

Examiners' Report

Summer 2012

GCE Religious Studies (6RS04)
Paper 1D Christianity

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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 scholars, and
- (ii) to select relevant material from the Smart material as a whole and relate this to the passage.

These various methods have been credit worthy and have produced some very good answers. However, as with other methods, these could have potential problems:

- (i) sometimes a close analysis of the text became a simple and basic comprehension exercise rather than the means of placing the Smart material in any meaningful context or showing evidence of analysis, and
- (ii) occasionally some candidates, by summarising Smart 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.

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 implication of their studies of religion.

Question 1

AO1 features of good quality

- Evidence of excellent work with confident understanding. For example, some presented thoughtful analysis of religious experience with effective use of scholarship including Swinburne.
- Examination of the passage in breadth and detail.
- Specific ideas/points of view raised by Smart being addressed. For example, some candidates focused on key areas such as revelation.
- Creative use of material from their other studies of Christianity in units 6RS01, 6RS02 1G and 6RS03. In addition, some incorporated material on religious experience from 6RS03.
- Using the extract as a spring board to showcase their wider knowledge. For example, some candidates incorporated ideas from other sources in the anthology.
- Clarity in the conclusion that cohered with the rest of the answer.

Examples of AO1 work that require improvement

- Generalised views on Christianity without specific reference to details in the selected passage.
- Some examples of AO1 were shorter than the AO2 material although there were more marks available for AO1.
- Evidence of candidates using a generic response to Smart 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. Some discussed critical scholarship on Smart and his methods. For example, some questioned whether a definition of religion is possible or even useful.
- Some included scholarly debates about the significance on the dialectic between experience and doctrine.
- 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.
- Ability to debate implications for understanding both religion and human experience.

Examples of AO2 work that require improvement

- Some candidates answered AO2 in the same manner as AO1 with little evidence of evaluation. Some stated personal opinions and presented little evidence of justifying their ideas.
- 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.
- Sometimes using paragraphs not linked together.

Conclusion

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

Example 1

The AO1 part of this answer represented very good work indeed. The candidate provided a context to Smart and this extract and presented a clear analysis of the passage and of its significance.

Example 2

The AO2 part of this answer represented very good work indeed. The candidate incorporated a good range of scholarship, including Said and Fitzgerald. This was used to debate in a thoughtful, critical manner a number of key issues associated with Smart's approach.

Example 1

1) Ninian Smart was the pioneer of religious studies, he was a key believer in the fact that classical theology is too narrow and that "we must wear the moccasins of the other man, and walk that extra mile with him to truly understand". That Religious Studies promotes and allows for a wider understanding of other cultures and belief systems and that this is crucial for world peace. Ninian was the first to start the study of religious studies at Lancaster University.

Smart also talks of the importance of the invisible world in his argument, which could also be described as James' (William) ineffable component of religious experience ^{or} ~~of~~ Rudolph Otto's numinous. This is said to be the unexplainable factor of such experiences and even though these ideas had been explored before, Smart was the founder of making the phenomenological approach accessible and easy to understand.

It's also said to be important that religious studies allows for the

ability to look on one's experiences in an objective manner by using epoche (bracketing out one's own beliefs in order to look at another's without bias) and empathy, to understand the meaning of these beliefs on a personal level to others. Clifford Geertz made it clear that both epoche and empathy are necessary for a truly helpful study of other beliefs.

Smart created his 6 dimensions of religions which include: doctrinal, (attempt to add intellectual credibility to stories) mythological, (neither true nor false: just a 'myth' story / explanation of e.g. God) Ethical, (desired behavior) Social, experiential and rituals. Smart later added a 7th dimension 'material' dimension and he applied this Matrix to all religions. Edward Said describes this as orientalism - the need to reduce everything down to categories or the ability to put things into 'boxes' is this reductionist?

This extract is from the experiential dimension (religious experiences) with reference to the mythological and doctrinal dimensions.

The article explores the problems one may have when exploring the experiential dimension of religion(s) for example; reference is made to the credibility of testimony, the presentation of mystical experiences by oral tradition, the relationship between experiences and cultures with knowledge of writing.

The second segment then makes reference to the effect existing doctrines and doctrinal knowledge may have on religious experiences and raises the question: does it affect the experiences' credibility? It also questions the effect of mythological and symbolic forms of the core had on religious experiences, and that there is probably less suspicion surrounding testimonies of 'lesser figures' than there is surrounding key prophets or founders as their experiences are likely to be interpreted in many ways and accuracy over time is an issue.

