**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

Religious Studies RSS02

(Specification 2060)

Unit B Religion and Ethics 2

Report on the Examination

General Comments

The mechanics of the paper were dealt with very well, in so far as there were very few errors with the question rubric, time management was generally good and most students achieved a reasonable balance between the different assessment objectives. The knowledge base for Kantian ethics and Natural Law was very good, but was less impressive for religious views of the created world and for environmental ethics. The strongest scripts were invariably those which answered the precise demands of the questions set, whereas the weakest were equally invariable in writing pre-prepared answers where the fit between question and answer was partial or worse. The biggest improvement overall was in answers to AO2 questions, where good work has clearly been done in prompting students to evaluate, as opposed to simply listing the opinions of various scholars.

Question 1 *Kant and Ethics*

01 The best answers discussed reason and rationality in Kantian terms, whereas weaker responses tended to equate 'reason' with 'reasons'. Whatever the weaknesses here, the majority of students made a number of sound points, for example that: reason, duty and good will are the inter-related core of Kant's ethics; reason arrives at maxims and laws that apply universally; the logic of the categorical imperative provides a moral force that contrasts with the variable dictates of hypothetical imperatives; reason is (hopefully) impartial in its judgements, whereas emotional responses are generally variable and are tied to a set of expected consequences which are unknowable, and so on. The best answers tended to talk about reason and the Enlightenment, the autonomy of reason, and Kant's postulates of practical reason. Quite a few students decided to mention the *summum bonum* at some point, although very few managed to relate it to 'reason as the basis of Kant's system of ethics'.

02 Some ignored the wording of the question and simply wrote a pre-prepared essay on the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's system of ethics. Most answers were commendably balanced in their approach to the question, showing that although it is hardly possible to construct *any* system of ethics without due reference to reason, reason works well in the abstract but not so well in practice: humans are emotional beings, and emotive factors necessarily include some consideration of the consequences of our actions. Some of the most impressive answers suggested that the answer to the question depends on whether it is referring to 'reason enthroned' or to the ability to construct reasoned arguments: if the reference is to the latter, all ethical arguments are reasoned even where reason is not paramount.

Question 2 *Natural Law and ethics*

03 A few answers got bogged down in writing extended explanations of Aristotle's Four Causes followed by a cursory explanation of Aquinas' ideas. Most students made a good job of this question, showing how Aquinas modified Aristotelian ideas in line with Christian thinking, and giving a good survey of the principles of Aquinas' system. Some truncated Aquinas' primary precepts to a list of five words, which presumably were a memorised list of the precepts but were devoid of explanation. Most gave a clear explanation of how the secondary precepts derive from the primary precepts, and gave useful examples of the effect of the former on human conduct. Many were very articulate about the basis of the system in Aquinas' assumption that humans share a common human nature.

04 Strong and not-so-strong answers to this question were generally identified by whether or not they responded to the words 'more strengths than weaknesses'. There was a general tendency to go through the strengths and weaknesses and then to assume that the answer depended on the number of arguments appealed to. The best responses were invariably those which assessed the quality of arguments rather than their quantity. Some legitimately extended their discussion to include Finnis, whose approach to contemporary modern issues received very little support: the discussion here made interesting reading.

Question 3 *Religious views of the created world*

05 The quality of responses to this question varied considerably. A few had little or no idea of what a *sustainer* is or does, and simply equated the term with *creator*; hence some essays got no further than saying that God creates/sustains the world, expanding on this by the simple expedient of writing out the story of creation, usually from Genesis. There were some good answers, and these defined the view that God sustains the created world in a number of ways, e.g. as creator, God holds the world in existence by his nature and by his power; God sustains the world (at least in part) by electing humans to stewardship of it, by being omnipresent, by being at the apex of the causal chains that govern the universe, by (deistically) leaving the universe and its occupants to operate according to their own causal principles or their free will, and so on.

06 Most took this as a reference to the existence of moral and natural evils in the created world which are difficult to reconcile with the concept of a benevolent creator and sustainer, since if God can will what he wants and sustain how he wants, then he clearly wills and sustains evil. A few made things difficult for themselves by reading 'immoral' as 'immortal', which produced some tortuous logic about God's relationship to time. Most students conceded the scale of the problem, and most made a good case for God's moral status, appealing to several different lines of argument. A few high-scoring essays replied that God is not a moral agent, so there can be no moral dimensions to his activity as sustainer of the world.

Question 4 *Environment, both local and worldwide*

07 This was the least popular question, although there were very few really weak answers to it. Where answers *were* weak, this was usually because the students concerned wrote about Third World development with little or no reference to the ethical implications of that development. Invariably, then, the best answers focused on the ethical issues, such as: the morality of allowing the pollution caused by the inevitable reliance on burning fossil fuels in Third World industrial development; the effects of development on the environment as a whole, where the moral issues arguably affect not just humans but non-sentient entities as well as other sentient species; the lack of ethical investment in Third World countries, etc. Some made the valid point that explaining the ethical issues depends on what is, and what is not, regarded as an ethical issue: for example, many utilitarians include animals as members of the moral community, since they can experience both pleasure and pain, whereas the moral status of animals in Kantian and Thomist ethics is dubious to say the least.

08 Some answers got little further than saying that since the industrialised nations have already caused the problem by their own development, it cannot be fair to restrict Third World development. Having said that, there was much useful discussion of this point, particularly of the problematic nature of the Kyoto Protocol. Some referred also to the recent Chinese attempts to gain international agreement on climate change, despite the fact that this would limit its own industrial expansion. The general consensus was that all development has to take second place to sustaining the environment, otherwise there will be no Third World left to develop.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades
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