

Examiners' Report
June 2012

GCE Religious Studies 6RS04 1A

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Introduction

It is clear that very many candidates worked hard in their preparation for this paper, including evidence of wider reading around the topics. Many showed evidence of commendable study skills. This included the ability to focus explicitly on the demands of the question, structuring their answers in a clear coherent manner and marshalling arguments into a critical evaluation.

Very few candidates attempted to fuse parts (a) and (b) together whereas in previous years, this approach led some candidates to pay insufficient attention to the various demands of AO2 (Assessment Objective 2).

The main focus in all the levels for the mark scheme of AO1 (Assessment Objective 1) relates to an understanding of the passage. Candidates had different methods for examining part (a). For example, two popular methods were:

- (i) to work their way systematically through the extract and link it to other philosophers
- (ii) to select relevant material from the Donovan article as a whole and relate this to the passage.

These various methods are creditworthy and produced some very good answers. However, as with other methods, these may have potential problems:

- (i) sometimes a close analysis of the text becomes a simple and basic comprehension exercise, rather than the means of placing the Donovan article in any meaningful context or showing evidence of analysis.
- (ii) occasionally some candidates, by summarising Donovan as a whole, may pay scant attention to the selected passage.

It must be noted that there is no predictable pattern in the choice of selected texts however over the life time of the specification all the three texts will be used.

Question 1

AO1 Features of good quality

- Evidence of excellent work with confident understanding.
- Examination of the passage in breadth and detail.
- Specific ideas/points of view raised by Donovan being addressed. For example, some candidates focused on key areas which may be seen as problematic, such as the notion of self-certifying religious experience being classified as 'knowledge'. In examining such topics, it was good to see candidates using a range of scholars being drawn into the debate such as Swinburne, Tillich and Ward.
- Intelligent use of scholars mentioned in the Donovan article eg Owen and Buber.
- Creative use of material from other units including 6RS01, such as the design and cosmological arguments, in addition to religious experience in 6RS03.
- Using the extract as a spring-board to showcase their wider philosophical knowledge. For example, some candidates incorporated ideas about religious language and also existentialism. These candidates wrote fluently about a wide range of scholarship, both within the wider Donovan text and beyond it.
- Clarity in the conclusion that cohered with the rest of the answer.

Examples of AO1 work that require improvement

- Generalised views on religious experience that were not related to Donovan.
- Basic mention of various key thinkers but limited understanding of how these relate to the passage.
- Greater focus placed upon Ayer than Donovan resulting in a partial answer.
- Some examples of AO1 were shorter than the AO2 material although there are more marks available for AO1.
- Evidence of candidates using a generic response to Donovan, which provided only incidental information on the extract itself.

AO2 features of good quality

- Good critical analysis, reflecting an evident ability to think through the implications of the passage.
- In response to the question *Do you agree with the ideas expressed?* the stronger responses presented their own opinions and located these within their wider areas of study. They referred to scholarly opinion, debating and constructing a valid and well-justified argument. These showed a thoughtful understanding of alternative and challenging views and ideas.
- Use of arguments based around ideas of Wittgenstein, Ayer, Hare and Dawkins.
- Ability to debate implications for understanding both religion and human experience.

Examples of AO2 work that requires improvement

- Some candidates answered AO2 in the same manner as AO1 with little evidence of evaluation.
- Part (b) was sometimes too short and descriptive rather than evaluative.
- Some short answers omitted either implications for understanding religion or understanding human experience or both.
- A few candidates used AO2 as a platform to sell their own brand of atheism, agnosticism or theism, without the academic scrutiny required at this level of work. Candidates should root these issues within scholarly debates, giving an understanding of the strength and persuasiveness of alternative approaches. It is, of course, creditworthy for a candidate to pinpoint their own approach, provided it is framed within this academic context.
- Sometimes using paragraphs not linked together.

This is an example of high quality work in AO1. This example is focused on AO1 only.

The candidate showed the importance of key ideas in Donovan's work and made effective use of scholarship within Donovan's article.

