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Examiners' Report

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## AEA Religious Studies Examiners' Report

In spite of a fairly regular and established pattern of entry in the last three years, there were two significant changes in the cohort for this year's examination. Previous entries tended to be characterised by a large minority of candidates for whom the examination at this level did not seem to be suitable. This year, however, many more able candidates entered, with relatively fewer who were unable to make any serious attempt at the paper. The size of the entry also rose by 50%, with the result that the overall profile of the entry was much better at the upper end. This is most encouraging, since it more accurately reflects the intention of the AEA to identify potential university entrants with flair, imagination and independent thinking, the qualities which distinguish the highest achievers in this examination.

As in previous years, the commentary below describes the quality of candidate's responses to the more popular questions on this year's paper. The most able candidates approach the tasks comprehensively, drawing extensively but succinctly on work they have undertaken at AS and A2 levels, and then consider the implications of their own ideas for wider aspects of religion and human experience, often in unusual and creative ways. Others tend to try to cover as much ground as possible, explaining carefully and in detail some of the discussions and arguments pertinent to the issues, but with relatively little consideration for the wider implications of their discussions. A few continue to show little detailed familiarity with any particular area of study and simply write from their own general perspective without, for example, drawing on any scholarship to support their views.

### Question 1:

Although the intention of including the passage about revelation was to elicit responses from candidates with a textual studies background, in fact the overwhelming majority approached the task from a philosophical, ethical or psychological perspective, which is entirely legitimate. It is worth emphasising the point that the paper overall is intended to provide scope for candidates who have undertaken A level work in any of the specified areas of study, but that individual questions can be approached from a variety of perspectives, as long as candidates can show in their answers that they are well grounded in a relevant area of study. Some of the best responses to question 1 dealt with it through a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of arguments based on natural theology.

### Question 4:

A large number of candidates attempted this question. Almost all were able to discuss, in some detail and with suitable reference to sources, the main issues about *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments. However, they tended to confine themselves to such discussions, setting out unnecessarily detailed accounts of the views of different scholars, with little attempt at any kind of synthesis. The most able summarised in a few paragraphs the key features of the debate, but then proceeded at length to address the focal point of the issue in the last sentence of the quotation about the assessment of conduct and social values. In doing this, they drew on specific examples from the overall debate to illustrate the points they were making - a particularly coherent way of dealing with the task.

#### Question 6:

Although a number of candidates attempted this question, it caused some difficulties. Some found the opening sentence problematic, and could not therefore relate its argument to the rest of the passage. The majority dealt effectively with the main point of the passage about arguments from nature being ambiguous. The most able drew on thinkers such as Kirkegaard to focus their discussion, and there were a few excellent discussions of the implications of the passage.

#### Question 7:

This was one of the questions attempted by candidates who appeared to have no clear understanding of any of the recognised systems of psychology, except by alluding to Freud in a general and uninformed way. There were however some very good answers which drew on a range of psychological thinking and reflected on these by contrasting, for example, the meaning of truth in Buddhism with its meanings in the western philosophical and religious traditions.

#### Question 9:

This was another question attempted by candidates who appeared to be unfamiliar with their ground in any detail. There were general discussions along the line that if the Church is to prosper today it must modernise its belief in accordance with society. Rarely was there any reference to an alternative, such as the idea that the Church might in fact represent a counter-cultural movement. The concept that truth could be unchanging was referred to only occasionally, except by candidates who approached the question from an Islamic perspective.

#### Question 14:

Some candidates appeared to adopt a rather simplistic and uninformed approach to the issues raised in the statement, and struggled to find suitably apposite examples to illustrate what they were trying to say. There was little recognition, for example, of the complexities of the relationships between religion and morality. The more able candidates, however, moved on to discuss alternative principles which might be more appropriate to applied ethics.

#### Question 15:

Although attempted by quite a wide range of candidates, many found it difficult to develop their arguments because of a lack of conceptual clarity, particularly in relation to a clear analysis of relativism, and confusion between relativism and other concepts, such as subjectivism. More able candidates argued, for example, for a more positive attitude to relativism, with suitable examples, or for the adoption of one theory as having greater validity than any others.

#### Question 18:

The majority of candidates attempted this question. Many followed a fairly predictable line by describing the familiar theodicies, with little attempt at analysis or at evaluating their most significant strengths and weaknesses, and concluding that the statement is evident nonsense. They appeared to work from an unsubstantiated view that suffering is *per se* inevitably negative, and hardly any

candidate questioned the philosophical or theological basis of the triad. This is where, to achieve the higher marks, candidates need to be much more familiar with possible alternative approaches such as were put forward, for example, by those who approached the discussion from an Islamic perspective

Question 19:

This was another very popular question. The majority tended to approach it as a discussion about evidence for and against the possibility of life after death. The more perceptive, however, focused more sharply on issues to do with meaning, and an examination of the concept of meaninglessness, based on a thorough understanding of debates within the field of religious language, particularly with respect to ideas about verification. Those who had studied either Hinduism or Buddhism were able to add further perspectives to the debate.

Question 20:

This fairly popular question tended to elicit uncritical assumptions that simply affirmed the statement. Only occasionally were candidates able to put forward a cogent analysis of the opposite viewpoint based on a clear understanding of possible interpretations of the concept of 'conditioning', and on views affirming the abiding value and strength of traditional religious affirmations.

Question 21:

Most candidates again dealt with the quotation at a largely basic level by reference to somewhat undigested and uncritical accounts of writers such as Freud, Jung and Marx. Stronger candidates showed sound understanding and analysis of the views of scholars, and dealt with the issue of whether there are 'good grounds' for the conclusion in the statement's claim. Also, in this case, there were some well-argued attempts to establish an alternative viewpoint based on religious belief as having a more objectively valid basis.

Conclusion:

It has been most gratifying to read a much wider range of perceptive and creative answers than has been the case in previous examinations at this level. It is particularly encouraging that earlier messages about careful analysis and incisive evaluation of ideas are being heeded. The best candidates are using the knowledge and understanding gained from their A level courses, and deploying it effectively to marshal their arguments, showing evidence of having assimilated ideas from a wide range of reading around the subject. They are not afraid to put forward and argue for their own perspectives on the issues raised, sometimes in unusual or unexpected ways.

There is still a significant minority of candidates who do not appear to be operating at the level of a potential grade A in the A2 examination, and who may therefore be disappointed, rather than encouraged by attempting this examination.

## Statistics

Grade	Max. Mark	Merit	Distinction
Raw boundary mark	80	57	43

### Notes

**Maximum Mark (Raw):** the mark corresponding to the sum total of the marks shown on the mark scheme.

**Boundary mark:** the minimum mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.



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