

2018 VCE Religion and Society written examination report

General comments

Students generally wrote well on a range of religious traditions, individual case studies and challenges in the 2018 VCE Religion and Society examination. It was clear from responses that students had tried to focus on the questions and address the key terms in the questions. The majority of students attempted all questions and most contained their responses to the provided answer space.

Many students were able to address questions directly without repeating the question or including unnecessary preambles. This was most evident in Section A. However, further improvement is required in directly addressing the question in Section B. Some students lost time, space and marks when more than half the allocated space for a response was taken up with unnecessary scene setting or background information that was too detailed. This meant they were either unable to answer the question fully or they wrote excessively in the extra space.

The categories of belief seemed well understood, with few students confusing them with actual beliefs. However, the ability to work with actual beliefs, regardless of the Area of Study in the question focus, was an area for improvement. Many students were not able to explain the theological connection between the nominated beliefs. Quite a few students seemed to be writing a response to a question from a previous examination when they identified 'suffering' as a belief from within the category of 'relationship between humans'. Also, when asked to select beliefs for demonstrating how they are expressed, many students chose complex beliefs that they were unable to explain theologically and found difficulty in showing how they were expressed. Simply saying that they are expressed was not an explanation, and repeatedly using a phrase such as 'contributes to the search for meaning' was not adequate for demonstrating how the particular expression of a belief is intended to work.

Students selected a diverse range of individuals. However, some choices for the case study did not enable students to deal adequately with all key knowledge points. A few students had studied a person who converted to the religious tradition. This was an incorrect selection, as the person had to be a member of the selected religious tradition when they had the significant life experience.

While few students gave unnecessary biographical detail in their responses, their ability to deal with the analysis of the person's significant life experience required improvement. This was especially so with the third key knowledge point as it required a number of different yet interrelated things to be analysed. It asks that students explain and compare the member's:

- level of adherence to relevant religious beliefs
- understanding of relevant religious beliefs
- faith in relevant religious beliefs
- engagement with the related expressions of those beliefs prior to the experience
- engagement with the related expressions of those beliefs during the experience
- engagement with the related expressions of those beliefs after the experience.

Generally, students showed little ability to explain the terms ‘adherence to’, ‘understanding of’, ‘faith in’ and ‘engagement with’. Most students repeated the phrase ‘adherence and engagement’ throughout their response, treating them as one and without explaining their meaning or showing how they were demonstrated by the member of the tradition. Many students did not answer the question asked and responded about the beliefs rather than working with the focus terms.

Knowledge of the historical context for the challenges studied was good, though accuracy of times, names and places could improve.

Some of the aspects of religion were misunderstood, especially sacred stories, texts, social structure and ethics.

There was little evidence of analysis, synthesis and supportive evidence in most student responses.

Each of the Areas of Study starts with one to three key knowledge points that require study of religion generally, before any study of a particular tradition or examples from that tradition is undertaken. The exception is 4.2, but those key knowledge points from 4.1 apply to it.

The introductions to Units 3 and 4 and to each of the Areas of Study provide ideas and terms for study and discussion about the nature and interaction of Religion and Society.

The key knowledge points and the introductions need to be more thoroughly explored and related to what is studied about particular religious traditions.

Section A

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	46	54	0.6

High-scoring responses showed understanding of sacred stories as having special value in the religious tradition. They are holy and are usually about the origins of existence, of the religion and of the people and events that are significant in the development of a religion. Sacred stories are usually found in the sacred texts/scriptures of a religion. These sacred stories may be quoted in other texts. Over time, stories in other texts may acquire the status of sacred story. Such may be the stories of prominent leaders and saints.

If only stories were defined without addressing the term ‘sacred’, or if the response claimed sacred stories as only myths, no mark was awarded.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Sacred stories denote holy narratives passed on through generations which convey and improve religious beliefs. They can be in the form of written text or can be transmitted orally in drawings.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	47	53	0.6

High-scoring responses showed understanding that there are many different types of texts in religion. Texts could be oral, written or illustrated expressions of the theology, teachings and history of religions. If only sacred texts were defined, no mark was given.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Texts are all the written material of a religion. They can be in the form of legal, historical, narrative, poetic, interpretative, explanatory documents. They can be sacred, often believed to be divinely revealed. They can also be an interpretation written by a religious figure.

