

Religion and Society GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Teachers need to be aware that in this examination many students failed to recognise key study design terms. Such students gave responses that demonstrated a narrowness of study. Answers tended to cover two (sometimes only one) topics with some very basic knowledge of credal type belief statements, which students were unable to apply in any detail to other studied content. Teachers are advised to check their courses against the general and particular perspectives of the study design.

Courses of content to be studied should have a connectedness, and the basis of this is the core beliefs of the religious tradition or traditions studied. Beliefs are consistently present in the language of the study design. Identifying beliefs, investigating how they are understood by believers, investigating how they are expressed through other aspects of religious traditions, investigating how these beliefs have been influenced over time and in particular situations, investigating how beliefs and their expression have influenced believers and the wider society – this should be the focus of whatever content is chosen.

‘Religion and Society’ is a big picture study of the interrelatedness of religion and society undertaken through a focused investigation of one or more than one particular religious tradition.

Whichever religious traditions are chosen for study, it must be remembered that this study looks at religion and its interaction with society from perspectives other than those considered in a Religious Education program. The study design does require philosophical and sociological perspectives as well as a theological perspective. All of these perspectives should be approached from an investigative methodology, which requires critical reflection and evaluation. These perspectives were absent or inadequately dealt with in many student responses.

Students must be able to go beyond a superficial version of knowledge of their chosen religious tradition or traditions. This is especially the case for students studying two traditions. However, as it often presents, the second tradition appears in a potted version. Resources should be carefully chosen to avoid simplistic outsider perspectives.

Careful reading of instructions remains a concern and students may need advice on how to be skilled in order to analyse questions and identify their focus.

In Section A, the short-answer questions, many students wrote excessively in their answers, to the detriment of Sections B and C. By its very nature Section A requires a different type of response.

Students tended to take a broad approach to questions in Section A, including as many points of information as possible into their responses. The questions, however, required a precise focus of information. Students needed to sift through the breadth of their information and select the appropriate information from their study and answer precisely the question asked. They had to think about their information from a different perspective to their school-assessed work. These skills require considerably more practice.

A few responses were polemical and some were angry. This indicates a difficult pastoral concern for teachers in balancing the formal study of religion in the VCE context with the faith and pastoral dimensions of their schools.

In Section B, the distinction between core and consequent beliefs must be thoroughly taught to students. More work on the desirability, necessity, and appropriateness of interpretation of beliefs needs to be done with consideration of the insights that other areas of human learning and endeavour can provide to theological thinking in a given time and culture.

In Section C, answers need to be grounded in a specific religious tradition. This indicates that the involvement of the chosen individual or group in a particular religious tradition should be overt. For example, operating from vague or generic Christian associated values does not constitute belonging to a religious tradition. Students need to be careful to match the person or group with the right religious tradition, for example C S Lewis, was an Anglican Christian, not a Catholic Christian.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section A (Units 3 and 4)

Question 1

a–b. (Average mark 2.81/Available marks 4)

Based on your study of a religious tradition, answer two of the following:

a. Why do humans exist?

b. Where did the universe come from?

c–d. (2.64/4)

c. What is the relationship between human beings and a higher being?

d. What is the relationship between human beings and the natural world?

A small number of students inappropriately answered all four sub-questions instead of only two.

Most students chose to answer parts a and b. Both offered more successful students a range of points to include in their answers. Responses were good across different traditions. More successful answers for a) and b) included a ‘don’t

know' perspective, that indicated understanding of different ways of 'knowing' and they also showed an informed understanding of the influence of scientific thinking upon theological thinking.

However, many less successful answers for b) were stuck on a 'big bang' theory with no religious view offered. Most of these responses had a very poor understanding of contemporary scientific thinking on the origins of the natural world. Generally the credal type knowledge about God was clear from each of the traditions studied. There was a tendency in the less successful responses to go into a 'rave', giving their own personal opinions without any reference to the religious tradition. Even some more successful answers found it difficult to explain why humans exist, whereas answers to the origin of the universe seemed a bit clearer and students referred to documents in the various religious traditions.

In parts c and d students had difficulty explaining 'relationship' according to a particular religious tradition. There was a tendency for students to sidestep the beliefs of the religious tradition about creator-creature-creation relationships and offer personal views. Part c needed clearer understanding of biblical theology, especially for significant terms such as 'dominion'. Part d often slipped into an environmentalist's litany, unrelated to a religious tradition's specific beliefs. Where the 'natural world' was defined more broadly than 'nature' the answers were more successful.