1.(a) surely the most compelling argument to G-d's existence is from experiencing = G-d himself? This is the issue tackled by Peter Donovan in his paper 'Can we know G-d by experience?'. Throughout his paper, ^{Donovan} ~~the~~ introduces the views of several thinkers who believe that we can know G-d through experience. The essential point, is whether we can trust our intuitions (inner convictions) regarding experience of G-d, as our inner conviction that we have experienced G-d is all we have to go by.

The passage given is taken from near the end of Donovan's paper where he makes his concluding remarks. Thus, it is vital that we first return to the start of his paper to understand the thrust of Donovan's argument and its implications ^{for} ~~from~~ religion. Donovan commences his paper by saying that to analyse the reliability of our religious experiences, we must analyse the reliability of our intuitions from which we claim to know G-d. Are they a good

guide to knowledge? Donovan claims that they are not always reliable, and we cannot trust them as they cannot be tested. Nevertheless, to be philosophical we must take seriously the person who claims to have had a numinous encounter with G-d, and we must ask the believer for justification as to how they 'know' they have experienced G-d. For ~~the~~ accepting one's beliefs without question is a dangerous game to play, a game that many ^{evil} tyrants, such as Hitler, have benefitted from in the past. For Donovan - 'To have no doubts about one's beliefs may be more a symptom of insanity or arrogant irresponsibility than of sound knowledge'. Therefore, no matter how convincing the religious experience may have been, we must still philosophically scrutinise.

In the passage given, taken from Donovan's concluding remarks in his paper, Donovan postulates the argument that 'Religious reasoning falls down' is when the believer treats their knowledge of G-d as 'self-certifying'. In other words, the believer sees no reason to doubt that they have encountered G-d, so they treat their encounter as unquestionably true. This is a key problem for mystical encounters for Donovan, as it may cause people to act in a determined way and not let doubts enter their head whilst acting. For example, former American president George Bush Junior claimed to have had a special revelation of G-d in which G-d told ~~his~~ ^{him} it was the right thing to do to go to war in Afghanistan. We only have to look back at the horrific events that followed to understand Donovan's concerns regarding such 'self-certifying' religious

experience. Donovan goes on to say that - 'The sense of knowing is never on its own a sufficient sign of knowledge'. Here, Donovan is alluding to the difference between psychological certainty (feeling certain) and rational certainty (being right). Donovan does not doubt that religious experiences certainly produce a sense of psychological

certainty ^{of knowing something}, but this can sometimes be misleading. ~~Donovan~~

therefore postulates the analogy of telling the time.

We may intuitively feel certain that we know what

time it is, but it is not until we test our watch, that

we discover if our ^{initial} intuition was correct, which often, it is

not. Furthermore, is my intuitive certainty about the location

of my wallet the same as my intuitive certainty about

who I want to marry? Bertrand Russell points out that

our intuition about love is particularly fallacious. Despite

the fact that our intuitions are often wrong (for

Donovan), this does not mean we should discard people's

intuitive certainty about a religious experience like 'I poked

balloon'. It would be absurd to conclude that all accounts

of religious experience were merely part of a great

illusion. There is no justification to take such an 'All or

nothing view', Donovan concludes. Therefore, to be philosophical,

we must continue to analyse accounts of religious experience

Having ~~considered~~ ^{returning} Donovan's concluding remarks, it is

worth ~~returning~~ ^{returning} to earlier in his paper, to see how

Donovan arrives at such a conclusion. Earlier in his

paper, Donovan introduces the arguments of H.P. Owen, who

believes that we can know G-d by experience, and that

there are great similarities between religious experience and

sensory experience. For example, just as we know peoples' characters through their acts, so we know G-d's character through his acts of creation. Furthermore, ~~we~~ for Owen, to have a religious experience is to experience parts of the world as work of a divine creator. Otherwise, we can achieve a sense of knowing G-d through reading religious scripture, contemplating nature or through personal experience of G-d.

