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Religious Studies (9871)

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Examiners' Report

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9871: AEA Religious Studies

Introduction

The trend established last year continued with this year's examination. A relatively large increase in the entry suggests that more centres value the experience and achievement represented by this qualification. Although there was evidence that some candidates were not able to work at this level, their numbers were relatively fewer than in previous years, and only a handful gained less than 10% of the available marks. Whilst the overall profile of the entry continues to represent a considerable improvement on the first three years of the examination, relatively few candidates were able to show what might be expected of the top 10% of grade A at A2 level, confirming the impression gained elsewhere that some centres are still not aware of this qualification, or of the opportunities it provides for the most able candidates.

The main part of this report offers some comments on the performance of candidates in the most popular questions. Typical performances characterise the three grades of this examination. Those gaining the distinction grade tend to show flair and imagination in their approach to questions, often following an unexpected and independent line of argument, and supporting their discussion with a wide range of sources, including reference to scholarship drawn from their wider reading. Their answers tend to be concise, succinct, selective, coherent and focused. Those who gain the merit grade tend to provide a wide-ranging and comprehensive discussion of the issue they are dealing with, but lack a sharp focus on the evaluative aspects of the tasks, or on the wider implications of their discussions and conclusions. Remaining candidates tend to focus on an aspect of the task with which they are familiar from their A level studies, but either miss the main thrust of the task or tend to write at length about tangential issues.

Comments on Questions

Question 1

The intention of the task was to provide an opportunity for those who had specialised in textual study to show their understanding of wider issues and questions in their field. Some from a philosophical background also attempted this question. Very few were able to deal effectively with the concept of myth, and its place in the interpretation of sacred writings. Truth and myth were frequently viewed as opposites, and only rarely was the possibility entertained that myths might contain truth.

Question 3

This was the most popular question and elicited a wide range of responses, including some excellent ones. Most candidates focused on a philosophical approach to the problem of evil and suffering. A few concentrated on a phenomenological approach by drawing on ideas from one or more religious traditions. Both approaches were valid. Weaker candidates tended to present a generalised account of the problem of suffering with little, if any, focus on the passage. Candidates need to be clear that detailed knowledge of the authors of the selected passages is neither required nor expected, and the texts are chosen for the ideas they contain. It was therefore surprising that a number of candidates did not adequately address the main issue, that the real task of humanity might be to work for the good of others - 'what then shall we do?' - rather than to try to answer philosophical questions about the problem of suffering.

Question 4

Many candidates were well-informed about the contribution of Enlightenment thinkers to the debate of the relationships between religion and morality. They paid careful attention to the line of thinking in the passage and a close analysis of key terms, making effective use of pertinent examples to support the points in the passage. They also usually made an effective response to the second question, focusing on AO2, presenting a critical appraisal of the passage and arguing the case against the views expressed. Others, however, did not adequately deal with the challenge in the passage, that religion could actually be a force for evil rather than good, and tended to soften the criticisms to fit in with their own presuppositions. A few simply presented narrative and descriptive answers about religion being the enemy of morality.

Question 5

This question usually attracted well-informed and competent answers. Most approached the question by focusing on a philosophical analysis of religious language, with particular reference to a thorough understanding of Wittgenstein and language games. Some drew appropriately on material from particular religions, and made good use of issues in inter-faith dialogue.

Question 6

Apart from its contemporary interest, which was no doubt an attraction to some candidates, this question produced some high quality responses, especially showing an ability to analyse in detail the key terms used in the passage. This kind of careful conceptual analysis tends to typify the more able candidates and in this question was shown in a high level of scholarship regarding terms such as metaphor and allegory. Most used their skills in a philosophical study of religious language to good effect. The evaluative, AO2, element attracted vigorous debate, some supporting and others challenging the viewpoint of the passage.

Question 13

Although answered by only a few candidates, this question produced some outstanding answers. These met the criteria of level 4 in terms of creative and independent analysis and discussion.

Question 14

This popular question elicited some excellent discussion of seminal thinkers, such as Freud, Jung, Butler and Newman. There was evidence of 'reading round' the topic, showing competence across a wide range of materials. In some cases, the scholarship was evident even when names of thinkers were not always used for every point being made. The evidence lay in the obvious understanding of the points under consideration, and the way in which candidates used material selectively, drawing on key points for emphasis.

Question 15

Responses to this question generally displayed a thorough grounding in debates about ethical language, linked with an ability to argue systematically for an identifiable line of reasoning from a wealth of information. However, there were also examples of confusion in some answers, mainly in those who were preoccupied with recording all they had ever learned about ethical language. Whether the problems were 'insurmountable' - the main thrust of the task - was frequently not addressed at all, other than in the final sentence of the response.

Question 18

The various so-called proofs for the existence of God were usually reproduced with ease by the majority of candidates. In this lay the greatest weaknesses in their responses, since many were unselective and descriptive, and failed to address the thrust of the task about the difference between proof and probability. The better responses focused explicitly from the start on the demands of the question. These included analysis and debates about the concept of probability with, for example, a discussion of the significance of Swinburne's writings on this topic. In these responses, candidates selected and adapted arguments for the existence of God in relation to debates about the 'balance of probability'.

Question 19

All candidates were familiar with the theme of religious experience, at a descriptive level, and presented a wealth of information including substantial detail from the writings of James and Otto. Relatively few, however, were able to focus on the demands of the question about its uniqueness, and the possible implications of this for an understanding of religion.

Conclusion

Once again, a key point of this examination is to emphasise to candidates the importance of focusing on the thrust of the question, especially in section B, where identifying the key idea(s) is paramount. All merit and distinction candidates will do this. They will likewise be selective and succinct in the material from their course of study that they use to support and illustrate their main points. They will also show that they can draw on sources of scholarship selectively. At this level, there is no room for merely descriptive accounts, for example of Paley's watch or Plato's allegory of the cave. Such material needs to be woven into the main argument and linked with other ideas to show a wider grasp of the issues being raised. The weight attached in the objectives to the skills of evaluation is also particularly important at this level.

It is worth remembering the purpose of this examination, which is to provide universities with evidence of the abilities of the most able students, who are able to tackle complex and wide-ranging issues from an analytical and evaluative basis, showing that they are able to think creatively and independently. Needless to say, it is a real pleasure and encouragement when examiners can read the persuasive answers of students who show these qualities as the culmination of their formal schooling.

Statistics

Grade	Max. Mark	Merit	Distinction
Raw boundary mark	80	43	55

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