

Teacher Resource Bank

GCE Religious Studies

Unit 4B Topic III *Religion and the Visual Arts*

Example of Candidate's Response



**GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION
ADVANCED LEVEL**



**RELIGIOUS STUDIES UNIT 4B
Religion and the Visual Arts**

RST4B

EXAMPLE OF CANDIDATE'S RESPONSE

For this paper you must have:

- a 12 page answer book.

Time allowed: 1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions

- Use black ink or ball-point pen.
- Write the information required on the front of your answer book.
The *Examining Body* for this paper is AQA. The *Paper Reference* is **RST4B**.
- Choose **one Section** only.
- Answer **one** question.

Information

- The maximum mark for this paper is 75.
- The marks for questions are shown in brackets.
- In each question, part (a) tests your knowledge and understanding, while part (b) tests your skills of reasoning and evaluation.
- You will be marked on your ability to use English, to organise information clearly and to use specialist vocabulary where appropriate.

RST4B Topic III Religion and the Visual Arts**1 (a) Explain the role and importance of the visual arts in religion.****(45 marks)****AO1****Candidate Response**

I shall use two religions to reference my answer to this question, Judaism and Christianity. There are many contrasts between these two religions and the role and importance of the visual arts and thus they demonstrate the diversity one can find reflected throughout religion. In the case of Judaism, especially Orthodox Judaism, there are clear controls about the use of the visual art whereas in Christianity there is no central control and thus within the Christian tradition there is a wide range for both the role and the importance of the visual arts.

At one end of the Christian tradition there are those who reject any use of the visual art at all, one good example of this would be the Quaker movement which considers any form of representation, any decoration and image acts as a distractor to the worshipper and thus must not be present in the Quaker meeting house. Thus the traditional Quaker meeting house will have plain white walls, plain windows and no decoration whatsoever. There will be no carvings on the furniture, similarly the visual arts would not play any part in the worship, there would be no use of dance or ritual movement.

By way of complete contrast in the High Church tradition of the Anglican church there is a very active use of the visual arts. At the heart of the use of the visual arts lies the idea that they enhance the worship and that they also help to create a sense of wonderment and reverence which becomes a feature of worship in this tradition. Many High Anglican churches will have stained glass windows, often these depict scenes from the New Testament or the wider Christian tradition. Thus the east window of St George's Beckenham has four central panels which depict Christ as King, as High Priest, Christ of the Passion and Christ of the resurrection all by the artist Freeth. Whereas, St Mary's Deerhurst has what is known as the Catherine Window which depicts St Catherine holding the wheel. For the church it is not simply that these represent aspects of the Christian tradition and faith it is also that the beauty of the windows helps to enhance the entire building, thus assisting with the idea of the building pointing towards the glory of God. Of course there was an earlier significance for the use of stained glass windows in the church during the early Christian history when the windows were used to inform the congregation about accounts from Christian scriptures and the wider Christian history since people were not able to read and scriptures were only read out in Latin. Thus the stained glass window became a teaching vehicle. Similarly many churches had wall paintings which acted in the same way and they too were a very significant further teaching feature. In many churches there will be variety of other visual arts, the use of carvings, sculptures are wide spread in the High Church tradition, from the depiction of the 14 Stations of the Cross to statues of the Virgin Mary. One could also suggest that use of vestments is a further use of the visual arts from the altar hangings to the chasuble, in these particular cases the colour of the vestments represent the time of the liturgical year from green for the period of Trinity to purple for periods of penitence. In many ways these all help to create the sense of mystery which also becomes a significant feature of the High church worship tradition. This is especially the case at the eucharist where in the tradition there will be further use of the visual with the ceremony, the use of people and actions which all contribute to the visual image treated during the eucharist. Thus we see the use of the crucifer, acolytes, the thurifer, torches all interacting with the priest during the eucharist often highlighting the mystery of the eucharist. At the words of institution the use of the sanctus bell and thurible with incense becomes the drama to remind the people of the church's teaching about consubstantiation.

Within Christianity the visual arts are used well beyond simply in a place of worship. Probably the most significant would be fine art, where almost every style of painting has been used and many famous artists either began their work under the patronage of the church or turned to it at some time during their career. Thus great artists have produced great works of art which have been entirely focused upon the religious, Michelangelo Buonarroti produced a large volume of religious works from painting to sculpture, the Pieta in St Peter's to the vault of the Sistine chapel in Rome. Whilst many works were originally commissioned for the church in one way or another they are no longer all remain within the confines of the church and many international picture galleries have collections of religious art, the British Museum in London being just one where all manner of Christian visual art is available for the general public to study and admire. In the case of the British Museum the collections range from vestments and religious furniture through to paintings. It might well be argued that these collections continue to have an educational effect upon the people who visit in that they will still act as teaching objects as people read about them and some might maintain that their significance is raised further in that their message of the teaching is often going to those who do not practise as Christians.