In criticising Owen's arguments, Donovan does at first admit that encounter with a personal, loving G-d is consistent with the Biblical view of the G-d of classical theism. Furthermore, Owen's arguments do consider the complex interplay of experience. However, for Donovan, the case for knowledge of G-d through religious experience is ~~to~~ too broad and lacking proper rules. The fact that so many different people have had encounters of so many different deities makes the case for intuition seem weak. For Donovan, all experiences of G-d must be the same to be 'plausible'.

Donovan next considers the arguments of Martin Buber, who distinguishes between personal, intimate I/You relation types, and rational, impersonal I/It relation types. For Buber, it is not human to just have I/It relationships with others, and in fact we encounter G-d ~~through~~ through the personal I/You relation type. In other words, we know G-d through subjective, personal faith, rather than rational argument.

In response to Buber's arguments, Donovan argues that 'Experience of' presupposes 'Knowledge about'. Here, Donovan is saying that we have no rational I/It knowledge of G-d, we simply presume that he is a loving, divine creator.

and Father of Christ, and this may influence how we experience G-d. The implication for the believer is that their experience of G-d may be more a psychological occurrence than a true event. In addition, Donovan claims that 'Experience of' is not itself 'Knowledge about'. For example, a male doctor may know a lot about pregnancy having greatly studied the process. Although a female doctor may be in a better position than the male doctor as she has experience to draw on as well. However, we need rational knowledge as a basis for our knowledge before we can take experience as a form of additional knowledge. The problem for Donovan, is that we have no rational knowledge of G-d.

In conclusion, Donovan postulates a plethora of analogies to draw us to the conclusion that we cannot simply trust our 'Knowledge' of G-d through experience. There must be some kind of empirical testing before we can know anything about G-d.



ResultsPlus Examiner Comments

The candidate moved between the selected passage on the examination paper and Donovan's overall article. This enabled the candidate to illustrate important ideas and points of view from the article, in order to highlight their understanding of the selected text.

In this case, the candidate achieved a reasonable balance between the full article and the passage. Candidates should not devote too much time to the article itself if this is at the expense of an analysis of the selected passage.



ResultsPlus Examiner Tip

The introduction showed that the candidate understood the significance of some key issues.

This is the full answer. The candidate did not specify part (a) or part (b). This is not good practice, although it can be noted in this case that the candidate moved through the various demands of both AO1 and AO2 in an identifiable and systematic order. However, to be safe, it would be better to write in (a) and (b) at the relevant stages in their answer.

The particular passage deals with the idea that there is a way of knowing God by intuition, by a sense of 'just knowing'. The difference between "knowledge ~~of~~ about" and "belief" of ~~is~~ is one which can sometimes be confused by those who justify their belief in God with this "sense of knowing" which is not considered to be "on its own a sufficient sign of knowledge". Indeed, there are many historical examples whereby someone's intuition has been proved completely wrong, Hitler being a main culprit of using his own intuition to say that the Aryan race is the superior race. More recent examples include Gaddafi and Kony in Uganda. Whilst it is important to trust your intuition in everyday circumstances to avoid ~~of~~ finding oneself in a "sceptical bog" (Vardy) the difference between the sense of knowing God and the ability to safely cross the street is great, as the former deals with metaphysical concepts beyond mere everyday intuition. Therefore ~~this~~ Donovan argues that there is "no justification" for taking "such an all-or-nothing view" of religious experience and whilst it is ~~interesting~~ interesting from a psychological point of view - similar to Freud's primal Horde Theory of wish-fulfilment - religious experience is not enough to prove ~~of~~ God's existence on its own - as it is a

rather "weak straw to be clutching at".

The first key issue with the entire extract comes from Bertrand Russell who argues the problem with using your intuition, and "one of the most notable examples" of a person's greater intuition failing them is when someone believes they are in love. Whilst in love, someone may have the belief that their significant other can do no wrong, additionally they believe they know them inside-out. However, in cases like this acts of adultery are committed, going against someone's promise and proving the other's intuition wrong.

A link with this in the media in 2005 was the affair Jude Law had with ~~the~~ the nanny of his and Sienna Miller's child. As they were engaged after a two year period the trust they had was broken - going against Sienna Miller's intuition that the man she loved could hurt her.

