



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

Religious Studies

RST4C

(Specification 2060)

**Unit 4C Topic I Religious Authority
Topic II Ways of Moral Decision-Making
Topic III Ways of Reading and
Understanding Scripture**

Report on the Examination

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General Comments

There were fewer very weak answers this year, although conversely there were fewer top-level scripts than the previous year. Perhaps the main issue for attention this year concerns essay focus. Many candidates wrote fluently and well, but did not always focus on the precise wording of the question set, so scored less highly than they could have done: see the comments below on Questions 07 and 08, for example. Quite a high proportion of scripts contained additional phrases, sentences and even paragraphs, sometimes crammed between lines of writing, sometimes turned sideways on the page, sometimes with up to 4 or 5 asterisks for afterthoughts. Most of these essays showed no essay plan, and given that Unit 4 expects candidates to write cohesively on one question, more careful forethought would be expected. Having said that, there was of course much evidence of careful preparation and good teaching, and candidates wrote with conviction and interest.

Section A Religious Authority

Question 1

- 01** Weaker answers tended to be very narrow in focus, confining themselves perhaps to a Roman Catholic v Protestant debate. Most candidates discussed a variety of sources of religious authority, such as God, scripture, religious leaders, tradition, prophets, and so on, and showed that each source functions as an authority by virtue of its nature: for example, scripture functions authoritatively as the word of God and prophets speak with the authority of God's word. Most distinguished between sources whose authority functions directly, e.g. through God's intervention, as opposed to indirectly, such as the prophets who were God's messengers.
- 02** Quite a few candidates struggled with the idea of a 'remote' source, and ended up simply by comparing different sources of authority, suggesting that some work better than others. Most got the general point of the question, and suggested that God was the most remote source of authority because God cannot be experienced in the same way that people can interact with religious leaders or consult their own consciences. Some suggested that scripture is, or can be, a remote source of authority, since there is doubt about the original meaning of some texts (for example), so the authority of religious leaders and religious scholars is needed to interpret them. As a counter-claim, some said that God is the only authority; others suggested that Buddhists needed only the authority of the Buddha; and others that the only realistic authority was the religious conscience, since it is 'immediate'.

Question 2

- 03** This was generally answered well, with candidates identifying a wide range of external and internal challenges to religious authority. Some identified the challenges but forgot to mention responses to them, or else mentioned responses only to one or two of them. Some of the essays on challenges to authority in Islam were particularly well written.
- 04** Weaker essays simply repeated what had already been said, often at great length, in answer to Question 03, without considering whether or not the responses referred to were 'successful' or not. Some simply stated that they *were* successful, with no reasoning in support of this conclusion other than the fact that those responses had been made. Alternatively, the reasoning did not go beyond a simple claim: for example where candidates explained the depth of scientific challenges to religious authority, acknowledging the force of these challenges, yet claiming that all challenges could be met simply by asserting the inerrancy of scripture. Some forgot to deal with the word 'all' in the question. The best essays generally pointed out that any reasonable answer to the question depends on identifying and defining the criteria for 'success'.

Section B Ways of Moral Decision-Making

Question 3

- 05** There seemed to be a kind of Jekyll and Hyde dimension to answers to this question: candidates were often torn between the Jekyll of religious institutions and the Hyde of conscience (or the other way round), meaning that they entirely ignored one or the other. Many candidates appeared unsure of the definition of a 'religious institution': the majority confined their understanding of the term to Catholics and Protestants (quite often referred to as Catholics and Christians). Discussion of the conscience rarely went beyond generalisations such as, 'Conscience is the voice of God, so has to be obeyed'. Those who at least explained the differences between the views of Augustine and Aquinas usually scored highly, since that basic distinction enabled them to examine the role of the conscience in two different contexts.
- 06** It was ironic that some who ignored the conscience in answering Question 05 suddenly burst forth with in-depth explanations of it for Question 06, which seemed a bit self-penalizing for their efforts in 05. Some who had included Freud's analysis of the conscience for 05, where it was irrelevant, omitted it for 06, where it would have been relevant. Most did include secular understandings of the conscience for 06, and made a good case for understanding the Freudian-type conscience as a complex part of human psychology that has significant, but not absolute, authority. There were many variations on such ideas.

