

ASSESSMENT REPORT 2020

REL315116 – STUDIES OF RELIGION

General Comments

Evidence of preparation for the examination in Studies of Religion REL315116 was clearly apparent and was to be commended, especially given our disrupted year as a result of Covid-19. On the flip side, lack of preparation, very brief responses or lack of evidence was unfortunately evident in a number of cases too. There is a great deal of content in this course and it needs to be fully committed to memory which is very challenging.

To accommodate for the interruption to learning during the pandemic, time was allowed in the examination for students to write on two religious traditions so there was scope for depth and detail in time management by candidates. Candidates who used the time to write responses of nuanced detail were evident and well rewarded. Handwriting was legible, on the whole. You should be able to clearly understand which question has been attempted on reading the introductory paragraph of any exam response, as the introduction should address the question directly and use strong referencing signposts to the question.

The introductory paragraph must lay out your main thesis point/s as an absolute essential requirement. As far as the number of body paragraphs is concerned, there should be a minimum requirement of five given the scope of time, furthermore, the shaping of the paragraph is the essential point – always a clear point, expanded upon, with evidence from an authoritative source, and then a link back to the stimulus and question. This is the P>E>E>L or T>E>E>L structure of which teachers tend to speak.

- Legibility of scripts is critical – your ratings could be adversely affected should an examiner struggle to read your writing.
- Poor or inaccurate grammatical expression can limit your ability to make points clearly and succinctly.
- Incorrect spelling, especially of terms specific to all three topics, will detract from your response to questions.
- The use of evidence to support your argument/discussion is critical. You will not achieve satisfactory ratings for Criterion 4 if you do not use evidence. Furthermore, the use of evidence adds sophistication to your writing and demonstrates your ability to engage critically with the essay questions. Draw together some summary and evaluative comments in your concluding paragraphs when discussing religious traditions or ethical issues. Your task is to engage your scholarship in an examination of religious traditions and ethical perspectives and arrive as some strong concluding remarks.
- **Avoid** 'dumping' all of your knowledge about a topic into your essay. While it is important to include much detail and explanation, it is critical that information is used as part of your engagement with the specifics of the stimulus or to demonstrate analytical thinking.

STUDY 1 – RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Strong responses used a WIDE range of terms, concepts and ideas including reference to the sub-traditions. Students with clear, cohesive structure to their essay were rewarded. Long paragraphs without the P>E>E>L structure tend to be just a regurgitating of information and lack the shape and discipline required for a compact essay with explicit links to the question. To demonstrate analysis in this essay, it is essential to use the core belief you have identified and then draw connections on the way the tradition, expression or ritual, either does or does not authentically draw back on the belief.

A practical way to analyse is often to draw on the variants or subdivisions of the religious tradition to highlight differences in meaning that have arisen over time. It was heartening to see some quotes from sacred texts as a primary resource and the thoughts of published authorities by way of secondary sources. In the planning of your essay, drawing together the threads of your essay into strong, evaluative comments in conclusion is essential.

SECTION A

Question 1

(Answers given were predominately on Buddhism in this section)

Buddhism

Criterion 1

Candidates were rewarded for their ability to not only recall specific details about the religious tradition's beliefs and practices, but to integrate their knowledge and understanding of ideas and concepts whilst engaging with the essay question.

Stronger responses demonstrated how adherents found inner strength through their faith, and detailed how they practice and strengthen their faith. They also went beyond the individual and discussed how shared beliefs and practices strengthen community among individuals with specific examples.

The stronger responses were distinct, as they demonstrated discernment in their analysis of specific beliefs and practices that best suited the essay question – rather than simply just recalling all beliefs and practices learnt throughout the course. Candidates were also rewarded for their confident and accurate use of terms, concepts and ideas.

Criterion 2

Stronger responses maintained a clear and cohesive essay structure throughout, which supported the development of analysis and discussion of the question. Too many candidates relied on a rehearsed introduction which fell short as it did not specifically address the question.

Criterion 3

In addition to accurate and specific details about the various beliefs and practices, additional examples of quality evidence used to support stronger responses to the question included references to the Pali Canon, quotes from Buddha's teachings, quotes from the Dalai Lama and a thorough analysis of the differing interpretations of core beliefs and practices between the Schools of Buddhism. Stronger responses were able to ensure that the scope of the question was clear and fully explored through the use of their examples as they described and analysed how both individuals find inner strength through their faith, as well as how the Sangha is strengthened through the adherents.