Additionally, it is difficult to explain a "encounter" using sufficient words. In order to explain an experience of God we must use worldly words that do not amount to what they were experiencing. Whilst this may seem to weaken the argument for religious experience because it reduces the genuineness of the "transgression of a law of nature" (Hume) William James would

argue that this makes it ineffable and thus "incapable of being expressed using sufficient words." (Jordan) As one of his four characteristics of a religious experience this adds to the worth of the experience rather than taking away from it.

A link with this is seen in Hinduism in the Upanishads, where one must learn the "Brahma-Atma synthesis" (Zachner) through inner conviction and jnana (knowledge from within) whilst this cannot be taught, it is a main idea in Hinduism as jnana is accepted as being a reliable source of knowledge. However, "jnana only makes sense when experienced." (Jamison) giving experience a greater argument for the existence of God through intuition.

Another key issue with the whole passage is Buber's ~~contradiction~~ distinction between knowledge and belief. Buber said that God seems "person-to-person relations" and therefore experience of God is personal and not universal. Whilst senses can be subjective and misleading, the argument that "a perfectly good Creator will seek to interact with his creations" (Jordan) is a widely accepted, especially amongst those capable of knowing Him.

A link with this comes from Hinduism and the Bhagavad-Gita where Krishna reveals himself to

Arguna in the Grand Theophany: "I love thee well, therefore I will tell thee thy salvation" meaning that God spoke personally to his creations, starting up the bhakti movement which is fundamental to Hindu worship today.

Furthermore, there are examples in the Bible where God has spoken personally to someone, notably the story of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah. "If you find ten then I shall not destroy it" (Genesis: 18) showing God's exact, direct words referring to destroying the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Donovan concludes that religious experience is rather "a weak straw to be clutching at" and whilst it is still important in religion, alongside worship, practice and prayer, he concludes that intuition ~~is~~ by itself is not enough to provide proof of the existence of God. He does not, however, go as far as Ayer in saying that this therefore makes the possibility of God's existence zero, making Donovan's conclusion altogether more satisfying on a macrocosmic level. I agree that whilst experience may hold importance to the individual on the microcosmic level, the argument for religious experience is insufficient to provide proof of God's existence.

and says more about the nature of religion relying on intuition than the actual proof of God's existence.

A strength of Donovan's conclusion is from Hume who states that "no man is reliable enough to be believed." This refers to everyday circumstances as well as wider interpretations regarding God and the insistence of miracles. "People lie everyday" and telling a lie is one of the easiest things to do, therefore, why believe anyone when they say that they have had an experience, furthermore, why base a religion upon someone else's assertion.

A second strength comes from Anselm's attempt at an a priori argument for the existence of God, seeing God as being "self-evident": the ontological argument. This explains that the definition of God is such that He proves himself to "avoid being self-contradictory." (God) That which exists in reality will always be greater than that which exists purely in intellect, and therefore the omnipotence of God is such that He cannot not ~~exist~~ exist. Gaunilo, however, posed a huge blow to this argument by saying that Anselm was a monk and therefore the argument "preceded from the idea of God" and Anselm would always argue that God exists, no matter what argument he provided. This means that the argument

lack credibility as it was biased from the outset.

A link with this can be seen ~~with~~ with epistemology and sources of knowledge. Donovan is an empiricist, whereas the ontological argument uses analytic reasoning in order to provide, or attempt to provide, a proof of God's existence. Swinburne's Principle of Credulity is such that we must everyday empirical senses in order to go about our life, making him an empiricist also, trying to avoid landing in "a sceptical bog" (Vardy).

A weakness of Donovan's conclusion comes from Swinburne and his Principle of Credulity. This means that "if it seems to be that x is present, then x is probably present." Therefore, if it seems you are experiencing something religious in nature then that is what is happening. Trusting your senses and intuition is an everyday occurrence, so why would you begin to ignore them if they notify you that something you are seeing is extraordinary.

