



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

Religious Studies

RSS08

(Specification 2060)

Unit H Religion and Contemporary Society

Report on the Examination

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General comments

It was pleasing to note the quality of a good number of the scripts this year. These showed that candidates had a good knowledge base and were able to write thoughtfully in response to the questions. In general, candidates seem better prepared for the demands of both AO1 and AO2 questions, and for the allocation of their time between these questions. There are still a number who penalise themselves by entering into an AO2 type discussion in the first part of a question, where it can gain no credit, or at best, incidental credit. Because the topic areas for the four questions are bound to come up, examiners have to be strict on only giving credit for answers to the questions set! Some candidates insisted on presenting their prepared answers to previous questions, and these too, could gain little credit. As always, there were scripts where the handwriting proved challenging to the most experienced examiner. It is important that candidates practise writing under examination conditions, and realise that even the best answers still have to be legible.

As mentioned in a previous report, it is a matter of concern that some candidates still show themselves to be 'othering'. Thus, when writing of religious groups, there is a strong tendency not only to use 'us and them' language, but also to refer to various groups as 'immigrants', or to talk about 'the countries from which they have come'. Religious Studies students, and indeed any students at this level should be aware that the majority of those of whom they are speaking are third or fourth generation British residents.

Question 1 *Changing patterns of religious practice in the UK during the 20th century*

01 This was the first time that 'ways of measuring practice' had appeared on the paper, and there were some interesting and informed responses. Some wrote about the various indices (i.e. identification/affiliation, membership, attendance and belief.) Others wrote in an informed way about 'methods' and about the various surveys, including the census, as well as about attendance counts, and some referred to the Tearfund Report, the work of Brierley, or other recent studies. Some suggested ways such as counting buildings or functionaries of religion. In some cases, it appeared that candidates might be 'thinking on their feet', but in many instances, they did so well. The second part of the question was often less well done. 'Relative strengths' is a term from the specification, and refers to the numerical strengths. Some candidates tried to write about the 'relative merits' of different religions. The most basic information here was the relative figures from the 2001 census. (Obviously, these will be updated by the results of the 2011 census, when published.) Better answers were able to explore the implications of these figures, or to show, for instance, particular branches of Christianity which are doing well statistically. Weaker answers tended to be very general or only to refer to one or two religions.

02 A significant number of candidates did not read the question sufficiently thoroughly, and wrote their prepared discussion on 'decline'. The focus of this question was on 'being a committed member' and the significance of this in today's society. Better answers were able to consider this in the context of societal changes such as the fact that the membership of organisations generally is down, the demands made on people by committed membership and to set these against the benefits of such membership (having a group of like minded people), and the fact that if one really believes in something, committed membership is important. There were some good discussions.

Question 2 *Expressions of religion within society*

03 There were some very good answers to this question, in which candidates clearly showed a very good understanding of what faith schools are, something of their history, and a range of aspects of their role within the educational system today. Such answers were able to distinguish between various types of faith schools, and to refer to the relevant legislation. Weaker answers tended to be very vague, and left the impression that the topic had not been studied at all, with candidates relying on very general observations. The question was 'stepped', asking the candidates firstly to outline what is meant by 'faith school', and then to examine the role of these schools. This was a deliberate wording, to help the accessibility of the question, and to encourage candidates to define their terms at the outset. Too many candidates ignored the help which was offered by this wording, and thus penalised themselves by failing to offer any sort of definition.

04 There were some thoughtful answers here, in which candidates were able to present good arguments on both sides. The reasons offered in agreement with the statement included the idea that faith schools are inappropriate in a secular society, that faith schools may indoctrinate, that they cause segregation which is not good for social cohesion. In disagreement, they pointed to the popularity of the schools, and the fact that many gain excellent examination results, as well as the fact that they enable people to practise and follow the life style of their religion. The best answers used such ideas to reach a reasoned conclusion. Weaker answers tended to be one-sided, or simply to reiterate points made in the first part of the question.

Question 3 *Issues of identity and belonging*

05 It was pleasing to note that the majority of candidates did try in some way to address the concepts of identity and assimilation here. Too often in the past, when the word 'identity' has appeared, many have gone straight into prepared answers on dress and diet, often at a rather basic level. There was still this tendency, but in most cases, there was some attempt to address the question. The best answers were able to define the concepts, recognising their complexity, and to look at a range of aspects, including, but not limiting themselves to dress and diet. Thus, they were able to consider the impact of identity on social groupings, and on personal values, as well as to talk about dual identities such as 'British Muslim' and to consider the implications of these. When writing about dress and diet they were able to show the effects of culture and some awareness of the practices of different groups within the religion. In discussing assimilation, they were able to describe something of the 'dynamic' of assimilation, and to give examples of different forms of assimilation. Weaker answers tended to be limited to a few examples of dress and diet. A worrying trend here was not just the forms of language noted under General Comments above, but also the degree of stereotyping. For instance, there was sometimes the implication that all Muslims (not even all Muslim women!) wear Burqahs. It is important at this level that candidates can begin to see beyond stereotypical views. In writing about assimilation it was clear that quite a lot did not really understand the meaning of the term, and were tending to discuss ways in which society had accommodated, for example, the need for Halal food. The term assimilation is in the Specification and should be known.

06 There were some well reasoned answers here, which showed good understanding of both the positive and negative aspects of assimilation. Some drew thoughtfully on the experience of their own families. Weaker answers or those who failed to appreciate the meaning of the term 'assimilation' were obviously limited in their responses. This was one of the places where quite a lot of 'them and us' language was seen.

Question 4 *An introduction to New Religious Movements (NRMs)*

07 Five days before the examination had been the date predicted by an American preacher for the 'rapture'. This prediction had been much in the news in recent weeks, and clearly some candidates had been following this, and had used this material very well. It may have been this factor which led to this being a very popular question, and one on which many candidates scored highly. Even without this aspect, it was clear that many candidates were well prepared for this topic. They were able to write in detail about the concept of millenarianism, and to explore different types of movements. They were also able to exemplify their ideas appropriately. Some weaker answers just gave general material about the characteristics of New Religious Movements (NRMs), which could gain little credit.

08 There were some good answers here which focused on both sides of the argument. Some were able to point to the decline in religion generally, and to argue that any kind of religion, let alone more 'extreme' movements, such as millenarians, has little appeal in the 21st century. Such answers also pointed to the apocalyptic imagery having little meaning in today's world. Many used the fact that May 21st had come and gone as evidence against the relevance of these movements. On the other side, some argued that the continuing existence of such movements must be evidence of their appeal, and some used the argument that earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters can be interpreted as 'signs of the times' and therefore show that these movements still have a place in the modern world. Some of those who had remained focused on millenarian movements in 07 nevertheless tended to write about the appeal or relevance of NRMs in general in this part of the answer, and thus gained limited credit.

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