The last segment refers to the dilemma we face when deciphering an religious experience: Which parts are due to the experience itself? and which parts are due to doctrinal and mythological interpretation? Still the ongoing debate of credibility. The last segment then goes on to explore possible solutions for this dilemma by aiming to get varied data and look for consistencies, for example, comparing reports of men from different cultures which had virtually no contact during the periods of the ^{crucial} ~~critical~~ formation and elaboration of the dominant religious beliefs.

This last segment interests me as I can fully relate to the dilemma of religious experiences being based on experience / religious presupposition held by the experient. It's a subjective area of study and one that cannot be empirically measured and this causes confusion when using religious experience as proof for the existence of God.

Some even question whether debating the existence of God(s) over and over again is useless, and that we can't expect to have answers to everything and that sometimes we have to take a leap of faith, even if we may not want to, because we will never know for sure until the after life, and some say this is how God intended it to be: to differentiate between those who embraced him and those who didn't, and therefore comparative studies such as the one suggested in the last segment between different cultures may not be necessary or respectful to your belief in God if you constantly feel the burden of proof lies with you.

I can understand how it would be reassuring to have confirmation and interesting from a historical point of view, but as Wittgenstein says: "If you question the testimony, when do you stop questioning?" Sometimes we have to take a leap of faith or wait for our:

own numinous personal experience.
The first segment makes reference to the issue of testimony and Credibility, Shribbucke did much work on religious experience and came to the conclusion that we should not doubt the testimony unless there is clear evidence of lying and that in general people tell the truth. He also is a supporter of the Occam's Razor theory in which the simple answer/most obvious is usually true and that testimony is the strongest form of evidence for religious experience you could get and therefore we really shouldn't question it.

William James truly believed that religious experience was/is the closest you can get to the divine. The cumulative argument also supports religious experiences validity as it states that there's so many experiences/testimonies that it's very unlikely 100% of them are false, very unlikely. However, it states that several weak arguments do not make one strong one.

Peter Vardy then adds that with religious experience we can use the theory that if probability is low, the quality of evidence must be high and that high ^{quality} evidence usually consists of some empirical evidence but that we don't have objective evidence within religious experiences and that this causes validity issues. The debate of how mystical experiences of important religious leaders were preserved among before being written down affected the validity - issue of Chinese whispers. However it's worth most are written down.

But because most are written down in cultures that know writing, does this influence the reliability of religious experiences? If we have religious presuppositions does this make our experience biased? If we also have doctrinal knowledge does this influence our judgement too? And therefore 'lesser' figures may be more credible as less speculation ~~and less~~ surrounds them.

B) Many disagree with Smart's categorising / orientalism, however I do; for reasons due to my studies of Psychology, I know that it's a natural human process to 'put things into boxes' and that it's a strategy called schemas which we have developed to help us make sense of the world and things around us, and therefore it's natural and useful to us in our process of understanding to be able to do this, and this is why Smart's dimensions are so accessible.

Timothy Fitzgerald criticises Smart's dimensions in his book *The Ideology of Religion* by making claims such as; his dimensions are too broad; how can he fit the same matrix on to several religions with taking different premises. He also questions the quality of Smart's argument / theory as if a 7th dimension (and even tossing with an 8th) were added it suggests even Smart himself knew there were some flaws in his theory / that it didn't work, especially the 6th dimension.

14/11/1

This is a substantial argument by Fitzgerald and doubt Smart's credibility as however one could say he was just adapting/expanding on his theory - which why should it be seen as a bad thing if he wants to improve it in the light of new research. He also wonders can we ever truly 'look in the moccasins of another' as a partial experience of this is far from understanding what it's like to be fully immersed in another religion, unless we join them and then we would lose objectivity, which is key in any field of study? Minson's Lent is in the right place wanting a greater world wide understanding/appreciation of each others beliefs but we have to understand/question if that's logistically possible? What if we bracket out our own beliefs to the ^{Point of} the subject? As well as this, I fully understand the complications of religious experience/experiential processes for the existence of God through my study in

Paper 3; and can fully understand
lead to the issues of testimony,
lack of empirical evidence and
objectivity and that experiences can
be misconstrued through ^(mythological) religious and
doctrinal presuppositions, especially
those with a lot of speculation/
research interest in them such as
prophecy, and leaves one feeling
unsure of what is truth and what
isn't, and that some critics such
as Pierre Laplace, ^{+ Dawkins} feel that when
we experience such things, it's either
mass hysteria or us filling in ~~the~~
the gaps with 'God'.

