range of Christian variants and also referenced Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* encyclical. The width and depth of scholarship was pleasing to note. The students adopted a similar scaffolded approach, and the better responses addressed the specifics of the question not only in the introductory paragraph but throughout the essay and in conclusion. Students drew in particular on the strong Christian ethic of preservation of life and the importance of stewardship of the earth and its creatures especially where the effects of climate are having the most impact. Students answering this question were able to draw on notions of social justice especially in countries which lack resources to address the impacts of climate change and sustainability. Rather than formulaically outline Christian beliefs, values and practices, candidates in this cohort were able to draw on this knowledge to provide the response of the tradition to this contemporary issue drawing some strong conclusions.

Section C

Question 5

18 candidates selected this question.

The majority were on the role of women in Islam and were varied in their level of sophistication and ability to draw on wider reading and researched understanding from their Depth Study. Strong responses were articulate and well structured, used Islamic terminology correctly and were proficient in their use and control of language. A clear thesis point was articulated in the introduction of strong responses and sustained and addressed throughout the essay. Stronger responses also displayed wide, accurate and considered understanding of Islamic beliefs, values and practices explaining well their significance to the individual adherents, variants, and cultural groups. It was refreshing to see frequent reference to Quranic verses in well prepared responses and nuanced understanding of the way Islam is practiced in different countries and within different subvariants. Stronger responses used quotes and examples of differences in points of view in this very culturally diverse faith tradition. The ability to contrast the experiences of women across the globe to highlight the diversity of roles of women within the tradition were well rewarded by markers. Weaker responses made wide sweeping generalizations about the oppression of Islamic women, provided simplistic understanding of concepts such as veiling and modesty, marriage, divorce, and access to education for women within the tradition and used terminology incorrectly. Students need to be accurate in their understanding of the core beliefs, values, and practices of Islam. For example, if candidates refer to the Five Pillars of Islam as a foundation on which to

discuss the role of women, candidates need to move beyond just providing prepared information on the Five Pillars to the way the Pillars themselves might provide a basis upon which to compare and contrast different perspectives on the role of women that might exist within the tradition.

Question 6

There were no responses to this question.

Question 7

147 candidates selected this question.

Criterion 1

Strong candidates were sophisticated in their essay structure, use of terminology and demonstrated effective use of communication skills to answer the question convincingly meeting the demands of an essay under exam conditions. Strong responses distinguished ethical theoretical approaches that applied to a religious tradition and drew on extensive knowledge of writers, theorists, philosophers, or theologians from the candidates selected religious tradition. Sophisticated answers quoted sacred texts, offering analysis and application. Better responses offered comparison between the range of different ethical approaches and responses to a particular ethical dilemma in the light of the tradition. Students who showed a command and control of language to convey their meaning thoroughly were well rewarded on this criterion.

Criterion 3

Strong responses embedded in their answers a deep and thorough understanding of the beliefs and values of a tradition, explaining how these beliefs shaped their response to the ethical dilemma being discussed. Furthermore, they were able to offer analysis of the meaning and significance of the religious beliefs in the light of the dilemma. Mid-range responses were able to present the ethical response of a religious tradition to a contemporary ethical issue, this may have included some reference to sacred text, beliefs, values, or practices that aligned with the tradition but lacked precision in drawing back or linking clearly to the religious tradition overall.

Criterion 8

Students who were adept at exploring points of view expressed by the adherents of a tradition at a variant level were well rewarded. Strong responses were able to identify inconsistencies, and problematic consequences of adopting a religious ethical perspective as well as the benefits and coherence in adopting such points of view. Weaker response offered some analysis of adopting religious perspectives relating to ethical dilemmas but needed more critical analysis of points of view to be awarded a higher award.

Weaker responses were often short in length, were poor in their overall structure and lacked clear evidence, expansive discussion, or analysis. In some cases, there were errors about what a tradition believed and held to be true. Often these poorer answers were simplistic in their response to the question and lacked the development of an argument supported by appropriate evidence. Some candidates were able to name and describe two ethical positions but did not tie them to a religious tradition overall. It should not be left to the marker to assume that candidates know that Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law approach is aligned with the Catholic Christian tradition whilst Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics has its source in the Protestant tradition. There were also some

obscure topics which tended not to tie in as seamlessly with an ethical position. A few essays just focused on a faith position – like the Bible – but with no reference to ethical guidelines such as The Ten Commandments or The Beatitudes and how they fit within the Jewish or Christian tradition.

Question 8

There were no responses to this question.

Question 9

There were no responses to this question.