

Examiners' Report/  
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2013

GCE Religious Studies 6RS02  
Paper 1D  
Study of World Religions

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## **AREA 1D The Study of World Religions**

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### **Introduction**

#### GENERAL COMMENTS

The Investigations Paper continues to draw from an inspiring range of topics within a wide range of varied academic fields. The high standard of work evidenced in June 2013 was no exception to historical high standards as candidates demonstrated a very high level of independent student enquiry which clearly showed their engagement with their area of investigation. Their knowledge of a particular academic field was evidenced in the way they independently used and evaluated a wide range of source material. The enthusiasm for and knowledge of the chosen topic was clearly conveyed in many answers that were truly academic in their approach. Some Centres chose to focus on the same or similar topics for all their candidates, whereas other Centres permitted considerable choice for individual candidates. Candidates were very well prepared for the examination and it was evident that Centres used their specialist resources and interests to encourage candidates to research in depth a particular area of study. It is important to stress again that the 'Investigations' unit has a definite academic purpose. The aim is to involve students as active participants pursuing open-ended enquiries with an emphasis on independent learning. Questions were designed to be inclusive of all possible approaches to various topics and all valid answers were considered.

Whilst most centres had entered their candidates for the correct option there were still a few entries for particular areas of study where consideration regarding entry for a different area of study may have been beneficial to the candidate. It is important to ensure candidates know which area of their investigation is the best fit for the question they answer on the paper. There was evidence of candidates choosing a different question on the paper to the question they had clearly prepared for before the examination. In some of these cases the candidate was using material suitable for Question 1 to answer Question 3 (or vice versa) and not really grappling fully with the demands of the question. This practice does not always work to the best effect as the candidate might end up answering neither question as fully as possible. Candidates were not penalised if correct entries were not made or a cross was put in a box that did not match the answer or if no box was ticked at all. Examiners were encouraged to mark positively and to credit all valid material according to the mark scheme and question paper. Centres should ensure that candidates are entered for the option that matches their area of study and that candidates are clear about which question they have been prepared for on the paper.

Variation in achievement was related to the two assessment objectives. These objectives should receive prominent attention in the process of the investigation. Importantly there must be explicit attention to these objectives in the examination answer and also to the question that is intended to focus the answer. Each question consistently referred to the assessment objectives with the trigger word 'Examine' for AO1 and 'Comment on' for AO2. These dictated the structure of the question and helped candidates to plan their answers. It would be advisable for candidates to pay regular attention to the level descriptors for these

assessment objectives as a way of monitoring their development and progress during their investigations. The phrase 'with reference to the topic you have investigated' will always appear in the question to ensure that the generic question can be answered with material from any appropriate investigation. The mark scheme itself is generic to all questions but the answer itself is not necessarily generic as candidates are expected to use their material to answer the question. The purpose of the question is to challenge candidates to adapt their material so that at the highest levels they may demonstrate a coherent understanding of the task based on the selection of their material. Widely deployed evidence/arguments/sources were evident in well structured responses to the task whereby a clearly expressed viewpoint was supported by well-deployed evidence and reasoned argument. There was skilful deployment of religious language in many answers and the fluency of good essays showed command over the material; such command makes for high outcomes and rewards the amount of hard work done by the candidate.

Candidates at the lower end of achievement struggled with the demands of the question. In preparation for this examination some candidates may find it useful to write up their investigation under exam timed conditions to a variety of different possible questions. They might build up a number of different essay plans to different possible questions. The important point in these activities is to enable candidates to develop their management of material such as how to best structure their content to answer the specific question. However, success can be undermined by writing up a rote-learned answer which was not adapted to the question set or by answering a question that has been written for a topic they have not studied. There was evidence of rote learned answers using the same structure and material inclusive of quotes; whilst much information was relevant to the topic and consequently was awarded in terms of AO1, there was a significant lack of engagement with the specific demands of the question and consequently marks for AO2 were low, with only generic evaluation provided. This approach is contrasted with another form where candidates were trained to answer the question; arguably, this is evidence of good practice but at the lower end some candidates thought it was sufficient to simply use the question stimulus at the end of each paragraph. The best answers were those which were guided by the statement as opposed to simply '*tagging it on*' to content that they were already anticipating to write about. A balanced approach to the question that meets the highest levels of achievement according to both assessment objectives is obviously desirable and the generic question accommodates many possible routes to success whereby any valid approach to the question was credited.

## SPECIFIC COMMENTS PAPER 1D – The Study of World Religions

### Question 1 ETHICAL PRECEPTS & APPLIED ETHICS

The Study of World Religions continues to attract a more sustained academic approach within the quality of investigations for this question. Some candidates presented impressive studies on Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought that evidenced independent research; candidates understood clearly the different positions taken by a group of Jewish theologians from Orthodox, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism to the ethical dilemma of Nazism. Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Greenberg, Berkowitz, Cohen were placed in the correct context and carefully contrasted against Weisl's Protest stance and Nietzsche's nihilism. It is refreshing to see work that engages with an issue with such carefully selected detail; the only caveat being that a few candidates missed out on making the most of such rich material to substantiate their own view. The challenge of this unit, and with this particular topic, is to ensure that a range of meticulous detail surrounding the issue is coupled with sufficient analysis to achieve high levels of attainment.