I understand that especially in
today's society it's difficult to
let go of our need for empirical
evidence, especially as the world
is becoming increasingly driven
by science; but we have to still
remain in contact with a spiritual
side and not run out a bigger
picture/after life/creator, if there
are pointers to suggest this. Such
as religious experiences.

Example 2

(a) This extract comes from Ninian Smart's book ~~the~~ 'The Religious Experience of Mankind', in which he attempts to outline the six dimensions of religion. Smart was the founder of the first Religious Studies department at the University of Lancaster in 1967. He believed that without a better understanding of the cultural 'other' peace in the world would remain elusive.

In this passage Smart discusses the experiential dimension, questioning its nature and reliability. The "special difficulty" associated with religious experience is that we have to "rely on testimony." For many religious experience is unreliable as it usually occurs to an individual and their testimony is all ~~that~~ the evidence there is that it ~~is~~ occurred. Although this is true, and many atheists are not convinced by arguments from religious experience, Richard Swinburne developed the 'Principle of Credulity' which says that dependant on circumstance, and person, it is likely that religious experiences do occur. William James ~~also~~ was also known for his scrutiny of religious experience. He noticed certain patterns in people's testimonies ~~which~~ which he argued did not add to their truth or falsity. ~~that~~ Smart is right to point out that we cannot entirely rely on religious experiences because they are so subjective, but this is interesting as earlier on in the article he writes,

"It is not here our task to pass judgement on the truth or otherwise of these claims." Smart maintains that the dimensions of religion are an aid to understanding religion that does not require a need to question their truth or falsity, and yet in this passage he does just that with regards to religious experience.

Smart notes here, the history of religious experience and how we come to hear of it today. These stories "must be conveyed to us either by telling or writing." Once again smart alludes to the reliability of stories passed down by oral tradition. Can they be changed? Smart obviously is aware that passing such important stories such as Jesus' teaching by word of mouth, is in danger of being considered unverifiable. It wasn't until 367 CE that Athanasius wrote in his 39th festival letter which books would make the canon of the Bible, Matthew, Mark etc. and which would not; Thomas, 3 Corinthians. ~~that~~ until that point stories were passed by word of mouth, or written down and spread ~~over~~ across Palestine. Smart refers to the importance of this when studying a religion. In terms of Christianity, the canon was not put together until 300 years after Jesus' death, and books were left out. ~~It~~ I think smart wants his reader to be aware of the history of the Bible, and other

important religious texts, before accepting it as truth or entirely the revealed word of God.

The implication of this is also the context in which these stories were written down. Context is a vital part of religious studies. Smart said, "Unless you wear the moccasins of the other and walk the extra mile with him, you will never understand him." Smart maintained the importance of context when studying a religion. In this passage he refers to the fact that religious experiences would have been written down after the doctrine of the church had been established. For example, in Christianity the early church established their ethical system and doctrine long before Athanasius chose the canon. How then can we rely on these stories if they were written from within the confines of the ~~the~~ Christian doctrine? Smart says the stories are "likely to be interpreted in the light of existing doctrines." This is particularly a problem when we consider the "saints and visionaries" of the faith whose impact came after the established doctrine. ~~The passage~~ Smart ~~warns~~ warns who to be wary of the context of the traditions and stories within a religion.

Smart attempts to overcome the issues associated with religious experience, in this passage

when he refers to "comparing the reports of men from different cultures." To some extent this adds credibility to the stories of religious experience that we hear. James noticed similar patterns associated with religious experience in all cultures. It is important to compare the experiences and belief systems of cultures to find similarities. If there are any anomalies than we aware that they may not be verifiable, so long as we do not impose our beliefs on another culture when studying them. Smart emphasized the importance of epoche and eidetic vision which came out of Edmund Husserl's teaching on phenomenology. There is a need to bracket out one's own beliefs in order to understand the beliefs of another from a non-bias standpoint. If we are to compare religions from different cultures, we must do this with epoche and empathy.

Smart says,

"It is worth noting that there is a dialectic between experience and doctrine." Here, he refers to the dialogue between the doctrinal and experiential dimensions. Earlier in the passage he has established that the two are linked through history but he goes ~~on~~ to say that they are still in dialogue ~~today~~ today. Smart says, towards the

end of ~~see~~ the article, that you can never truly understand a religion until you have experienced. One may know all the doctrines of the religion, the traditions, stories and rituals associated with it, but unless you have experienced it and "made contact with the invisible world" you will never truly understand it. Which is why he maintains that there is, and needs to be a dialogue between the doctrinal and experiential in order to gain a complete ~~under~~ understanding.

b) Smart's dimensions of religion set out to impose a matrix over the religions in order to aid our understanding and studying of them. However, although the method he implies and the points he makes can be considered useful within the study of religion, the ~~thinking~~ concept is significantly flawed.