If we now turn to Orthodox Judaism, here, like some other religions, for example Islam, there are restrictions about the use of the visual arts. The central one lies around the requirement that God should not be depicted in any way. However this does not mean that visual art is not used in an Orthodox synagogue, indeed there are a number of features in the synagogue where the visual art plays an important role, from the Menorah to the decorated coverings found on the Torah scrolls. The Ark is often a feature of the synagogue, which because it contains the Torah scrolls and other scriptures becomes a major feature in the synagogue and this is symbolised by the size and then the decoration of the Ark. This indicates the importance of the Ark and what is contained therein. Similarly the scrolls are covered with a highly decorated cover, and there are the crowns which are placed upon the top of the scroll rollers and the breast plate which is hung over the scroll, all of these are often highly decorated and represent the finest material and artistic skills available at the time. Thus we can see there are aspects of the use of visual art in Judaism which have the same intentions as the use of visual art in the High Anglican church. However, there is a tendency to avoid any images of human beings in the synagogue and one would not find any sculptures of human beings in an Orthodox synagogue, the use of the visual art is usually restricted to the Ark and the Bimah and the Menorah, other aspects of the synagogue will usually be very restrained, using top quality material but in a very simple unfussy way.

Beyond the synagogue there are certain symbols which one would find in the Jewish home and once again these will be decorated, ranging from the mezuzah, the candelabra for the Shabbat lights through to goblet for the wine used during the opening and closing ceremonies in the home for Shabbat. Unlike Christianity the visual art has not generally been used in Judaism as a teaching vehicle rather the visual art is to enhance the word which remains the central feature of Judaism.

Commentary

A good example of an answer which has adopted the 'breadth' approach. It is quite a long answer which a very sound level of supporting material. Whilst the Christianity section is stronger than Judaism, nevertheless the fullness of the answer means that this is not a problem.

Level 7 (45 marks)

- (b) 'When the subject is a religious one, complete freedom of expression is impossible.'

To what extent is this true?

(30 marks)

AO2

Candidate Response

The response to this would be that it depends upon the religion and even the country. Thus we have already seen that there are religions like Judaism and Islam which place restrictions upon the use of certain images whether in the place of worship or generally, whereas a religion like Christianity has few restrictions. However, in the UK there is another interesting restriction placed upon the use of the visual arts which is expressed in the Blasphemy law. There is perhaps, a third restriction which we might call public reaction, often expressed through the media. Thus when cartoons were published last year in Denmark which depicted Muhammad there was an enormous outcry about how inappropriate the images were largely from Muslim groups, but nevertheless this did have the effect of censoring the publication of the cartoons and when more recently there was an attempt to republish a further protest prevented this from happening, despite claims about freedom of expression. Certainly in countries where a particular religion dominates it is very clear that there are restrictions on the use of images which might be seen to offend the particular religion and this is most apparent in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia with regard to Islam and Israel and certain districts in America with regard to Judaism. So far as Christianity is concerned then there are restrictions in Italy, especially Rome and then countries like Spain and Ireland and Malta all demonstrate how they would not tolerate complete freedom of expression with regard to Christianity.

Equally there are often conventions which are observed when the subject is a religious one, for example although there is some evidence that the Romans may have crucified men naked this is not generally the way Jesus is depicted in any of the visual art forms used to portray the crucifixion, be it fine art, sculpture or even drama. Perhaps more dramatically this is illustrated in Hinduism where the images of the different gods almost always follows a particular convention, thus Shiva always has three eyes, four hands, and he dances on the back of a demon. The convention may well be established since there are accepted symbols which should be part of the visual expression, as in the case of Shiva. But sometimes the convention is not related as directly to symbolism. If we turn to Christianity, a rarity amongst western religions where there is no particular restriction upon portraying God, nevertheless is the vast majority of paintings or sculptures God is clearly portrayed not only as an human being but as male and yet there are indications in Christian scripture and certainly in Christian teaching that God is neither human nor male.

Whilst Hinduism is probably the religion which most uses the visual image throughout all aspects of the religion it does not have the variety of expressing one can find through the whole Christian tradition, as we have noted Hinduism seems to be very bound by the symbolic representation and the convention for the expression of the symbols thus there may be many different images each particular image does not necessarily have a widely varied expression. Whereas turning to Christianity we do see a much wider variety of expression of the same image. Thus if we were to take images of the Virgin Mary there is the unconventional picture by Lewis Williams called Our Mother of Sorrows which depicts Mary in a modern industrial scene with aircraft and factories to the 14th century Russian icon entitled Mother of God of Tolga which has the conventional image of Mary holding the Christ child.

Commentary

The candidate has chosen to tackle the question by considering 'degrees of freedom' rather than 'complete freedom of expression', but given the nature of the question and the expectation that candidates will debate issues, this is a perfectly acceptable approach. By contrast with section (a), this is a rather short response and this is largely because the candidate does not always fully develop some of the supporting material. Nevertheless, the candidate writes clearly and provides a well informed answer. There should really be a final section which draws together the debate and maybe focuses more upon the issue of 'impossible'.

Level 5 (23 marks)