Criterion 5

Question 1 required the candidates to not only analyse how adherents find inner strength through their belief in the Four Noble Truths, The Three Jewels, The Three Marks of Existence and The Four Sights and their practicing of The Noble Eightfold Path, but to *also* analyse how individual adherents strengthen the Buddhist community (Sangha). This was often missed. Strong responses addressed how the Buddhist viewpoint created meaning for both the individuals and collective, and drew conclusions based on the various differences between the Schools of Thought.

Overall, weaker responses consisted of:

- seldom/no discussion of the question
- vague references to beliefs/practices
- incorrect information/details
- spelling errors of key terms / misuse of key terms.

Islam

Overall, stronger responses:

- integrated discussion of Pillars as expressions of faith and analysed how beliefs are expressed in accordance to either Sunni or Shia sects
- included different interpretations of specific Quranic passages
- demonstrated an integrated and confident use of key terms
- unpacked Sharia Law - not just mentioned it.

Overall, weaker responses:

- explained the Five Pillars with little analysis or explanation of their purpose/expression of belief
- simply listed beliefs without reference to the question.

Christianity

Overall, stronger responses:

- identified the Trinity, however, don't rely on formulaic definitions, better responses identify the monotheistic nature of God and addressed the complexities of a Triune God, perhaps highlighting the Great Schism or the opportunity for an adherent to develop a multifaceted faith relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- referred to Catechism, theologians, and/or Bible to support discussion of beliefs and practices
- included purposeful discussion of variations of beliefs/practices between specific denominations e.g. Eucharist and Baptism (sacraments)
- accurately referred to specific denominations throughout their essay.

Overall, weaker responses consisted of:

- vague discussion of beliefs; no discussion of origins or the theology of the belief
- limited references to the question
- explanation of what the various sacraments are without exploring how rituals/sacraments strengthen personal faith and connection to God or contribute to the strengthening of community.

Question 2

Strong answers reflected upon the provided quotation through the twin elements of the beliefs and practices of their chosen religious tradition.

Knowledge of key beliefs and how these are expressed through spiritual rituals and daily life were evident in the small number of responses on Christianity for example. Whilst acknowledging that the students are not required to write about different sub-traditions, it is important to make sure to differentiate between different branches of Christianity if specific practices or rituals are referred to in the essay. For example, infant baptism is not traditional for all branches of Christianity. Qualifying words can be the difference between a nuanced response and one that assumes that all Christians perform rituals in the same way. This aspect is important for Criterion 3 and Criterion 5, where the focus is upon different interpretations and also the lived tradition of the community.

Candidates who selected Buddhism as their tradition would have found the quotation to be a rich source for the construction of their response. The best responses connected the beliefs and practices to the two key ideas of 'spiritual path' and 'darkness' and 'growth'. Better responses delved further into the key idea of suffering and how following the Noble Eightfold Path would be incorporated into daily life and thus lead to spiritual 'growth'. It was pleasing to read responses that referred to quotations from Buddhist scripture, relevant parables and stories as evidence. In addition, better responses were able to refer to ethical practices and daily rituals.

Many responses retold the life of Buddha and only made a tenuous connection to the quotation and the question. Whilst knowledge of Buddha's spiritual path to enlightenment is relevant to any discussion of Buddhist beliefs and practices, the question requires more than a recitation of historical events. It was disappointing that so many candidates failed to include even the most basic Buddhist beliefs of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Criterion 1

Most responses showed a sound grasp of Buddhist beliefs and associated terminology. However, many responses were a recount of beliefs rather than an application of key concepts to the question and stimulus. Knowledge of religious practice and how expressions provide meaning to belief were less evident.

Criterion 2

Most responses were well written. However, many candidates failed to apply basic elements of good essay writing, such as appropriate use of paragraphs and topic sentences. Some essays followed a familiar learnt formula which was not adequately adapted to properly address the question. Many essays contained substantial detail but did not effectively structure the material and could not develop a sustained and logical analysis in response to the claim made in the stimulus. The spelling of key terms was generally good, although many candidates were less skilled with punctuation.

Criterion 3

The best answers provided quotations from Buddhist sources, retold appropriate parables and emphasized Buddhism as a practice more than a theory, including both private and public devotional practices and meditation. Stronger responses noted relevant differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of ideas and the claims made in the stimulus is necessary to properly address this criterion.

Criterion 4

Stronger responses consistently made links between the content of beliefs and context of practices in addressing the assertion that 'times of darkness' (suffering) provide an opportunity to strive for enlightenment. Weaker responses made the connection between darkness and suffering but did little to make any link to the expression of these beliefs.