However, this may be flawed with examples such as optical illusions and magic fooling even the most intelligent minds. An example of this was provided in a recent DVLA advert for motorcyclists whereby the mind deceived a driver into thinking a motorcyclist was further away than he was in

reality. Swinburne's Principle of Testimony (where you must believe what people tell you unless they have a motive or an illness) can also be disputed with the everyday occurrence of white lies.

A final weakness of Donovan's conclusion comes from Buber's distinction of God seeking a personal relationship with humans, rather than an "I-It relation". This is linked to Allister Hardy's anonymous survey conducted through Oxford University in the 1960's. His status meant that it ^{was} held in high esteem as it stated that "some 60% questioned" (Taylor and Reid) stated that they had previously experienced something religious in nature or what they classed as religious. The sheer volume of people is significant in itself, as it shows the amount of people having these experiences are great and not only confined to few famous examples including Bernadette and the Children of Fatima. Additionally, the anonymity of the survey means that the people who took it may have no motive to lie. There is no chance of fame, money or publicity, and therefore the numbers seem more compelling to an outsider.

I conclude that whilst Donovan's conclusion is satisfactory in saying that religious experience is relevant to religions whilst at the same time

being meaningless on its own, ~~the~~ he must also conclude that experience is enough to prove God's existence on a microscopic level. I think that the argument for experience is "a weak straw to be clutching at" and therefore not enough to provide either proof or probability to an outsider who has not had a particular experience which is classed as religious.

If Donovan's conclusion is accepted, this holds many implications for both the individual and religion on a whole. It would imply that Bernadette and others like her were lying, possibly for attention or even for money and fame. She could have been following Lash's theory of "pattern setters" and therefore copying past experiences of others. There could also be possible natural explanations for these experiences including wishful thinking or mass hysteria (the Toronto Experience).

If he is correct then miracles or answered prayers could be mere coincidence and out of luck. Additionally, the basis of Islam would be questioned as it is purely based on revelation between Muhammad and the Angel Gabriel. Similarly, Christianity and stories in the Bible will be questioned as being fallacious as many conversations with Mary, Moses and Noah are based

on direct experience.

~~If, however, Donovan~~

We would have to look at other reasons for the existence of religion, including Freud and Marx's "opiate of the masses" idea. Whilst this will be interesting from a psychological point of view it will mean that Freud was correct in asserting that religion can be cured as it is a psychosis, similar to OCD.

If, however, Donovan is incorrect then we may accept God's existence as he can be proved through intuition and he aligns with the idea of a "God of Classical Theism". The Bible will be held in high esteem as being Testimony and truthful and although there are arguments for the "everything in the world can be explained using physical science" (Atheism) the Bible may still be symbolic and helpful to the theist as a way of providing proof of God's existence through revelation and intuition.

Furthermore, William James' four characteristics* will all be correct and helpful when describing and classifying a religious experience and should this experience align with these characteristics it should be classed as intuition and therefore proof of God's existence.

* (ineffability, noetic, passive



ResultsPlus
Examiner Comments

This candidate was very well-informed about a considerable range of material and tended to use this array of knowledge to good effect. Some of the illustrations may be argued to be of variable quality but overall this is a competent and high-quality answer.

There was proficiency in the use of technical terms and the candidate made important conceptual distinctions.

This extract focuses on AO1 only. This is a good example of a candidate who tended to analyse the text in detail and move from this to illustrate key ideas from the Donovan article itself. This does not become a basic comprehension exercise for the candidate, but a detailed analytical investigation.

a) In his essay 'can we know God by experience?', Peter Donovan questions whether we can have direct, intuitive knowledge of God. After setting out this question, he considers the views of 20th Century Theologians and philosophers (like H.P. Owen) who argue that religious experiences may provide knowledge of God, through intuition. Donovan then points out how intuitive knowledge of God links in with established christian ways of thinking: God is a personal being who acts in history. He then tries to distinguish between psychological feelings of certainty with actually being right on logical grounds, which he associates intuitive awareness of God with the former. Donovan then goes on to say how our sense of certainty is often mistaken, a idea established from Bertrand Russell. Although he believes that religious experiences can be a personal encounter (I-you), he rejects that it itself is a form of intuitive knowledge. Donovan then goes on to say that even though he rejects that religious experiences are not a form of intuitive knowledge of God, he claims that he does not undermine the value of religious experiences altogether.

