



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

Religious Studies

RST4A

(Specification 2060)

**Unit 4A Topic I Life, Death and Beyond
Topic II Perceptions of Ultimate Reality
Topic III Religious Experience**

Report on the Examination

Further copies of this Report on **the Examination** are available from: aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2011 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

Copyright

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

Section A Life, Death and Beyond

There were many interesting answers to these questions, and some answers to each part of each question scored full marks. The best AO1 answers were those which had points to make relevant to the topic and used the information to explain or illustrate their points. Weaker answers in contrast tended simply to summarise information. There were also signs that some candidates were using prepared answers to past questions in places and, as a result, their answers were not actually focused on the question set.

Question 1

01 There were some very well-informed answers to this question; however, some simply summarised, for example, teaching from the Book of Revelation or Qur'an without commentary or, in some cases, explanation: this limited the marks that could be awarded. Most did focus directly on eschatology and apocalyptic teaching but a few wrote in general about life after death, only some of which was relevant. In their commentaries on the teaching, many candidates included the point that the Book of Revelation may not be about the end of the world at all. This was, of course, perfectly valid but many then went on to include much information about the possible 'real' meaning of the teaching. This led them away from the focus of this part of the specification 'Life, Death and Beyond', and some could have spent their time much more effectively.

Some candidates, after dealing in depth with the teachings of one religion, made almost passing references to another. Such references were often quite broad generalisations and not always accurate.

Secular views were often simply listed rather than examined in any way. For example there are speculations about disasters that will wipe out humanity (plague, super volcano eruption, nuclear accident etc.) and theories about how the universe will end (Big Crunch, cold death etc): these are very different but were simply presented without comment as alternatives.

02 This was a broad statement which required candidates to consider what value such teaching could have, who 'people' might be in this context and the value some of the teaching may or may not have for them. There were some good examples ranging from those who allow predictions about the immediate end of the world to dominate their lives, often illustrated with reference to the recent predictions of Harold Camping, to those who consider the possibility so remote that it has no impact at all on their lives and/or reject all talk of a final judgement and so rule out any final reward or punishment for their actions. Some good points were made about the treatment of the theme in the media and film and on 'living every day as if it is your last' which has resonance both in the secular and religious worlds. Weaker answers tended to include few examples or made only general comments about why non-religious people might reject religious teaching.

Question 2

03 This was the most popular question on the paper and there were many excellent answers. Most dealt with the importance of the present life as a test or preparation for the next life and explained which aspects of life were important and why. The best answers often included a section on why this life was of limited importance relative to the next, or explained which aspects of this life were not important and why. They also dealt with a range of views within a single religion where appropriate e.g. from the idea of life as a process of soul-making to the idea that life is predestined in Christianity. Such answers often included impressive detail in the examples they gave to illustrate or explain their points. Many answers referred to more than one religion, for example Christianity or Islam would be used to explore the importance of this life on a linear view of existence while Buddhism or Hinduism were used to explore the importance of any one human life in a cycle of lives.

Some answers legitimately explored the value of life in addition to, or instead of, the ideas above. This was clearly relevant and credited, but candidates were not required to use both approaches in their answer. Some candidates confused nature and value and included irrelevant material in their answers, and others simply summarised some of the teachings of one or more religions on this topic. Some candidates appeared to be using a prepared answer to last year's question, with limited success.

04 The best answers to this question compared and contrasted a variety of religious and secular views and carefully considered what the phrase ‘are essentially the same’ could mean. Both obvious differences and apparent similarities were pointed out – for example a religious view that the purpose of life was to serve God was contrasted with a view that life has no purpose. Some candidates did not draw out any apparent similarities between religious and secular views. Some attention to both Christian Humanism and Christian existentialism could have been useful here, as well as recognition that many secular thinkers hold similar views to religious believers, but for very different reasons.

Section B Perceptions of Ultimate Reality

The focus of this section lies on the concept of God, or in the case of non-theistic religions on Ultimate Reality, but in answers to both questions some candidates moved away from this focus. In Question 3, some candidates wrote about religion rather than God and in Question 4 some wrote much about religious experience but relatively little about how such experiences can be sources of knowledge about God. In some cases it seemed that candidates had not considered this aspect in depth, and that their information applied better to Section C questions on religious experience rather than this Section B question specifically on knowledge about God/Ultimate Reality.

Question 3

05 Candidates were required to complete all aspects of this question for marks over level 5, so they had to cover Freud’s view on the role of the concept of God and the influence of this concept on society and Marx’s views on the same. A number of candidates explained what God, or in some cases religion, meant to both Freud and Marx and stopped there and while there was usually some relevant material to credit in such answers they rarely achieved any great depth.

