



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

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

The general standard of scripts was high, with performance at A* displaying some of the very best qualities of essay-writing in this subject area. A few high-scoring schools and colleges produced paradigmatic answers which often restricted individual student achievement, in so far as some students bent the paradigm to fit the question as opposed to writing a more free-flowing answer. A number of scripts were rather unbalanced in terms of time management, writing exhaustively on the AO1 question and leaving only a few minutes to answer the AO2. One disturbing trend is the increase of scripts that are to some degree illegible. Where examiners cannot obtain a sufficiently clear picture of a student's answer, students cannot do themselves justice. On the whole, students were well prepared and wrote to the best of their ability.

Section A Religious Authority

Question 1

01 Despite the fact that the question gives four examples of “dependent religious authorities”, weaker responses tended to talk exhaustively and in general terms about the *contents* of the scriptures of a particular religious tradition. Most, however, took the hint, and wrote informed and interesting essays. Some of the most detailed exposition was on the status of scripture in relation to its supposed inspiration by God. Equally interesting was what students had to say about the source of the religious conscience where that conscience was perceived either to depend on God or else to be an independent authority related to reason.

02 There was a broad range of responses to this question. Most argued that where a religious tradition accepts God as the creator, then of course all religious authority depends solely on God, even where God delegates that authority to others. In functional terms, however, most agreed that the role of the Pope and of bishops in the Christian tradition was delegated by God through scripture and by Church Councils, so they must exercise some degree of independent religious authority in interpreting scripture. Similarly in Islamic tradition, the Muslim jurists formulated the principles of *Ijma*, *Qiyas* and *Ijtihad* in order to develop new laws for new situations. The permutations of these ideas were varied, not least with regard to the authority of conscience and reason, which were interpreted by some as a form of devolved authority from God and by others as standing over and against any religious authority from God.

Question 2

03 Weaker scripts showed a tendency to confuse religious and secular authority, and often referred to challenges from *within* a religion, as opposed to specifically secular challenges. The challenges identified varied, of course, in accordance with the religion under discussion, although primarily these were scientific (the authority of physics and cosmology challenging religious views about the creation of the universe by God, and of biology and genetics challenging religious statements about the creation of species), philosophical (arguments against the existence of God), socio-political (that religion is essentially a mechanism to exercise power and control) and psychological (the Freudian view that religion is neurotic). Most of the material was comprehensively explained, with varying degrees of coherence. A number of students responded to the challenges to religious authority in answering 03, and thereby left themselves little to do in 04 beyond repeating the same material.

04 Those who repeated material from their responses to 03 often compounded the problem by leaving their answers as simple juxtapositions of opposing views, which is primarily an AO1 feature rather than an AO2 skill. Some students simply repeated faith-based

assertions that because something occurs in scripture, or because God says so (in scripture or through religious leaders), then it must be true, and therefore religious authority can overcome all challenges from secular authority. More realistic answers suggested that there were some challenges that religious authority is not in a position to overcome, for example where the predominant political power in a country is secular rather than religious. One well-expressed line of argument was that religious authority can maintain itself by accommodating itself to secular challenges, for example in the way that philosophers of religion have accommodated Big Bang cosmology and the theory of evolution into their interpretations of scripture. Some suggested that post-modernists are right in claiming that religions are competing meta-narratives, and have no more (and no less) authority than any other such narrative.

Section B Ways of Moral Decision-Making

Question 3

05 Some students wasted both time and effort by including Kantian Ethics, Bentham's Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, and the like, as examples of religious people applying religious ethical teachings. Most applied Divine Command Theory, Natural Law and Christian Situation Ethics to medical research and developments, and most applied the appropriate teachings in a systematic and methodical way. A few illustrated their answers by using very simplistic material on abortion and euthanasia, much of which turned out to be irrelevant to issues of *research and development*.

06 One very effective approach was to suggest that religious ethical teaching must, by definition, be useful to those who belong to the religion whose approach they are using, otherwise they would not belong to it! There may be instances where a believer does not agree with the stance of their religious tradition on one particular moral issue or another, but presumably that tradition is useful in providing a starting point from which to assess moral issues. In a general sense, most students suggested that religion might be seen as a bar to progress with some types of medical research and development and to some kinds of business venture, although even here, such a criticism was more often than not tempered with the comment that all religious traditions have mechanisms in place for dealing with 21st-century issues.

Question 4

07 On the whole, this question was answered quite well. In practice, the hybrid theories selected were mainly Situation Ethics, Rule Utilitarianism, and Virtue Ethics (the latter being interpreted as a separate mix of ethical principles, or else as a basically situational/teleological theory centred on the 'rule' of the ethical mean. A few answered the question without having any clear idea of the nature of hybrid theories or how they might help people make moral decisions, but on the whole students wrote fluently and well. Some of the best answers were seen in the application of virtues to business ethics and in the application of Rule Utilitarianism to animal ethics. Some students chose to argue that Natural Law, Kant, and other theories are hybrids because they all have a mix of deontological and teleological features. This was fair enough, but for whatever theory they selected, students should show how the theory operates as a *hybrid*. Identifying Aquinas' Natural Law Ethics as a hybrid because the system has a *telos* and has a teleological aspect in double effect is one thing, but applying this in an essay and referring only to the primary precepts is another. Equally, with Rule Utilitarianism, when using this to illustrate how hybrid ethical systems work, referring only to the hedonic calculus does not achieve this.

08 Weaker answers usually went no further than describing how deontological systems work, perhaps comparing them with other systems. The focus of the question was on the

comparative *clarity* of deontological systems. There were many good answers, most of which suggested that clarity lies in the formulation of rules, since rules are sufficiently clear for most people: somebody who accepts a deontological system will normally see its particular rules as being clear to follow, e.g. Divine Command Theory and the Ten Commandments. Against this, students argued that presumably any system would be reasonably clear to somebody who follows it. Some suggested that it makes a difference if deontological systems are considered collectively, because a follower of Divine Command Theory, for example, might not consider Kant's categorical imperatives at all clear. In fact Kantians themselves might not be that clear, since with issues such as embryo research, it isn't clear at what stage Kant might have considered embryos to be objects of moral concern. Conversely, most students thought that Divine Command Theory has no clear answer to Euthyphro's Dilemma.

Section C Ways of Reading and Understanding Scripture

Question 5

09 This question received rather descriptive treatment. A few students simply described worship within a religious tradition, with little reference to religious scriptures. Some ignored the second part of the question concerning the role of religious scriptures in people's personal lives. There were some very solid essays covering both parts of the question, illustrated in connection with various religions, primarily Christianity and Islam.

10 The best answers tended to be those which began by asking the question, 'Irrelevant to what?' There was some very good comment on the religious responses to the challenges of the verification and falsification principles, where students pointed out that these challenges reject the truth of religious scriptures in any meaningful sense, yet neither challenge has shown that religion as a whole, or scripture in particular, can be irrelevant. Religious scriptures, moreover, contain a great variety of formal types, and it is arbitrary to suggest that all of them will ever become irrelevant. Balanced against that, there was a general acknowledgement that some parts of scripture might become irrelevant in terms of having any claim to scientific truth, although they would retain relevance as meta-narratives / poetic accounts / mythopoeic literature, and so on.

Question 6

11 Most of the answers to this question considered the scriptures of Christianity or Islam. For both, criticism of scriptures was discussed primarily in connection with the question of whether or not scriptures are divinely inspired, and whether or not key figures in scriptural tradition, such as Moses, Jesus, Paul and Muhammad, were divinely inspired. Other issues included criticism of scriptural stances on scientific, philosophical, social and moral issues. With regard to moral issues, for example, there was much discussion of the scriptural basis for the Christian, Jewish and Muslim attitudes to homosexual relationships and to feminist issues in particular, and of the reaction of those religions to criticisms that the relevant scriptures are homophobic, misogynist and unscientific. The quality of answers depended mainly on whether they were an examination of the issues or a set of assertions.

12 Reactions to this question were very varied. Some suggested that criticism of scriptures had no effect on the status of a religion, although most saw that this is patently untrue. The fact that the theistic religions show internal disagreement over the issues discussed in Question 11 shows that each religion does have a proportion of believers who do tolerate such criticisms and do attempt a rationalisation based on the sum total of the available evidence about them. Some suggested that tolerance of criticism is a slippery slope that will lead to wholesale scriptural rejection. Others insisted that lack of toleration will lead to

the marginalisation of organised religion on all important issues, even religious ones. The debate was very mature.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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