Smart is famously criticised for being ~~an~~ orientalist, ~~the~~ and guilty of reductionism and reification. Edward Said's orientalism, was an attempt to confine diverse ideas into boxes, often imposing western thought on eastern culture. In this passage, Smart refers to the need to compare different cultures "such as India and the West". Although comparison of the two, and say Hinduism and Christianity, does go some way to strengthening our understanding of the religions, and the nature of concepts such as religious experience of life after death, we are also dangerously close to imposing our ideas on each other. To say that all religions possess these same six, later seven, dimensions is to reduce and condense them into the same six boxes, and yet they are so diverse. Timothy Fitzgerald famously criticised Smart's use of the term 'religion'. Smart did not set out to define a religion but Fitzgerald argues that

he does, because if one were to approach the article with no concept of what a religion was, you would conclude that it must possess these six dimensions. The implications of this are huge. Fitzgerald says the term religion has been "overstretched and now holds nothing specific in the world." Smart's use of the term 'religion' means that we bring our own understanding of what a religion is to the article. For the majority, although they can see evidence of Smart's dimensions in their concept of a religion, ~~the~~ they do not agree with them. ~~#~~ With regards to understanding religion and human experience, Smart reduces the diversity of the world religions, making them appear to possess a similar nature. The implications of this could actually lead to a lesser understanding of religion because of the assumption that all religions fit the matrix.

Smart emphasizes the 'invisible world' in all his dimensions of religion and yet he fails to include it as a dimension. The fact that he later added a seventh dimension, the material, in his book 'The World Religions' proves that his ideas are flawed. However, for me, the biggest flaw is his failure to acknowledge the 'invisible world' as a dimension ~~it~~ in itself. These dimensions could

be imposed on anything, even something secular such as football. Yet the 'invisible world' is what sets the religions apart from other activities that involve ritual and social dimensions. Mircea Eliade said that,

"Man understands the sacred when it manifests itself, shows itself, ^{as wholly different from} ~~is~~ the everyday, the profane."

Eliade points out that it is only through our knowledge of the everyday or profane that we come to understand what is sacred. If anything smart could have just one dimension 'the invisible world' because this is really the essence of a religion. To bypass this ~~point~~ has serious implications on our understanding of what religion involves. For someone who believed that without such an understanding peace in the world would remain elusive, ~~perhaps~~ it is surprising that smart overlooks the importance of contact with the invisible world.

Smart ~~also~~ refers to the reliability of religion which contrasts with his belief that we should not question the truth or falsity of a religion. This is a ridiculous statement to make as the very essence of religion relies on the fact that to the believer, it is all true. The existence of contrasting religious beliefs mean that we must question the truth of religion as

they cannot all be right. In this passage Smart draws attention to the reliability of religious experience which proves that even he cannot rule out the truth or falsity of the religion. Verification is a vital part of ~~of~~ all religions. ~~and~~ it is important that people are aware of this when they study a religion.

Despite these weaknesses, Smart's argument does emphasize the importance of epoche and empathy when studying the religions. Although these ideas had already been introduced in the study of phenomenology, Smart made them accessible to those studying religion. It makes sense that we must be empathetic and bracket out our beliefs. If we do not practise epoche then we would be effectively in the religion and if we did not have empathy, we would be likely to judge the truth claims which Smart says is not our task. Hecht said of Smart,

"When the definitive history of the study of religion is established... Niklas Smart will be remembered as a giant amongst his peers for he opened up religion to scholar and layperson alike."

However, Smart makes some contrasting points.

He emphasizes the need for epoche and empathy and yet he also states that without experiencing a religion, you can never fully understand it. These opinions conflict with each other because as soon as one has stepped into a religion and experienced it, they are no longer ~~studying~~ studying it from the outside looking in. In this sense, religious studies becomes theology as the person studies the religion from inside it.

Smart's ideas are circular. How can one be not biased ~~any~~ towards a religion? Is it ever possible to completely step out the box or do we always bring something of our own experience and understanding to the study? ~~It~~ It is unrealistic to expect ~~that~~ that we can do this and also unrealistic to impose such a matrix on the vastly ~~different~~ different and diverse ~~ideas~~ traditions and ideas behind the religions. They are not the same, and although they may share some similar beliefs or nature, they cannot be categorised in such a way.

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