

Religion and Society GA 3: Written examination

Part 1

GENERAL COMMENTS

This was the first paper for the revised study design. The paper was in three sections. Section A examined the areas of study and outcomes of both Units 3 and 4, Section B examined the areas of study and outcomes of Unit 3, and Section C examined the areas of study and outcomes of Unit 4.

Although this meant that there would be overlap of content, the focus of questions in Section A, using the same content, was different to the focus of questions in Sections B and C.

The paper incorporated a new style of question for students of Religion and Society: the short-answer questions in Section A. Overall, the students handled the new format and question style moderately well. There are some technique problems to address in preparing for this style of examination. Prominent among these, is responding to the question asked, and writing appropriate length responses as guided by the suggested time and mark allocation. Answering short-answer questions requires a different technique. Students have to be carefully attuned to the emphasis in the question. They then have to be very selective about the information they use. Teachers need to train their students to write briefly and succinctly to the point of the question.

These questions are not mini essays, nor are they one-sentence responses, nor is an adequate response achieved through a series of listed words or phrases. All responses should be in complete sentence format, which can include lists and a series of points, and they are connected within the sentence structure and to the question asked.

The suggested time allocation is most important for students to observe. They need to use this time to select the important points, plan and then write. Their responses must always be grounded in actual information and understandings related to their studied religious tradition or traditions, not in some imagined ‘what if’, generic religion.

Generally, the essay questions in Sections B and C were handled reasonably well. Many more students were consciously attempting to identify the theological dimensions of the questions. There is still more work to help students refine their understanding of the core beliefs of a tradition and the beliefs attendant or consequent upon them. The quality of responses, and the number of students represented in the very high to medium range, continues to improve.

A small percentage of student responses were brief, yet indicated appropriate knowledge for the question, but an inability to apply it. Discerning the focus of questions remains a problem for such students, who are less confident in their content base and in their writing skills.

It was of concern to find that Questions 5 and 6, though dealing with different sections of the study, were answered very similarly by some students. These students, not only used the same person or group, but also the same information and examples. They acknowledged the different questions merely by using the language of the questions to sandwich their limited and very stretched material. Whilst it is possible to study some ‘content rich’ individuals or groups for both Unit 3 Outcome 2 and Unit 4 Outcome 2, it is more helpful for students to have a wider range of focus content in their study.

Choosing different content for the areas of study and their related outcomes is recommended. These may all be selected from within the same religious tradition for continuity and deepening of understanding of that tradition. It was pleasing to note that more students, though still a small minority, are taking up the study design option to study more than one religious tradition.

In the essay section, Question 7 created the most difficulty for students who attempted to answer it. Many students ignored the quotation and the instruction to apply the quotation to their studied topic and religious tradition. Students launched into prepared answers for Unit 4 Outcome 2, paying no attention to the examination question.

There were students, knowledgeable in their material and able to competently express their information and understandings, undermining their response because it sat unconnected to the question asked. Students must practise dissecting questions, working out exactly what emphasis is required, selecting the appropriate information from all they have collected on a particular topic, and then re-working it to address the question focus. Responses that reproduce coursework type responses, topped and tailed by the paraphrased question do not score highly.

Generally, the quality of response from students working with the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions could be improved if they had more to say and could say it correctly and clearly.

There are too many students responding from a very narrow research base. This is the case with their specific topics and with regard to their religious tradition generally. There is still a tendency for many students to claim the views of one group or branch or theological interpretation or practice as representative of the entire tradition within a particular time and even across time. Certainly in some traditions there is an official body of belief, teaching, interpretation and practice. However, students should acknowledge from which perspective they are responding and

indicate that they are aware of differences and diversity even though it may not be relevant to the question to develop these. Students need to research their topics widely and to take a more critically reflective approach to their research. Skills of synthesising and critically evaluating information, opinions, interpretations and understandings need serious attention to enable students to apply their content to the examination questions.

Essay technique remains a problem, although more students made a short point plan for their essays. However many plans show clearly that the student has not analysed the question. They are writing what they know in response to key trigger study design terms in the questions, but not addressing the emphasis of the question.

Students working with the Jewish tradition and traditional Aboriginal spirituality usually have abundant information. In their responses to Section A short-answer questions these students must be careful to limit their answers to the question focus, keeping close to recommended times. Many students wrote excessively in this section, consequently their essays suffered.

In Sections B and C, it is important that responses are written in an essay form with fluent development of the question throughout their answer, with clear introductions and conclusions, preferably that agree.

Too many of these potentially excellent responses remained a series of relevant, but not fluently connected paragraphs, with few overt statements relating the paragraphs to the question. The reader is left to make the connections from either an introductory or concluding statement.

Students working with contemporary Aboriginal spirituality, usually associated with Christianity, need to pay more attention to the theology of this tradition.

Teachers need to focus upon training their students to analyse questions and selectively apply their knowledge to the question asked.

Section A – Short answers

Question 1 – Unit 3 Outcome 1

Imagine you are contributing to an encyclopedia of religious concepts.

Choose two of the concepts below and write an entry that describes and explains each concept from the viewpoint of a religious tradition.