In this specific passage where Donovan says "knowledge, the philosophers point out, is just not like that", he talks about how we can not just gain knowledge through a feeling and what we perceive to be true through our intuition. Donovan, and other philosophers that he agrees with such as Ayer, say that we can't just gain knowledge from what we believe we have seen or heard in our minds, because it is most likely to be wrong. As Ayer says, if it is not verifiable then it is meaningless, and if it is not analytic or synthetic then it is also meaningless. Donovan goes on to say that "The sense of knowing is never on its own a sufficient sign of knowledge." Donovan is saying here how there needs to be more to back up an intuition in order to gain knowledge from it, and that there is no way that we can gain knowledge from just a 'feeling' of God in us. If this were true that we could gain knowledge from intuition, then it would also be true for anything we feel to give us knowledge, and we could argue anything into giving us knowledge.

At the beginning of the specific passage, Donovan says "where popular religious reasoning falls down." By this he means how religion can be seen as weak, as ~~an~~ religious men or

women believe that having a religious experience or intuition of God definitely gives them direct knowledge of God. Whereas Donovan argues that it may not in fact be a basis for knowledge, and if the whole of your religion is based on this, then it would be a weak religion as when it "falls down", because there is no way of backing this idea up. It would make religion weak for Donovan.

In this specific passage, Donovan says that "there is no justification...". By this he is telling us how there is no way of actually proving that an intuition may give us knowledge of God or not. So from arguing about intuition, we can not lead it to a "conclusion" about whether we can gain knowledge from these religious experiences. Donovan believes that there is no basis for all philosophers to take such a strong line or either believing that intuition gives us knowledge or not, and that because there is no basis, it is unrealistic to "take such an all-or-nothing view of religious experience". So he is saying that Owen does not have the knowledge himself to say that religious experience and intuition can provide knowledge, and Dawkins can't say it doesn't.

Dorovan's argument on ~~the~~ intuition adds to the wider debate on religious experience as he is putting across the view of whether we can gain knowledge through intuition, a type of religious experience. He would put across a strong view against both extremists who believe that religious experience is completely true, and those on the other side of the spectrum believing the opposite saying how religious experiences are not possible at all, and they can not provide any knowledge and that the person having the religious experience is crazy, such as Dawkins and Ayer.

Dorovan's argument can also be linked in to mystical experiences, and whether we gain knowledge from them. If it were true, then we must be able to gain noetic new knowledge of God through these experiences, like many people have before. They can't be described in words, and are over quickly, but people who have had them do gain more knowledge of God. This backs up with Dorovan's idea of intuition leading to a gained sense of knowledge for a person having an experience.

It can also be linked into the

wider debate of the existence of God. The traditional Christian beliefs that 'God is a personal being who acts in history' is a biblical view of what God is like, all-loving. However if intuitions were argued to be true this would back up the idea of God being all loving and a personal being because he would approach people in an intuition, making him all loving. It must then also link into the questions of what happens after death, as if we can gain knowledge of God through intuition, the surely we can know what happens after death to us from this knowledge? With this, there needs to be a boundary to how far and how much we know from intuition and religious experiences.



ResultsPlus
Examiner Comments

The candidate based the answer on the specific passage and worked their way through it quite carefully. At the same time, the candidate elaborated the key concepts and line of thinking with reference to Donovan's full article.



ResultsPlus
Examiner Tip

There are various ways of creating good introductions to these sorts of answers. The technique of this candidate was to present a clear overview of Donovan's line of reasoning and key ideas. They succeeded very well in this approach.

Paper Summary

One of the purposes of this unit is to enable candidates to develop skills in textual analysis. There are important outcomes for candidates, including transferable skills across a range of enterprises, involving careful attention to detail, evidence and reason and also preparation for university work. In addition, this unit provides an opportunity for candidates to reflect upon and debate the implications of their studies of religion.

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