Question 1c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	16	39	30	11	2.3

Some students answered separately for sacred stories and for texts. Others answered by noting common roles, for example, sources:

- of the truth narrative of religion
- to enhance believers' understandings of God and of how to live their religion
- for authority for power to rule, guide and govern religion
- of ethical guidelines
- for inspiration, meditation, prayer and communication with ultimate reality
- for communication of beliefs, teachings and interpretations.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Sacred stories, which are one form of texts, provide role models for human behaviour, are repositories for the religious beliefs, establish traditional practices and moral precepts in vivid ways that can be remembered. Other forms of text communicate interpretations, explanations, rulings that relate beliefs to new situations, and the documents that guide or govern a religion. All texts and especially sacred stories are intended to provide answers to the 'big questions' of life and therefore provide direction and purpose for the lives of members.

Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	8	55	37	1.3

High-scoring responses remained closely linked to the cartoon. Students noted that the ideas in the cartoon suggested that every created being and thing is a source of meaning and inspiration. Some students extended the idea to include the here and now, the everyday, the ordinary, common experiences.

Although not necessary for full marks, some students referred to the posture of the person in the cartoon, indicating an attitude of respect, even reverence, towards the various creatures and objects.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

The cartoon suggests that answers to the search for meaning can be found in many different places and from many different things, evidenced by some of the spiritual leaders met by the person being sentient creatures, while some are not, like the tree. The cartoon suggests that wisdom and inspiration can be found in the contemplation of the natural world, rather than just from traditional leaders of religion and spirituality.

Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	19	32	28	16	5	1.6

High-scoring responses noted that religion can reflect the ideas of the cartoon, acknowledging the presence of the divine in all things and therefore deserving of respect as seen by the posture of the cartoon character towards the various 'spiritual leaders'.

High-scoring responses also stated that religion differs from the cartoon. They observed that religion sees the source of meaning coming from that which is transcendent, other than self and created creatures and things. It is the transcendent source that gives meaning to everything else, elevating it to have sacred value, such as the sacredness of life itself and the sacred symbolism of various places, objects and actions.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Like it is shown in the cartoon, religions do see the natural world as a source of answers in the search for meaning as they hold that the divine (God) is the creator of all things and can be found in all things. However, the cartoon does not depict an ultimate reality in itself as a means to find meaning in existence. It also fails to address the offerings of religion in accumulated wisdom of beliefs, stories, ethical framework and respected spiritual leaders in the search for meaning.

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	2	10	32	32	19	6	2.8

Students' answers had to show understanding of the term 'engagement', such as how people's involvement with, commitment to, living by or practising the religion is affected by significant life experiences. Positive and negative effects of the significant life experience on engagement with religion had to be stated.

Points made in responses were that such life experiences influence the engagement of people in their religion through: reflecting, questioning, doubting, wondering, researching, studying. These types of engagement may then lead to effects on adherence such as:

- affirmed/increased/deeper cognitive understanding or heightened spiritual awareness/sensitivity resulting in even more engagement, that is, commitment and involvement in the activities related to a religion
- diminished cognitive and spiritual understanding of the beliefs and the meaning to life they offer resulting in less commitment and involvement in the practices and rituals
- the participation in the activities of religion may remain as before the significant life experience, but the engagement cognitively and spiritually may decline.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Significant life experiences can be turning guide for adherents as their acceptance (adherence) and participation (engagement) with particular beliefs, that influence and are influenced by the experience, may undergo change. Whether the experience is positive or negative, if a significant life experience affirms or revises in a more meaningful way, the related beliefs, then it is most likely that the person would make their acceptance or acknowledgment (adherence) more openly or strongly of those beliefs. It would also probably increase the person's participation (engagement) in the practices of the religion.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	24	23	28	18	8	1.7

High-scoring responses showed clear understanding of the meaning of indifference. A stance of indifference might be taken by religion because:

- The significant challenge is not affecting religion directly.
- The significant challenge is too confrontational and potentially divisive to engage.
- The significant challenge is too complex to explain and work through.
- There are powerful interests in religion that determine it is too dangerous to address the challenge.
- The focus of the challenge is not part of the concerns of religion.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Indifference, that is being unconcerned by a significant challenge so that the religion has no definite opinion as to the rights or wrongs related to the challenge, is not the general stance taken towards significant challenges. Because the challenge is significant, then the religion will take stances that either accept and support the content of the challenge or stances that disagree and counter the content of the challenge. But the general reasons for a stance of indifference being taken are to avoid discrimination or persecution from society or other groups in the religion or other religions. Also to avoid offending members of the tradition and to decrease the possibility of members leaving the tradition or ceasing their adherence of rules, laws and practices, perhaps causing a split in the religion. If the challenge is perceived as temporary, a stance of indifference may be taken to avoid drawing attention to certain beliefs or practices or because the religion does not have a clear understanding of the issue at that time.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	6	9	20	24	24	13	5	3.1

Social structure involves the whole organisation of religion, and the feature of authority within it is the source of stances taken towards a challenge. Therefore, the aspect of social structure will invariably be involved in any stance taken by a religion, as the authoritative figures and institutions of religion aim to safeguard the existing traditions, power, gender roles and organisation.