Question 4

- 07** Candidates generally did well with this question. Those who did not do so well tended to drift from the focus of the question: "major ethical issues". Some wrote pages explaining the various deontological, teleological and hybrid ethical theories, but forgot the issues, or else relegated them to a few sentences between the theories. In a similar vein, some wandered away from "either medical research and medical developments or business practice and economics" – particularly the former, where quite a few answers centred on abortion, euthanasia, suicide and the law, without mentioning any research/developmental aspects to these issues. Most candidates did focus on the ethical issues, and were very well informed about research and developmental issues.
- 08** Again, the main cause of some candidates receiving comparatively low marks was the issue of focus. One main example of a lack of focus was the tendency to repeat large chunks of material already used for answering Question 07, in effect answering an AO2 question with AO1 material without assessing whether or not ethical systems can *solve any of the ethical issues*. Other candidates sometimes wrote extensively about the weakness of deontological, teleological and hybrid systems, without referring to "these [ethical] issues". For those who answered the question as set, the general conclusion was that any ethical system can solve the ethical issues, but only for those who accept that system. By definition, religious believers will (on the whole) accept the moral solutions offered by their belief system; situationists will accept the commands of love, and so on. Nevertheless even that will not be a complete solution, since different systems have different nuances (e.g. the various branches of utilitarian theory); so in the end, it isn't the ethical system that solves the ethical issues but the selection process adopted by the user.

Section C Ways of Reading and Understanding Scripture

Question 5

- 09** This was answered by comparatively few candidates, although it proved to be a fairly straightforward task for most, who answered it primarily with reference to the Judaeo-Christian or the Islamic scriptures. Weaker responses sometimes ignored entirely the reference to “the history of the scriptures”, and wrote instead about different scriptural beliefs.
- 10** On the whole, this was not answered well, although “the relevance of events in the particular history” is a required element of the specification. The most successful lines of reply tended to be those which considered the impact on the status of scripture of events such as the publication of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe. The former, for example, affected the belief of those who at the time had a literal understanding of the Genesis portrayal of a special creation of humans by God. Following the publication of Darwin’s material, the realisation that Genesis might not be literally true implied that some or all of the rest of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures might not be literally true, and for many this has adversely affected belief in the status of these scriptures as the word of God. Others referred to events such as World War I and the Jewish Holocaust as presenting a major challenge to the biblical understanding of God’s power and love, thereby challenging belief in the status of scripture as an authority on these issues.

Question 6

- 11** This question was answered in a variety of ways. Most used the approaches of text, literary, form and redaction criticism to biblical study, examining the method and purpose of each type of analysis. Some also looked at the hermeneutical principles used by scholars primarily in interpreting Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures, often showing the distinction between ancient principles of interpretation and modern approaches. In this respect, a number of candidates used a hermeneutical paradigm by James Kugel, which worked as well as the paradigm was understood. Weaker responses tended to draw exclusively on the debate about the status of the Genesis creation narratives, writing exhaustively about ‘creationist’ approaches.
- 12** On the whole, candidates were sceptical about the value of scholastic approaches to scripture. Some referred to the works of Paul Tillich and to reformed epistemologists in general, suggesting that scholastic analysis is largely irrelevant to faith, and in fact can be opposed to faith, which is more about commitment than dissection. Some considered that scholars could perhaps be useful for study groups, for example where there was interest in studying the background to the world of the scriptures in an effort to comprehend the mind-set of an ancient culture. Some pointed out, with some truth, that there is no more agreement among scholars about how to interpret scriptures than there is among believers about what to believe and how to believe it. A few argued that the work of Christian scholars has led to religious fragmentation and agnosticism in Europe, and that it is the non-scholastic approach of the evangelical churches that has contributed to the on-going growth of Christianity.

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