06 While candidates clearly had to refer to the ways in which religion had responded to the challenges of secular thinkers in their answers, many did little more than outline those responses and offered little evaluation of how far they were successful. This limited the marks they could be awarded. Some took the opportunity to discuss the challenges to religion from thinkers other than Freud and Marx, as was allowed by the question, and included a lively debate about how far challenges from Richard Dawkins had been met. Some used the problem of evil as a challenge from secular thinkers and outlined a variety of theodicies that have responded to it – here, too, they did not always get as far as evaluating the success of the responses and, in addition, tended to spend too long on what was in the end only one challenge among many.

Question 4

07 This was a popular question and there were some very impressive answers which showed a good understanding of relevant religious experiences and used examples to show how knowledge of God / Ultimate Reality has been drawn from particular experiences. Some, generally weaker, answers used miracle as an example of religious experience. This was rarely very effective, not least because not all made it clear in what sense a miracle could be regarded as a religious experience. Others referred to Jesus as a religious experience, but not always coherently. The best answers tended to focus on the classical forms of religious experience, especially revelation and mysticism and, in the case of Buddhism, vipassana meditation. The very weakest answers tended to be a summary of one or more experiences and give no commentary or explanation about how these could be a source of knowledge about God /Ultimate Reality. Indeed, as noted above, some answers actually made very limited reference to God/Ultimate Reality.

08 There were some very good answers to this question. Many candidates offered evidence of group visions to argue that not all experiences were personal and then considered the value of seminal religious experiences such as those through which Muhammad received the Qur’an and Moses the Ten Commandments. Many then focused on the ineffable nature of some experiences and the difficulty outsiders could have in understanding them, or even in believing that they happened at all. How far religious language could communicate the essence of the experience to those who had never experienced anything like it was usefully explored in many of the best answers – examples from the writings of St Teresa of Avila proved particularly helpful here.

Section C Religious Experience

Both questions in this section were equally popular and there were some very good and well-informed answers.

Question 5

- 09** The question asked candidates to consider both the influence and value of religious experience in one or more religions. In many cases candidates focused on individual experiences and considered their influence and value. While valid, this often resulted in only a partial explanation of the influence and value of religious experience as a whole in a religion as a whole, which the examples should have been used to illustrate. The seminal experiences of many religions, such as the revelation of the Qur'an or of the Ten Commandments and the enlightenment of the Buddha, were often used to comment on the influence such experiences have had and more recent examples such as the visions of Bernadette at Lourdes, or the personal experiences of some mystics and charismatic preachers, were used to discuss the value of some experiences today. Many candidates were clearly aware of differences of opinion both between and among religions.
- 10** There was much that could have been discussed here – is real understanding of God /Ultimate Reality possible? If so, are there alternative sources for such an understanding? Can we be certain that the understanding that comes through religious experience is correct? Candidates adopted a variety of approaches but did not always stay focused on the issue. In particular some spent a great deal of time discussing in general whether religious experiences can be verified. This is clearly relevant but is only a partial response to the issue raised.

Question 6

- 11** There were some very well-informed answers to this question. Many showed how an experience would be designated 'religious' if it passed the agreed tests for such an experience or matched the agreed definitions for such an experience. Others focused on the presence of the numinous within the experience as the single qualifying condition. Many pointed out that meeting such tests or matching such definitions would only satisfy those who accepted such tests and definitions in the first place. Some candidates referred to miracles as religious experiences and included tests for their verification within the debate. This was rarely successful because it was not always made clear why such experiences could be considered religious, even if it could be established that they actually happened. The best answers explained the criteria being used to identify an experience as religious and used examples to show how an experience could be matched to those criteria.
- 12** This question allowed candidates to ignore the issue of verification and evaluate the impact of any reported religious experiences today – for believers of the individual religion that claimed the experience, followers of other religions and non-believers. There were some excellent discussions based on very good examples. Many considered the continuing importance of the (unverifiable) seminal experiences such as the Buddha's enlightenment alongside the rejection by militant atheism of any such experiences today. Some considered the influence that predictions of the end of the world can have when offered by a charismatic preacher; others looked at the apparently arbitrary decisions believers made in favour of those experiences validated by their religion but against very similar experiences validated by other faiths. Many were clearly aware of the very different views that exist within individual religions from charismatics and mystics on the one hand to those theologians who reject many traditional forms of religious experience on the other.

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion