

Teacher Resource Bank

GCE Religious Studies

Unit 4A Topic III *Religious Experience*

Example of Candidate's Response



**GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION
ADVANCED LEVEL**



**RELIGIOUS STUDIES UNIT 4A
Religious Experience**

RST4A

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 **RST4A**.
- 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.

RST4A Topic III *Religious Experience*

- 1 (a) Examine what religions and scholars mean by revelation and conversion as types of religious experience.

(45 marks)**AO1****Candidate Response**

Judaism seems to have a very clear understanding of revelation, at least within the orthodox communities. Almost all Orthodox Jews will turn to the experience of Moses as God's revelation and some writings seem to imply that Moses' experiences were almost unique. Jews will cite two central experiences of Moses; the first is the revelation of God to Moses at the burning bush and the second is the revelation by God to Moses of the Law. In the case of the former Moses is drawn to the sight of the burning bush and God tells him that he will be entering the holy land, following this God reveals to Moses some aspects of God by referring to God of history and then later as Yahweh, the God who is always present. The second revelation to Moses is that God has a special relationship with the Israelites and that He intends that they should be freed from slavery by Moses. When we turn to Sinai we are again given some detail of God's presence with references to thunder, lightening a dense cloud. Equally the people are not to come into the direct presence of God whereas Moses can. The revelation in this case is the Law to Moses, in Orthodox tradition this is not only the Ten Commandments, which are seen as a summary of the Law, but all 613 Laws which have subsequently formed the heart of Jewish practice. Of course these are intimately associated with Covenant too. Other lesser occasions seem to confirm the same points, thus Abram, Jacob, Elisha, Elijah, all receive some form of revelation directly from God which is often focused upon God's purpose for His people and instructions about behaviour and reminders of the covenant relationship. Thus we can conclude that revelation within Judaism is to do with direct approach and contact with God to specific people chosen by God. The revelation has a message for the whole people, in most cases, which has to be transmitted to the people by the individual recipient of the revelation. Many other of the western monotheistic religions have a similar idea, although Christianity has a more exaggerated revelation with its idea that Jesus was God in human form and thus a direct revelation to all the people and especially effective to those who responded directly to Jesus and his teaching.

By contrast if we were turn to Buddhism we find a very different idea of revelation. Buddha is generally seen to be the exemplar for revelation. From the life of the Buddha we are told that revelation came about through self discipline and self focus. The Buddha began to recognise reality and this he then formulates into the Four Noble Truths. There is of course no intervention from something beyond the human nor is there any change of the human condition, it is much more the fact that the Buddha comes to understand the true position of the human condition. It is from this recognition that the Buddha is able to conclude that by acceptance of the Four Noble Truths and then by following specific practices one can achieve Nirvana.

When we turn to scholars and their views of revelation we can see that there are two approaches, one provides a definition and description of revelation the other is more focuses upon considering the process. In Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, Aquinas wrote about revealed theology, here Aquinas maintained that there were certain aspects of theology which could not be discovered by man and man's reasoning and thus these aspects of theology needed revelation from God. Many scholars speak of two different types of revelation; propositional and non-propositional revelation. By propositional they mean a revelation which comes directly from a divine being, usually God, whereas the non-propositional revelation is the human being recognising truths from things around him, for example a sunset leading the human to conclude something about the nature of God and God's existence, Aquinas writes about propositional revelation.

Frank Davies in his book, *The evidential force of Religious Experience* suggests that there are five features of revelation; they are sudden and of short duration, new knowledge is acquired, the new knowledge comes from an external agent, the new knowledge is received with utter conviction and insights are sometimes difficult to put into words. Peter Cole in his book *Religious Experience* suggested that revelations often are concerned with the following; universal truths, the future, the present and spiritual help.

Conversion is normally seen by scholars to be from no religion to one, or from one faith to another or from a notional acceptance to a personal and committed approach to a specific religion. James speaks about two major types of conversion, the gradual process and the sudden dramatic type. In the case of the former, there is an idea that someone might well take a number of factors into consideration as they move towards a conversion, they may have had an experience but one which they wished to reflect upon, they may consider that they need to study and to talk to others before they make a final decision about conversion, sometimes scholars refer to this as an intellectual conversion. The sudden and dramatic will be an event, usually, which has an immediate and thus dramatic effect upon the person, like Saul on the road to Damascus and thus there is an immediate response from the recipient, the conversion happens almost instantaneously. There are scholars who have attempted to identify the processes involved in a conversion, Lofland and Stark and perhaps better known, Rambo and Farhadian, both identify aspects of a conversion experience, referring to in the case of Rambo and Farhadian, context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. Most religions are happy with an idea of conversion and indeed some, with a missionary element to them, see conversion to their faith as an essential part of the religion, Christianity and Islam are especially clear about this. Judaism is unusual as a religion which not only does not encourage conversion it often opposes it and is highly suspicious of attempts to convert, although even Orthodox Judaism does have a carefully established formula for anyone wishing to convert.

Commentary

This is a very full answer but one which is not well balanced. The response to revelation has, perhaps, too much detail which appears to have taken too much of the candidate's time and thus the section dealing with conversion appears rather thin and a little rushed. However, overall it is a good response. There is a very clear understanding of the question and the material which the candidate presents. The answer deals well with the breadth issue this question seeks, referring to both scholars and to specific religions. The answer meets the criteria for Level 7 but the lack of balance prevents a full mark award.

Level 7 (42 marks)

- (b) Consider how far religious definitions of God / Ultimate Reality allow for any idea of revelation.**

(30 marks)

AO2

Candidate Response

Many religions have a set of definitions for God. Those which are strongly monotheistic tend to adopt similar aspects to their definition. Thus God becomes; omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, everlasting, creator and transcendent. If we focus upon Christianity we can see when Christianity wrestles with Jesus the problems which arise when there is a claim for revelation by God. How can Jesus be God revealed to human kind, born as a human being? The difficulties focus around a number of aspects of the definition given to God, transcendent is taken to mean that God is beyond time and physical strictures so how can something which is transcendent suddenly not be, or indeed even just become involved in the physical world? The apparent answer from Christianity is that God is able to set aside some of these aspects of his definition to allow, in this case Jesus to be God in human form. It would seem that although one aspect of the definition seems to be a problem another provides the answer, here it is that God is omnipotent and thus can 'do whatever he wishes'. This does appear to be slightly unconvincing by using one aspect of a definition to overcome another, clearly the counter argument could be posed, that is the transcendental aspect of God is so significant that the omnipotent is only partly sustainable. But transcendent seems to be a very significant aspect of God since without this God becomes involved in time and the physical and this causes deep problems which the other claims being made about God especially the eternal aspect. Human experience of time and space indicates that these cannot be eternal and thus have to be removed from any idea about God.

One possibility would be to reject the Christian idea of a direct revelation of God himself and consider something which is less demanding, as is the case with a number of other religions. Both Islam and Judaism have ideas about revelations from God but both reject the Christian view that this can be God directly. From Jewish scriptures we can appreciate the Jewish theology where the record of God's revelation at Sinai makes it clear that God cannot be seen, even Moses has to hide from God and so both religion adopt a view that revelation from God has to be via an intermediary. In the case of Judaism Moses seems to be unique as an human who is in direct contact with God in some sort of physical way, whereas almost all other recipients of revelation from God within the Jewish tradition, that is the prophets, the revelation seems to be less direct. There is a similar idea from Islam although here there is a very clear statement about the Qur'an that it was dictated to Muhammad from God via the Angel Gabriel. There are problems with such claims, by removing God from direct contact the obvious problem is how can one know that the message being given by the intermediary really is from God and thus what makes one claim more valid than another. More significantly how and why did God communicate with Moses, could this not have been given to lots of people rather than simply one? Islam, by using the Angel Gabriel as the intermediary does circumvent this problem and thus does seem to provide a reasonable solution to the difficulty of a transcendent God revealing to humans beings.

Of course many of the difficulties we have considered thus far are associated with the concept of propositional revelation. If we turn to non-propositional revelation there seem to be fewer problems, since this style of revelation already rejects the whole idea of any revelation coming directly from God and sees revelation as God's activities in the world and the universe being observed by human kind and then conclusions being drawn from these about God, the nature and purpose of such a being. However, for many believers this is not acceptable since it makes all aspects of a religion too vague, too imprecise and too open to change and rethinking by other human beings, and thus even leading to a religion which simply comes to reflect current human thinking and possibly aspiration, but no more.

Revelation and Ultimate Reality seems to be just as difficult; the definition normally accepted by this is that Ultimately Reality is the absolute and final truth about everything. The main problem seems to be that as humans pursue the quest for knowledge and understanding of the world and the universe it seems the more we begin to realise that there is more to learn about and that as we do so, so we begin to realise that the construct we humans placed on one thing needs to be revised, the example, from Chemistry, of Levoisier and deflogisticated air clearly demonstrates this point. Thus it would appear that any claim that a person or indeed even a group of people have been able to discover the Ultimate Reality seems extraordinary.

Thus whilst the definitions given do make many claims about revelation difficult they do not make it impossible, perhaps what humans have to accept is that there can be no certainty about a revelation and thus elements of faith become equally important.

Thus we can see that when there are very tight definitions provided for both God and for revelation is do seem to be very difficult to reconcile ideas about God and revelation.

However, where the definitions are broad and generalised then it does seem quite possible to maintain a definition for God and for revelation which readily sit with each other.

Commentary

Again a very sound answer. The candidate shows a good understanding of the issues raised by the question and deals with them in a particular way. Whilst it would not be required that an answer should have reference to both God and Ultimate Reality, there is no reason why an approach such as this cannot work. Perhaps there could have been a little more exploration of 'any idea of revelation'. The conclusion is a little weak and again appears rather rushed, in that there is no supporting material which could have been referred to in the conclusion from all that had been discussed earlier in the answer. It fulfils the Level 7 criteria but the weaker conclusion prevents full marks from being awarded.

Level 7 (29 marks)