

Examiners' Report Summer 2007

AEA

AEA Religious Studies (9871)

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9871: AEA Religious Studies

Introduction

The entry for this year's examination was down by some 20%. However, candidates represented a similar spectrum of ability to previous years, though with fewer very high calibre scripts. A small but significant number of candidates who did not represent the target ability group again entered, and an unexpectedly high number of candidates who had entered for the examination withdrew.

Once again the range of performance shown by candidates could be broadly divided into the three areas. Those who did not achieve a merit tended to focus obliquely on the passage or essay topic, identifying a feature with which they were familiar and writing, often at considerable length, everything they could recall about the subject matter, but without effectively addressing the task.

Those who gained a merit grade were, however, able to address the key issues raised in the task, and to deploy sound background knowledge and understanding organised around the main issues, though often with limited evidence of their ability to evaluate an issue.

Those candidates who gained the distinction grade tended to focus quickly on the key issue for discussion, drawing in a range of sources to summarise different viewpoints, including their own personal point of view. They also demonstrated evidence of wider reading or included elements of other subjects they had studied, addressing the evaluative aspects of the tasks thoroughly and bringing their discussion to a personal and often independent conclusion.

The comments which follow relate to responses to the more popular questions in this year's examination.

Question 1

Candidates who gained higher marks on this question tended to approach it, as expected, within the context of wider debates about plurality, exclusivity and syncretism, in some cases defending the value of uniqueness, in others setting out a strong case against it. Some candidates, however, confined themselves to straightforward textual exegesis and their answers were consequently limited in terms of the scope of the passage.

Question 3

The question was poorly answered by those who attempted it, largely because they failed to offer a clear analysis of the concept of salvation either in its personal or social context. Instead, they tended to give most attention to facets of the passage such as the abolition of religion, and offered no debate about the key claim at the end that 'diagnosis and proffered cure are correlative.'

Question 4

Candidates may initially have been attracted to the theme of 'rights' as an apparently straightforward topic, but then tended to lose their way in a rather complex debate about the claim in the passage that conflicting rights represent the most serious challenge to absolute rights. More able candidates were able to relate their discussion to the contextualisation of rights, for example within different cultures, and to a consideration of how different moral codes impinge on the debate about rights, including absolute rights.

Question 5

Some very good answers to this question dealt analytically with such key concepts as 'brute fact' and 'necessary being' and welded this understanding into their discussion, drawing in other aspects such as omniscience, omnipotence and responsibility, particularly in relation to evil and suffering, as part of the debate. That kind of approach worked particularly well and led to some imaginative discussion and wide-ranging argument. At the other end of the spectrum, there was a tendency to see the passage as basically a traditional question about the ontological argument or the problem of evil, and an opportunity for candidates to write all they could remember about these topics, with little reference to the thrust of the passage.

Question 6

This passage appeared to provide a haven for those candidates who were unable to relate their knowledge and understanding to other areas of study. The result was a complete absence of any analysis of the claim that 'all religions are the same', virtually no reference to scholarly opinion or debate, and the tendency simply to string together a series of often inappropriate examples and anecdotes. Occasionally, there was a good attempt to deal with religious diversity from first principles, but otherwise little evidence of any real study of the issue.

Question 7

An extensive range of material was produced on all aspects of religious experience, describing types, tests and examples. However, only a few of the more able candidates addressed the issue of whether the quest for a definition of religious experience was fruitless, and even fewer explored the implications of such a conclusion.

Question 14

In responding to this question, the more able candidates explored a range of well chosen dilemmas and related them to a selection of ethical theories. Those who grouped ethical theories into types or approaches and discussed their effectiveness or otherwise usually achieved much better results, as did those who examined ways in which the theories might impinge on the dilemmas. In many cases, however, candidates tended to deal separately with the dilemmas and the theories, without effectively trying to apply them. Very few went on to explore alternative ways of resolving dilemmas.

Question 15

Many candidates wrote extensively on the themes of the question, but most did not offer a sufficiently clear analysis of the key ideas of ‘moral questions’, ‘correct answers’ and ‘objective moral facts’ to enable them to develop their argument. Many of those who approached the task from the viewpoint of issues about ethical language wrote widely on this theme, but did not then focus their argument on the key issues.

Question 18

This was a ‘classic’ AEA question where candidates were invited to apply their understanding of a familiar and thoroughly learned area of study, evil and suffering. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases this was seen as another opportunity to describe the range and detail of their knowledge about this theme, relating it to a variety of theodicies, without focusing on the point of the task. A few more able candidates assumed a familiarity with the material, summarising the key issues, and then debating the key issue about whether evil and suffering provided ‘sufficient reason and evidence’ to affirm the non-existence of God.

Question 19

Some better answers to this question gave a careful analysis of life after death as an ‘essential’ feature of religion, a few drawing on their knowledge of more than one religious tradition to illustrate differing approaches to the issue, others debating the contextual issues of dualism and monism. The most effective answers, drawing on appropriate scholarship, dealt carefully with the implications of lack of clarity in coming to their own considered conclusion.

Conclusion

It is important for centres and candidates to recognise that the AEA does not require knowledge and understanding beyond that contained in the A level specifications. Additional teaching or exploration of additional ‘content’ is not required. It is essentially an opportunity for high calibre students, in the top 10% of the A level ability range, to show that they can apply their understanding. Any additional support given to candidates should focus on the grade descriptions and level descriptors to encourage them to think about the skills appropriate to AEA, and on how to construct effective answers, including of course, actually identifying what the tasks are asking them to do.

Statistics

Grade	Max. Mark	Merit	Distinction
Raw boundary mark	80	41	53

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