



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

Religious Studies

RSS03

(Specification 2060)

Unit C Philosophy of Religion

Report on the Examination

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General Comments

As in previous years, questions 1 and 2 were the most popular, with question 4 being the least popular. It was noted that a significant number of students seemed to be relying on class notes and ignored the focus of the question. For instance, many students rehearsed Aquinas' first three ways for question 01 and for question 02 many listed the strengths and weaknesses of the cosmological argument. In both cases it would not have been possible from the answers given to conclude what was the actual question set. Similarly, in question 03 many students merely gave general summaries of the three main types of religious experience. Students need to realise that there is not a one fit answer for all questions on a particular topic. Each question has a particular focus and it is that which must drive the structure of the answer. The selection and ordering of material is a key aspect of the AO1 skill.

There was some evidence that students have learnt some key technical words but do not really understand them and so use them inappropriately. A number of centres had entries where the entire cohort selected the same choice of questions. It was not clear whether these centres had prepared students for only two of the four areas, or whether the students just preferred those particular topics. To reduce the content to the bare minimum of two areas would be to give a student a very limited experience of the subject and it is to be discouraged.

Students continue to struggle to gain beyond Level 5 in the AO2 questions. Evaluation is about weighing up an argument using reason and giving justifications. Many students are still just listing arguments for and arguments against. This is not evaluation since there is no weighing up of the persuasiveness or otherwise of the arguments. Reasoning and critical analysis demand engagement with the arguments, and allowing the reader to follow a sustained line of thought to an appropriate conclusion.

Question 1 *The Cosmological argument*

01 As discussed above, many students ignored the actual focus of the question and rehearsed the first three ways of Aquinas. This often took the form of a simple outline. However, the focus of the question was on the first and third way in terms of first mover and necessary being. The higher level answers discussed potentiality and actuality in terms of first mover, using the example of heat and wood. Although there were some good answers about contingency and necessary, many students could not coherently explain how this third way related to contingency and necessary being.

Students often omitted any reference to Aquinas' rejection of infinite regression. A significant number of students included criticisms of the three ways in question 01. They seemed unaware of question 01 being AO1 and question 02 being an AO2. It may well be that students were just repeating their class notes. Surprisingly, they often failed to include these criticisms again in answer to question 02, where they would have gained some credit.

02 As discussed in the general comments, less able students tended to just repeat the criticisms rather than assess them. Any suggestion of an evaluation was often in terms of 'I think' or 'I agree' but no justifications were given in support. The focus of the question was often ignored and less able students merely rehearsed the arguments for and against the cosmological. A number of students even limited themselves to discussion about the Big Bang.

Higher level answers gave a reasoned sustained argument focussed around whether the argument proved that God exists. It was encouraging to see some students discuss inductive arguments and whether the cosmological was therefore more about persuasion than about proof.

Many students referred to Russell's fallacy of composition, but few seemed to understand it and limited themselves to stating 'just because we have a mother, why should the universe have a mother?' In explaining a criticism of the argument it is necessary to make clear how the criticism challenges the argument.

Question 2 *Religious experience*

03 Many students gave general comments related to religious experiences or examples of religious experiences without relating them to characteristics of visions and/or mystical experiences. Some students chose to give examples of religious experiences with no reference to characteristics whilst others included the characteristics of conversion in their answer. It was clear that many students seemed to struggle to discuss visions. Higher level answers were focussed on the characteristics and supported by appropriate examples. Such responses were able to go beyond James' characteristics to include reference to other ideas about mystical experience such as those of Happold.

04 Many students struggled to go beyond describing the work of Ramachandra and Persinger, and few were able to discuss the extent to which their work fully explains religious experience. Higher level answers addressed the key words in the question – 'fully explain'... 'to what extent'.

Question 3 *Psychology and religion*

05 It is vital that students identify the focus in the question set. In this instance it was how Freud *challenged belief in God*. However, most students seemed to just recite their notes on Freud and the Oedipus Complex and so were limited as to the marks they could be awarded. Few students noticed the plural 'ways' and so other theories by Freud such as wish fulfilment were rarely mentioned. The higher level answers went beyond the Oedipus Complex and primal horde to include Freud's challenges that God is an illusion or that belief in God is accounted for by people's need to overcome the fear of natural forces.

06 As expected, most students referred to Jung as a counter to Freud. However some struggled to link Jung to the question focus 'religious faith necessary for good mental health'. A number of students did not seem to understand the connection with individuation. Weaker answers were often limited to arguing that Freud's theories suggested that people with religious belief were mentally ill. Higher level answers addressed the focus and reached an appropriate conclusion in terms of 'how far'. They also argued that Freud did see some positives related to religious belief.

Question 4 *Atheism and postmodernism*

07 This was the least popular question, although there were some centres who had clearly taught this area in depth and these students produced some thorough answers. In contrast there were some answers that suggested that students attempted the question without having studied the topic. Often students explained only one of the two phrases and so limited themselves as to the mark they could achieve. All too often they ignored the question structure and wrote in general terms about postmodernism or reasons for the rise of atheism.

Higher level answers discussed positive and negative atheism and also explained the background to Nietzsche's term.

08 The lower level answers tended to ignore 'religion' and just listed some general arguments against atheism. Higher level answers made clear links to religion, including relevant data such as church attendance, evidence of pockets of growth in religion, and the reinterpretation of spirituality. There was evidence of some good reasoning and critical analysis that drew a justified conclusion in terms of 'to what extent'.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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