Ethics provides the reasons and methods for people to decide how to live their lives, guiding, regulating and challenging personal and communal values and behaviour. So ethics will be involved in any stance taken by a religion as the principles and moral codes will be the basis for deciding on a stance.

Other aspects needed to show why the other aspects of religion bring about particular stances and responses as modelled above for social structures and ethics.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Through consultation of the various types of texts of a religious tradition, a stance may be formulated and appropriate responses designed to support that stance. Some of these texts contain the original experiences, beliefs and ethics of a religion and are therefore the basis for the other types of texts that interpret, apply and develop understanding of material in the sacred texts. Texts are the main source of reference for a religion deciding on its stance towards challenges. Texts give the reasons for taking a particular stance.

The social structures of a religion provide the details of how the religion will respond to challenges. The organisations and processes of the social structure of a religion enable an authoritative stance to be taken and provide the means to inform the members of the stance

and related responses, and to ensure the members known why and how they are to respond to the challenges.

Question 6

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	29	40	24	6	1.1

Students needed to show they understood that there are different types of truth and that the truth narrative of religion is one type that has its particular focus and limits.

They also needed to show that they understood the meaning of narrative in the sense of the statement, that it is an ongoing story unfolding the lessons learned by religion in the search for meaning.

The truth narrative of religion is a way of seeing the world and its meaning. It is grounded in the past, directing attention to what is believed to be universal and eternal and accepting this in faith. The sense of truth in such religious narrative is explicable and meaningful only within the religion. The concept of religious truth is different to empirical truth, since it cannot be measured or factually proven.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

In the statement above 'truth narrative' refers to an ongoing story (comprised of many stories over time) that reflects the ideas or concepts that give meaning to believers either because they are held to be literally true (empirical) or because they hold metaphoric significance about the nature or will of their ultimate reality. Truth narrative also indicates that the beliefs of religion give meaning to human experiences and have informed the collective consciousness of believers to understand and relate to a transcendent being, beyond human knowledge yet which is accepted as not only possible but truly existing. In terms of human history, the narrative of religion reflects the way those humans have lived their lives based on their understanding of religious truth.

Section B

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	6	5	10	16	20	17	14	8	5	4.2

The following general points could be made particular through the tradition-specific examples of the selected belief(s) and their expressions through symbol and times.

- Symbols give concrete expression of abstract ideas (beliefs), thus clarifying and reinforcing meaning.
- Symbols can open multiple sacred perspectives offering different meaning. They can be understood at many levels and in many ways. They offer personal meaning.
- Symbols facilitate the interaction of an everyday object and transcendent insight to create the extraordinary out of the ordinary.

Students considered the 'times' of religious seasons, particular festivals, rituals, prayer, life cycle events – commitment, birth, death. These times enjoin participation in rituals and engage special symbols that express the participants' faith in the belief.

- Times become an anchor for the enactment of a belief.
- Times become ritualised by symbolic words and actions.
- Times create opportunity for personal and communal expressions and experience of beliefs.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

In the religious tradition of Islam, the belief that Allah (God) is one and alone should be worshipped is expressed through the symbol of the Kaaba in Mecca. This sacred place was set aside by the Prophet as the House of God and represents the place of God's special presence in Islam. Participating in the ceremonies of pilgrimage and prayer at the Kaaba, Muslims experience a sense of solemnity and communal identity as they unite in their worship of Allah, as the Quran states that it is for the worship of God that humankind was created (51:56). This shows the true meaning of life and participating in the symbolic actions, chants and prayers at the symbolic place of the Kaaba realises in a personal and communal way the adherence and engagement of Muslims with their religion of Islam.

For the same belief (known as Tawheed), the feature of 'times' is represented in the special time of pilgrimage to Mecca and the Kaaba and also in the daily worship of Allah in observance of the prescribed five times of prayer (service). These times of prayer remind the adherent that it is the worship of Allah that gives their life meaning. These times, alone with God, allow the adherent to have a harmonious relationship with God, reminding them that it is God who created them and has given their existence purpose.

Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	13	34	29	18	2.4

Students needed to carefully choose the particular beliefs about ultimate reality and about the relationship between humans, as those stated beliefs were the ones used in part b. to demonstrate the connections between them in the search for meaning.

A mere naming of a belief, such as 'Creator God' or 'one God' was insufficient. The student had to describe what the ideas about that God mean.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

One belief related to the nature of ultimate reality, according to Judaism, is that God is holy, perfect and benevolent. One of the common names applied to God in the post biblical period is 'Hakadosh Baruch Hu', (The Holy One Blessed be He).

Judaism teaches that humans are made in the image and likeness of God and are therefore endowed with a divine spark and thus must treat each other according to this dignity of humanity (Kavod Habriyot).

Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	17	14	19	19	18	9	4	2.5

Connections between the beliefs focused on theological explanation. Some students extended the connection to expression in ethical principles or moral norms/standards. Some showed that the beliefs about the relationship between humans:

- are contradictory or complementary to those they have stated about ultimate reality
- logically follow particular beliefs about ultimate reality
- give further understanding of the beliefs about ultimate reality.

All points made in the response required demonstration/explanation. Supportive sources were expected within the answer.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Since the relationship between and purpose of humans is to imitate God's qualities, "just as he is compassionate so too we must be compassionate" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), members of Judaism must emulate god's qualities of being kind, compassionate, ethical and holy in the way they interact with each other.

This connection between the belief about God and the way humans are to relate to each other, reminds members of the Jewish tradition that they are endowed with the divine spark and must live accordingly. But humans have to remember they are creatures not the creator. Humans having been created in the likeness and image of God, blessed and given dominion over the rest of creation have a weighty responsibility to fulfil God's law and purpose for humanity.

Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	5	14	25	24	17	11	5	2.9

Some brief historical identification was needed about the person and the significant experience to provide the context for the explanation about how and why faith was influenced. Students needed to show in their explanation that they understood that faith is acceptance/trust/confidence in religious beliefs. Both how and why faith was influenced needed to be covered, though not necessarily equally. In what way was faith influenced? Why was it influenced in that way rather than another way? Students needed to show how their engagement with expressions of relevant religious beliefs was affected. Was their involvement with certain practices of the religion strengthened or weakened or altered in some other way?

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Allison Joseph's account of Miami based Charlene Aminoff, recounts how Aminoff's faith (belief and trust in God) intensified and how she engaged more with her religion through becoming more observant in its laws and practices. ("Jew in the City" Published December 2014). In 2010, Aminoff, a member of the Jewish religious tradition, underwent the significant life experience of watching her daughter's lifeless body after she had drowned and pronounced clinically dead for more than three minutes, be resuscitated when her husband performed CPR. As such, Aminoff already had faith in an omnipotent God, but the experience of her daughter's miraculous survival (against all the medical odds), her understanding of and trust in God's all powerful presence was intensified, as she was convinced that God had intervened and saved her daughter. During her experience Aminoff prayed to God and so her confidence in the power of prayer to bring God's intervention convinced her that God is intimately involved in the workings of the world. As a result of her experience, Aminoff's engagement with the related expressions of her beliefs also intensified. Prior to the experience while faithful and observant, she was not yet keeping all the laws as observed by Orthodox Judaism. As a result of her daughter being saved, which Aminoff attributed directly to God's intervention, she felt she owed God and began to adhere to all the laws upheld by Orthodox Judaism, including covering her hair and other laws of modesty.

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	11	17	20	20	16	10	5	2.6

Responses had to show whether the person learned that the experience was useful/helpful/beneficial in some way, even though traumatic. Responses also had to show how certain beliefs interacted with that interpretation; for example, was the effect of those beliefs on the interpretation, positive or negative, helpful, confusing, did it promote questioning, research, prayer or a request for help?

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

At first, when it seemed her daughter was dead, Aminoff felt that God must have wanted something from her through this tragedy. Her existing beliefs in God's benevolence and omnipotence allowed her to remain optimistic and hopeful and she expressed this in continuing to pray even as her daughter lay clinically dead. But with her daughter's resuscitation her existing beliefs in God's continued benevolent presence and intervention in the world intensified. Because of the positive outcome she interpreted the experience as tangible proof of this belief and God's call to her to become a more observant Jew.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	5	9	14	17	13	14	10	8	6	3	1	4.1

In explaining how the challenge demonstrates the process of engagement and negotiation of their selected religious tradition of denomination, students had to deal clearly with both 'members' and with 'wider society', though not equally as that depended on the challenge they used. The responses had to do more than describe what happened in the challenge. Students had to demonstrate conceptual understanding of the general process of engagement used by the tradition and apply it to the selected challenge.