Across all questions, the stronger responses came from a more philosophical rather than doctrinal understanding of the religious tradition's beliefs. Such responses indicated students had read appropriate scriptural theology as well as contemporary doctrinal statements and interpretations. These questions did give scope for more successful students to articulate their understanding and there were some excellent responses.

Question 2 (3.36/6)

Describe how a particular religious belief is expressed through two aspects of a religious tradition.

Those students who read the question with care and who chose to write on two aspects which had some content to them, did well. There were many who wrote coherently on the expression of the identified belief and even linked the two 'aspects' to make a very sound answer.

Many students were able to mention two aspects of a religious tradition, but the 'how' was not explained well.

Other students simply wrote at length on a number of religious beliefs. Many ignored either the word 'two' or 'aspects'. Another group of students used the word 'aspects' but in a non study design interpretation, or made relatively simplistic responses along the lines of 'x said things' and 'they are in y, our Holy Books'.

Many potentially successful responses undermined themselves by referring to only one aspect to illustrate the expression of the identified belief. A few students gave excellent information explaining and linking two aspects, such as ritual and text, but did not relate them to the expression of a particular belief. Generally, this question highlighted a weakness in the knowledge and understanding of **aspects** of a religious tradition as required in the study design.

Question 3 (2.74/6)

Does the response of a religious tradition to challenge always influence the tradition's relationship to the wider society? Give reasons for your answer.

There were some superb responses to this question, but they were in the minority. The key to this question was the word 'always'. Many students ignored it. Regardless of whether the student said 'yes' or 'no' to the question, they offered little evidence to support their stance.

A good number of students gave a detailed explanation of a particular challenge as an example of the influence. Generously, this could be interpreted as answering the question by inference. Very few gave reasons for their answer and many who attempted to support their claims, interpreted **reasons** as *examples*.

Generally, answers tended to be a collection of prepared statements about challenges and responses. Most responses said nothing about the wider society or dismissed it with a glib generalisation, 'they didn't know about it', 'they didn't care about it,' or 'they agreed and believed too'.

It was not necessary to offer details of particular challenges or indeed of specific responses. This type of response would not be appropriate within this short-answer section of the examination. This question tried to focus the students on the **dynamics** operating between a religious tradition and the wider society.

Relationship was a problematic term. There was little understanding of the different levels and types of relationship possible between a religious tradition and the wider society within which the tradition exists. This raises again the problem from last year's paper where students were unfamiliar with the term 'context'. Both **context** and **relationship** are concepts that must be explored in the content chosen for the courses based on this study design.

The key to successfully dealing with this question was careful reading of the question. Students were asked to think about response and its impact, and not just from the particular example but also from the general nature of the dynamic interrelatedness of religion and society. This is part of the big picture context of the study design.

Section B (Unit 3)

Question 4 (5.64/10)

‘Religious traditions have to deal with the problem of maintaining belief in a higher being alongside the harsh realities of human life.’

How has the religious tradition you have studied dealt with this problem?

A minority of students answered this question and generally they approached the question successfully. Those who did well addressed the issue clearly. They had a realistic view of what constituted a ‘harsh reality’ and fitted it well into their answer. Some responses used a biographical example successfully, but the most successful answers used a harsh reality common to all, such as death or suffering or victimisation.

Problems with this question arose with the students’ definition of ‘harsh reality’. The less successful responses gave banal definitions such as, ‘having a hard time’ or ‘not happy’. Other students made their responses so personal and often idiosyncratic, that they lost all relevance to the question. Some students made their response totally biographical, with no grounding in the religious tradition. The question asked not how an individual believer coped, but how the tradition dealt with life’s ‘harsh realities’.

Death was frequent among the designated harsh realities of life and was generally handled well, with many students dealing with beliefs and their expression through rituals and pastoral practices. However, it is inadequate to describe death simply as a ‘new adventure’ or a ‘trip’. These answers needed to explore the teachings of their studied tradition on its eschatology. Students need to be able to explain the tradition’s understanding of the meaning behind death and the profoundness of its impact on the living.

This question clearly gave more successful students an opportunity to use their case studies well. However, many less successful responses focused on the case study, telling a story, rather than using the case study as an illustration of the theological points being discussed. There was certainly a misunderstanding on behalf of some students as to what constituted the ‘harsh realities of human life’.

