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Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

Pearson Edexcel GCE
In Religious Studies (6RS02)
Paper 1D Investigations – The Study of World
Religions

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AREA 1D The Study of World Religions

Introduction

GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2017 examination season heralded the end of an era and the final entry stands as a testimony to the historic high level of engagement with selected studies drawn from a very wide range of academic fields. Over the life of this specification there has been consistent evidence of superb research on topics that are clearly of great interest to candidates. This legacy of academic achievement has been inspirational for examiners whose privilege it is to see what can be achieved by our candidates. The new specification will obviously provide a different assessment experience and centres will find that their excellent resources can be integrated into future schemes of work.

The high standard of work evidenced in June 2017 was no exception to historical high standards as candidates demonstrated a very high level of independent enquiry which clearly demonstrated what their chosen area of investigation had meant to them as a learning experience. Candidates showcased their knowledge of a particular academic field in the way they identified a line of enquiry, clearly expressed their view, analysed key concepts and deployed evidence with coherent understanding of their task whilst fluently evaluating a wide range of source material that they had at their disposal. The enthusiasm for and knowledge of the chosen topic was clearly conveyed in many answers that were truly academic in their approach. Candidates were mostly very well prepared for the examination and it was evident that centres used their specialist resources and interests to encourage candidates to research in depth a particular area of study. At this stage in the life of the specification it is difficult to find new things to report because, in the main, centres possess a very high degree of expertise and this is clearly evidenced in the work that is produced on the day of the examination.

Examiners were encouraged to mark positively and to credit all valid material according to the mark scheme and question paper. Variation in achievement was related to the two assessment objectives. The purpose of the question is to challenge candidates to adapt their material so that at the highest levels they may demonstrate a coherent understanding of the task based on the selection of their material. Widely deployed evidence/arguments/sources were evident in well-structured responses to the task whereby a clearly expressed viewpoint was supported by well-deployed evidence and reasoned argument. There was skilful deployment of religious language in many answers and the fluency of good essays showed command over the material; such command makes for high outcomes and rewards the amount of hard work done by the candidate. Many candidates had clearly learned much in the process and their overall grasp of the issues involved and command over their material was highly commendable.

Candidates at the lower end of achievement struggled with the demands of the question. These candidates were insecure with their management of material and did not know how to best structure their content to answer the specific question. Success can be undermined by writing up a rote-learned answer which was not adapted to the question set or by answering a question that has been written for a topic they have not studied. This approach is contrasted with excellent praxis whereby candidates were trained to answer the question; arguably, this is evidence of good practice but at the lower end some candidates thought it was sufficient to simply use the question stimulus at the end of each paragraph. The best answers were those which were guided by the statement as opposed to simply '*tagging it on*' to anticipated content. A balanced approach to the question that meets the highest levels of achievement according to both assessment objectives is obviously desirable and the generic question accommodates many possible routes to success whereby any valid approach to the question was credited.

The excellent work of centres and candidates in 6RS02 bears testimony to the academic potential of candidates that is a joy to behold when it is fully realised.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS PAPER 1D – The Study of World Religions

Question 1 ETHICAL PRECEPTS & APPLIED ETHICS

The Study of World Religions continues to attract a more sustained academic approach within the quality of investigations for this question. Candidates examined the key ethical teachings in their selected religion(s) and commented on the problems and possible solutions in relation to applying these teachings to ethical issues. In order to achieve higher marks, successful candidates presented material targeted explicitly on this range of demands. The best answers to this question were attempted with an eye to scholarship and candidates had a very wide ranging understanding of the topic and included an in-depth knowledge of a wide range of religious and ethical teachings. The level of detail about religious teachings and traditions was impressive in good quality essays where candidates had studied one or more religious traditions in great detail and were able to support their answers with a substantial amount of religious teachings and relevant scholarship. These studies were confidently expressed and offered a convincing assessment in relation to the question. Candidates on the whole presented comprehensive and detailed responses to the question which showcased their religious knowledge. It was pleasing to see more able candidates pursuing their own view by fully substantiating this view within the substance of the essay. The best candidates had studied one or more religious traditions in great detail and were able to support their answers with a substantial amount of religious teachings and relevant scholarship.