Sacred; fulfillment; soul; suffering; transcendence; evil; god; life-after-death

Students had to do two tasks for each of the concepts chosen. They were required to describe and explain the concepts, in order to satisfy this question. Their responses needed to be precise, giving accurate theological information specific to the religious tradition chosen. Firstly, students had to identify the religious traditions. The question allowed for students to do one concept in one religious tradition and the second concept in the same or a different religious tradition. Most students used only one tradition. Many students wrote too much, often of a vague nature. Responses which used correct theological language were more precise and of appropriate length.

Question 2 – Unit 4 Outcome 1

Briefly describe the **social**, **historical** and **religious** context which led to a particular challenge for a religious tradition.

This question was poorly done. Many students seemed to have no understanding of the term ‘context’. This is an essential term with which to familiarise the students. They need to be confident in their ability to explain the general situation and the particular factors leading to their focus topic. Students need to be able to do this both briefly and with some detail supported with examples, as it is a topic dealt with in both short-answer and essay questions.

Some students who did understand the term ‘context’ gave a generalised across time context for a religious tradition or for a challenge to a religious tradition, rather than dealing with the specific context which led to their particular challenge.

These conditions are not always separate, but intermingled and students’ responses should have shown this where appropriate. This was a big picture response focusing on the conditions that brought about the challenge. Students should have identified the challenge and the religious tradition – the challenge itself was not the focus.

Question 3 – Unit 3 Outcome 3

With reference to a core belief, briefly describe what may happen to the beliefs of a religious tradition when that tradition comes under pressure to change.

This question was problematic for many students. In responding to ‘what may happen’ they needed to outline the actual possibilities for a specific religious tradition studied. It was not adequate for students to give a generic answer that simply described the range of options, such as beliefs stay the same; beliefs are reinterpreted or altered in some way. These observations must be made, but they must be grounded in a specific example of a core belief in a particular religious tradition. While many students lost marks in this question, students who dealt successfully with

this question showed a clear understanding of a core belief as distinct from consequent beliefs. Some students wrote far too much for this question, and a few responses were almost full essays.

Section B – Essay (Unit 3)

Question 4 – Unit 3 Outcome 1

How does a religious tradition's belief in God or some Ultimate Reality influence the way that particular tradition understands questions about the nature, meaning and purpose of human life?

The relationship between **how** and the **way** had to be the focus of the response. An adequate answer could not be just a restatement of what is believed, though these beliefs did have to be clearly articulated. The students had to show what difference the religious beliefs made to human thinking about the nature, meaning and purpose of human life.

These understandings had to come through consideration of the questions from the viewpoint of a particular religious tradition or traditions.

Section B – Essay (Unit 3)

Question 5 – Unit 3 Outcome 2

What conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between religion and life experience? Refer to relevant parts from your study of a person's or a group's encounter with a significant life experience.

Responses to this question had to move beyond a biographical narrative topped and tailed with a few sentences mentioning the question. These responses were marked very low. Such writing continues to be a problem in this particular part of the Study. Students appear to need much more practice in selecting and adapting their material in this topic.

Using their specific case study as a model example, students were asked to extrapolate from the particular example, some general observations about the interaction between religion and life in general. They would then use material from their case study to support their claims.

There were some excellent essays which did just that. However, many students did not move beyond a chronological recounting of the life of their individual or group.

Section C – Essay (Unit 4)

Question 6 – Unit 4 Outcome 2

Why and **how** are groups or individuals within religious communities driven to develop and implement a vision of an ideal human community?

Responses to this question had to avoid unnecessary biographical narrative sandwiched between rephrasing of the question.

The **why** of the question had to be discussed within the context of the religious communities identified. There was a theological explanation required. Students had to identify the religious motivations; the religious ideas, beliefs and ideals that were formative of the action planned and taken, and these needed to be identified within the context of the specific and the whole religious communities involved. A response that was largely an account of the action taken was not an adequate answer for this question.

Students need to identify the particular beliefs of a religious tradition about God, humanity, the environment, the beliefs about ideal relationships of these to each other, which are held by their focus individual or group. They then needed to show how these particular beliefs led them to act in certain ways. It is the interconnectedness of foundational beliefs and action that is the focus of the question.

Section C – Essay (Unit 4)

Question 7 – Unit 4 Outcome 1

'The more things change the more they stay the same.'

Discuss the **extent** to which the above statement reflects the response of a religious tradition to an internal or external challenge.

Students needed to analyse the quotation and apply it to their particular content.

What are the things that are changing? In what way/s are they different? How can things change, yet stay the same? Is it only superficial parts or unessential parts that change? Does the heart, the core part that gives something real meaning remain constant? Is all change really just reinventing the wheel or rearranging the furniture?

After analysing the question students needed to address the instruction to **discuss the extent**. This meant they needed to explore the range of possible responses; they had to decide or assess the degree to which the statement

was accurate in the example they were using and where the statement was inadequate or inaccurate for their example.

Students who ignored the quotation and the instruction of the question, writing prepared responses that suited the assessment task for their coursework for Unit 4 Outcome 1 penalised themselves.