A number of students forgot about the particular religious tradition/s they had studied and wrote generic and vague responses.

Question 5

‘Beliefs need to change if they are to survive.’

Discuss whether this is true for a religious tradition you have studied.

Most students answered this question, and there were numerous very good and some outstanding responses. These students understood the nature of religious belief and could distinguish between core and consequent beliefs for their specific religious tradition. They were able to discuss the issue of change with this distinction in mind and illustrated through different examples. There was quite a diverse range of topics used to illustrate the position taken for this question.

Many students gave a historical overview of a belief in their answer. This can work, but often the students spent so long on the overview that they neglected to relate their example to the focus of the question.

A number of students missed the distinction between core and consequent beliefs and struggled to be clear and consistent in their answers. Many did not specify or give a clear definition of the belief they were addressing and seemed to wander around a set of beliefs, most often losing their way and forgetting to relate their information to the question.

The issue of whether the belief changed or the expression of the belief changed was confused in the answers of numerous students. Many answers, often dealing with the same material, were very fixed in their opinions that a belief does not need to change if it is to survive. But many of these students did not understand the difference between core and consequent beliefs. They often argued incorrectly that core beliefs must change to survive.

Most students did address the study design focus of interaction between beliefs and society, but a large number also argued that it is not necessary for beliefs to change. These answers were legitimate when well argued, but generally they failed to distinguish between core beliefs and beliefs developed from interpretation of those core beliefs. They also failed to address the question of interaction. And they neglected to discuss the role of the expression of beliefs. Some students interpreted the ‘beliefs’ as ‘one’s beliefs’. Such responses ignored the content of their year’s study and referred to personal opinion.

Many answers were passionately argued and were obviously a personal belief position. Even with this level of subjectivity, there were many sound responses; students carefully supporting their position with objective argument.

Section C (Unit 4)

Question 6 (6/10)

‘Beliefs play an important role in the lives of individuals and groups.’

How important are the religious beliefs of a tradition you have studied to the efforts of individuals or groups in creating an ideal human society?

Many students chose this question, and there were many high quality responses.

Well represented, even among the not so strong answers was the key word 'beliefs' and appropriate belief related sentences and paragraphs were placed at regular intervals.

Very few students missed the 'beliefs' point for this question, though the ability to explore in detail the interplay between beliefs and action varied considerably.

Students wrote copiously and enthusiastically for this question about beliefs in action. The continuing danger is that students forget the context for their study of the individual or group. The context is the religious tradition to which their chosen individual or group belongs. Therefore, their answer must refer to the core beliefs of that tradition, showing how they inform, inspire, compel and support the action of the individual or group studied.

Although present by implication or inserted as a catch phrase, most students did not explore the notion of an ideal human society. More attention needs to be given to describing or defining an 'ideal human society' as conceived by the religious tradition and as interpreted by the selected individual or group from that tradition.

Question 7

In what ways has a religious tradition you have studied changed in response to a significant challenge from inside or from outside the tradition?

This was a straight-forward, knowledge based question, which was handled well.

A wealth of topics was used for this question. Among them were Secularisation, Biotechnology, Paedophilia, Divorce, The Holocaust, Capital Punishment, Science, Declining numbers of priests, Forces of history and Abortion.

More successful answers addressed all key ideas in the question, an admirable achievement, as there were six of these. Many took the approach that change was less a response to challenge and more an evolutionary process. They tracked changes in terms of belief, practice and relationship with the secular world and other religions. Some essays showed thorough research and thoughtful critical reflection about the responses to the selected challenge. They dealt with the issues of authority and credibility for the tradition.

Less successful responses were from students overwhelmed by information that they could not summarise or interpret. Some topics are too big and within them there is confusion over wherein lies the challenge and where the response. Vatican II is one of these problematic topics, which in examination conditions, is not well handled.

In quite a few responses the significant challenge was perceived as malicious in its intent. Whilst this made for some interesting reading, the defensiveness of the approach and the curtailed research and critical thinking did not constitute a sound response.

Less successful responses did little more than provide a simplistic history, mentioning one change that was really more a reaction or response than an actual change identifiable in the aspects of the religion. Overall, there were still too many polemical and confessional responses. These responses do not fulfil the intentions of the study design.