The challenge of this unit, and with this particular topic, is to ensure that a range of meticulous detail surrounding the issue is coupled with sufficient analysis to achieve high levels of attainment. Candidates studying Judaism

presented impressive studies on Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought that evidenced independent research; candidates understood clearly the different positions taken by a group of Jewish theologians from Orthodox, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism to the ethical dilemma of Nazism. Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Greenberg, Berkowitz, Cohen were placed in the correct context and carefully contrasted against Wiesel's Protest stance and Nietzsche's nihilism. It is refreshing to see work that engages with an issue with such carefully selected detail; the only caveat being that a few candidates missed out on making the most of such rich material to substantiate their own view. Overall, there is no doubt that candidates studying Judaism are thoroughly grounded in Jewish theology and this has a positive impact on the quality of discussion surrounding Jewish beliefs and practices.

Candidates investigating Islam presented essays that have become more scholarly year on year. The best essays are full of relevant scriptural references; the use of detailed religious teachings from Qur'anic Suras, Hadith and Fatwa often supported a very well researched argument and higher quality essays made careful use of relevant scholarship to enrich the topic under discussion. This approach is strongly encouraged as candidates can reach the higher levels of achievement if the argument is sustained by a substantial range of sources that are effectively deployed throughout the essay. It is a shame that too few candidates do not explore more fully the distinctive Sunni and Shi'a following as the largest and oldest divisions within the history of Islam, for its relevance to the ethical dilemma under scrutiny. One of the more popular topics was an investigation into jihad. Candidates studied key Islamic teachings on the complex range of topics and distinctions about types of jihad and some candidates made effective use of the ideas of Tariq Ramadan. Bearing in mind the nature of this exam paper, they teased out key ethical factors and their political and social implications. Most incorporated ideas on what was perceived to be misinterpretations of jihad as a source of serious problems together with possible solutions. This included the charge of taking Qur'anic verses out of context and how this type of exposition may be improved. AO2 material was often associated with case studies and subsequent evaluations. The best candidates, however, paid attention to this point and were able to ground their discussion in a thorough exposition of a range of Islamic schools of thought with proficient use of technical terms – there has been much improvement in the academic approach to Islamic studies and this year is no exception.

There were very few responses on Buddhism or Hinduism.

Question 2 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, and RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

There was a mixture of responses to this question and as entry numbers are still low the range of topics offered remains narrow. In order to perform well in this question, candidates needed to understand and communicate key terms and stances, for example pluralism, inter-faith and multi-

culturalism. One of the ways of achieving this was via scholarship. Students in this area have a galaxy of eminent scholars such as Barth, Bowker, Cantwell Smith, D'Costa, Hick, Rahner, Smart etc. Candidates have a superb choice of case studies and the Interfaith Dialogue attracted some very good answers which showed secure knowledge of Barth, Rahner and Hick's contribution. This topic can be a little difficult for candidates who have not experienced the excitement and renewal of the Vatican Council era; however, the strongest candidates distinguished themselves by showing secure knowledge of the intricacies of this dialogue through appropriate sources and scholarship. There was evidence of interesting research on pluralism within Hinduism. This approach to the question worked well and demanded an in-depth knowledge of Hinduism that strong candidates could thrive on in their research. On the whole, candidates deployed a wide range of evidence and were able to draw sophisticated conclusions using sound religious terminology.

Question 3 CONTRASTING STANDPOINTS ON BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

There was admirable and diverse material on this topic but very few responses this year.

Advice for candidates:

Do not ignore the question; manage your material to focus on the demands of the question.

Use appropriate sources and, if possible, include recent scholarship.

Demonstrate how well you understand the topic by your selection of material.

Do not forget to comment on your material. Show that you have thought about your research.

Use your evidence to substantiate your argument.

Comment on alternative views if you know them.

Express your viewpoint clearly.

Practice writing under timed conditions as part of your preparation.

Do not spend too long writing out your essay plan to the detriment of the essay itself.

Spell key terms and key scholars correctly.

Write legibly.