In high-scoring responses students considered the ways members of the tradition were informed/involved/warned/threatened/banned/prohibited/encouraged/consulted by or dialogued/debated with the tradition as it dealt with the challenge.

In high-scoring responses students considered how the trends, ideas, events and innovations of the wider society influenced and were influenced by the way the tradition interacted/engaged/negotiated with the wider society in relation to the challenge. Or they explained why only some or none of that interaction took place.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

This ethical challenge to the Catholic church originated from the Anglican tradition's acceptance of artificial contraception as 'morally sound', at the Seventh Lambeth Conference in 1930. This required a rethinking of the understanding of the belief about the sanctity of human life and the purpose of sex within marriage as procreation, in light of new medical, and social developments. Prompted by this decision if the Anglican Tradition, the Catholic Church began a limited dialogue with adherents but here was no negotiation entered into with members or the wider society. This was seen in 1930 when the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, the Magisterium, released a response in the form of a text, a Papal Encyclical 'Casti Connubi'. In this document the Catholic Church reaffirmed their belief that procreation of human life was the purpose of marriage and that the use of artificial contraception was an 'offence against the law of God' (Casti Connubi). This encyclical was an engagement with the members of Catholicism, though one sided and with no negotiation involved to arrive at the decisions of the encyclical. The leadership of the Catholic Church determined the stance of opposition to the challenge and in the supporting response of the publication of the encyclical, proclaimed to the members and to the wider society the continuity of their existing beliefs and ethical principles. However, there was some engagement with the ideas and values of the wider society and the Anglican Church's position, as the encyclical acknowledged that within the conjugal acts in marriage, there was a "unitive aspect" and this was a 'secondary end' of marriage (Cast Connubi). Over 30 years later, in 1968, in response to further medical and social developments that opposed the Catholic ethical teachings on sex and marriage and contraception, the stance of the Catholic church on this ethical issue was again reaffirmed in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae". Though both before and after the encyclical there were bishops and theologians who engaged both other leaders in the church and the wider society in discussing the issues and argued against what they saw as the hard line of Humanae Vitae.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	9	8	12	17	15	13	10	8	6	2	1	4

Different views and the stances arising from them were the focus for answers to this question. Students who dealt with only one view and its related stance did not provide an adequate answer.

This question was about outcomes/results/consequences upon the challenge itself. These arise because of the particular views and related stances taken by individuals and groups within the religion, towards a challenge.

High-scoring responses identified different views held within the tradition about the challenge and the stances that arose from those views and discussed the effects, positive and negative, on the challenge itself (in its entirety and/or on identifiable parts of the challenge).

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Martin Luther, then a priest and theologian in the Catholic Christian tradition, argued that faith alone could lead to salvation. In opposing his position, the Catholic authorities initially took the stance to oppose and condemn Luther's contention and to use the supporting response of attack. Regardless of the variations of the stance, becoming increasingly confrontational and aggressive and the different supporting responses taken to curb, stop, and silence Luther, the initial stance to oppose and condemn Luther's theology was not effective in minimising the seriousness of the challenge. This was primarily because Luther did not accept that the Church had the authority to tell him what to do. The only authority Luther followed was the Scriptures. Due to this, the Church's repressive stances and aggressive supporting responses infuriated him and supported his opinion that the Church (leadership) was immoral and corrupt. The stances to oppose Luther, at first trying to ignore and keep the challenge quiet, then progressively moving to more public and aggressive opposition, were also ineffective in stemming the seriousness of the challenge because they did not acknowledge as valid and address the many large problems in theology and practice that Luther had identified. After the publication and spread across Europe of Luther's criticisms of the theology and practices of the Church leadership, the official stances of opposition became even less effective as more leaders, Church and State and ordinary members of the Church openly sided with Luther. The credibility of the Church's stances was weakened by the fact that Luther came in a long line of authoritative Church members making the same criticisms.

The widespread discontent of secular leaders over the issue of paying taxes to the Church made them ready to join Luther when he openly broke from the authority of Rome. And the advent of the printing press meant that the challenge became Europe wide rather than localised, the support for Luther's call for religious freedom spread quickly and the people were receptive. When the Church authorities finally took a more conciliatory stance it was too late and their decisions in the Council of Trent (1545), effectively changed little in response to the criticisms of Luther. By that time the stances of opposition to Luther had resulted in his excommunication from the Catholic church, the split from the Catholic tradition of many secular states in Europe and the devastating wars between Catholic and Protestant Christians.