Candidates investigating Islam presented essays that were scholarly and full of scriptural references; the use of detailed religious teachings from Qur'an Suras, Hadith and Fatwa often supported a very well researched argument and higher quality essays made careful use of relevant scholarship to enrich the topic under discussion. This approach is strongly encouraged as candidates can reach the higher levels of achievement if the argument is sustained by a substantial range of sources that are effectively deployed throughout the essay. It is a shame that too few candidates did not explore more fully the distinctive Sunni and Shi'a following as the largest and oldest divisions within the history of Islam, for its relevance to the ethical dilemma under scrutiny. The best candidates, however, paid attention to this point and were able to ground their discussion in a thorough exposition of a range of Islamic schools of thought with proficient use of technical terms.

Candidates investigating Buddhism generally produced higher standard answers and the best candidates made a more concerted attempt to discuss alternative views within various branches of Buddhism that were supported by religious teachings. The best answers were guided by the question and grappled with a detailed discussion of how ethical teachings might resolve ethical dilemmas. At the lower end some Buddhism answers lacked depth or breadth regarding their application to a dilemma. These answers confined themselves to outlining the five precepts and four noble truths without drilling down further into why the practice of Buddhism with its particular response to ethical dilemmas emphasises the individual search for liberation from the cycle of samsara. Some candidates missed an opportunity to discuss the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism; this might have raised the level of achievement according to the level of detail.

Popular topics included Jihad, homosexuality, capital punishment, suicide and euthanasia with reference to one or two world religions. There was some very interesting work on the ethical teachings of War and Peace that was

adapted to Hinduism and Buddhism and also to the debate of sexuality and marriage in Islam. Candidates at the higher end who addressed the issues in these topics with reference to Buddhism presented some very knowledgeable responses that scrutinised closely the ethical precepts of Buddhism. Some weaker candidates failed to address the question and spent most of their time writing about the history of Buddhism and failed to address the question. These responses also made little or no reference to scholarship. Candidates can improve their answers by demonstrating a much more detailed approach to studying any particular world religion. Weaker answers might contain a few quotes from sacred scripture but fail to include other sources such as relevant scholarship; scholarship is best accompanied in this Area of Study by ethical precepts that are derived from religious tradition and the authority of religious leaders. There was evidence of an increased number of candidates from the same centre unloading pre-prepared answers that were not focussed on the question. Centres are encouraged to find ways of ensuring that candidates are given the space to do some independent work as the same structure, quotes and content are not always adapted sufficiently to the question. It must be emphasised that candidates are not marked down for this but works of this types are self levelling if insufficient attention is paid to the assessment objectives.

#### Question 2 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, and RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

There were very few well written answers to this question but as entry numbers are still low the range of topics offered remains narrow. The Interfaith Dialogue attracted some very good answers which showed secure knowledge of Barth and Rahner's viewpoint within this topic. This topic can be a little difficult for candidates who have not experienced the excitement and renewal of the Vatican Council era; however, the strongest candidates distinguished themselves by showing secure knowledge of the intricacies of this dialogue through appropriate sources and scholarship. There was evidence of interesting research on pluralism within Hinduism. This approach to the question worked well and demanded an in-depth knowledge of Hinduism that strong candidates could thrive on in their research. On the whole, candidates deployed a wide range of evidence and were able to draw sophisticated conclusions using sound religious terminology.

Amongst weaker responses; candidates who focused on the role of women in Islam failed to present alternative opinions. Candidates need to include a range of evidence in their investigation that is supported by sound scholarship and, where possible, to show knowledge of more than one point of view. Answers in the lower levels tended to be brief, descriptive and generalised. Some candidates also relied on pre-prepared essays and failed to understand or answer the question.

### Question 3    CONTRASTING STANDPOINTS ON BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

This question attracted a number of excellent answers; candidates who wrote about Judaism knew their material well and included a range of sources in their essays. Candidates were very well informed about the different beliefs about God in Islam; however some candidates did not understand fully the Christian teachings on the existence of God and Christian denominations were mixed up.

Some candidates were not very clear about the differences between the contrasting viewpoints on belief about God they were arguing for. Candidates who wrote about the Sunni and Shia Islam were one sided and unfortunately answers can be one-sided if candidates are not confident about a tradition other than their own. That said, candidates generally appreciated differences in belief and their research conveyed the desire to understand in greater depth a view they did not ascribe to. Candidates, in most cases, were aware that in this type of topic it is important to create a balance of material between the different traditions under investigation. Candidates, whatever their religious background, should be aware that the Roman Catholic Church is a branch of Christianity, not a separate religion. Natural Law, as propounded by Aquinas, is regarded by Catholics as a separate source of authority, as opposed to scripture, since its basis is in reason not revelation. Likewise, if candidates are going to refer to Islam, they should show some awareness of different traditions within this world religion, as most did for Christianity. These remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other non-Christian religions. Candidates focusing on Hinduism produced excellent responses to this question. Candidates discussed different beliefs about God using the Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Vedas and different schools of thought. The better responses to this question included detailed knowledge of different beliefs about the existence of God; in particular Shankaras Advaita Vedanta and critically compared this with Dvaita Vedanta. The best candidates had very sound knowledge of the complexities of Hindu scholarship.

**Advice for candidates:**

- Do not ignore the question; manage your material to focus on the demands of the question.
- Use appropriate sources and, if possible, include recent scholarship.
- Demonstrate how well you understand the topic by your selection of material.
- Do not forget to comment on your material. Show that you have thought about your research.
- Use your evidence to substantiate your argument.
- Comment on alternative views if you know them.
- Express your viewpoint clearly with academic humility.
- Practice writing under timed conditions as part of your preparation.
- Do not spend too long writing out your essay plan to the detriment of the essay itself.
- Spell key terms and key scholars correctly.



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