SECTION B

Successful candidates were able to ensure that their responses adequately responded to the question (either historical or contemporary) by:

- explaining the challenge
- explaining the religious tradition, and then
- analysing the impact of the challenge on the expression of the religious tradition and its response to it.

Criterion 1

For students to be successful in this criterion they extended their use of key terminology in the context of the challenge. Stronger responses spent more time demonstrating their knowledge of the religious tradition being explored and thus drew upon greater breadth of terminology. Weaker answers had more limited terminology use which limited their opportunities to demonstrate their own understanding of the tradition. Strong answers included both descriptions of the challenge and the tradition, and then spent time considering how the religious tradition responded to the challenge.

Criterion 2

For students to be successful in this criterion, the structure of the response was intentionally crafted to facilitate discussions around the challenge and a religious tradition's response to it. Whilst it is acknowledged that structuring a response to demonstrate knowledge of a religious tradition, knowledge of a challenge to it, and then analysis of the interrelationship between the two, successful responses were able to achieve this through careful essay structure. Instead of the response being a list of factors/examples of impacts to a tradition, there was a clearer point of view and a synthesis of ideas that was upheld across the essay in order to have a strong response.

Criterion 3

For students to be successful in this criterion, they were able to utilise the evidence supporting their point of view to then analyse the impact of the challenge on the religious tradition. It was important for successful responses to extend their discussions beyond quoting evidence and instead connect the evidence back to a discussion around how the religious tradition itself has been impacted by the challenge.

Criterion 4

For students to be successful in this criterion, the students needed to incorporate evidence to further their viewpoints on the challenge and the religious tradition. Stronger responses were able to use evidence to demonstrate differing viewpoints, impacts or experiences as a result of the challenge, and the evidence ultimately formed part of their point of view. Whilst weaker responses simply included evidence but didn't necessarily factor this into their discussions, or integrate the ideas raised by the evidence into their response. Worryingly, very weak responses failed to include any evidence at all, which greatly limits opportunity to demonstrate appreciation of the religious tradition and the challenge being discussed. The strongest responses were successful at utilising their evidence to also incorporate understanding of how the tradition as a whole has been impacted in response to the challenge.

Some specific comments based on the religious tradition and challenge chosen:

Islam

There was a wide cross section of answers, either on Islamophobia, women in Islam or the impact of September 11 and ongoing terror attacks. On the status of women – while there were some of a very high standard, there was still confusion over terminology and there was still scope for greater analysis of contemporary trends in the world of Islam: from conservative theocracies to new thinking in the West. Pauline Hanson's "ban the burqa" stunt in parliament figured in many answers, but usually candidates failed to add that very few Muslim women in Australia wear the burqa, indeed few Muslim women outside Afghanistan wear it.

References to Susan Carland's outlook were more thoughtful. Better answers tied dress rules to culture or with patriarchy; deliberately forcing women to cover up as in Saudi Arabia. Candidates who discussed Terrorism found it too easy to devote one or two pages to detail the events of 9/11, though some candidates mentioned other, more recent, lone-wolf terrorist attacks in Europe or New Zealand as well.

A better emphasis would be on the way the world of Islam has dealt with the association of their faith with terrorism, so better answers looked at the concept of Jihad as well. For clarification, ISIS and Al Qaeda (which is still active) are both associated with Sunni Islam, not Shi'a. Islam is not an ancient religion; it's the most recent one apart from Sikhism and the Baha'i faith. There is still scope for improvement in using correct dates and terms. Too many candidates detailed knowledge of Islamic core beliefs such as the Five Pillars when the question required specific engagement with sources of challenge within the tradition.

Christianity

The responses detailing the challenges to Christianity that have resulted in the emergence of the Protestantism within the Christian tradition since the Reformation were of a very high standard. Use of theological terms and concepts were sophisticated and students were able to discuss in detail the challenges to Catholic teaching provided by the Reformation and the ongoing dialogue that has taken place in the unfolding centuries between the sub traditions. To the student's credit the responses reflected deep knowledge and understanding of the way religious traditions are challenged and change within the context of world events and movements in theological thinking and challenge. Clear scaffolding of the essay responses was evident and enabled students the confidence to approach this section of the exam with efficacy and skill.

Buddhism

Once again; a small group of responses, all of a high standard. It is important to refer to the Communist Party's efforts in Tibet to reduce Buddhism to a folk tradition. Conversely, maintaining Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet faces several long-term challenges which were discussed in a considered manner. Although the West has taken up an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, it has tended to be selective in its adaptation of the rich cultural practices of Tibetan Buddhism. All religions evolve over time and this is a point that needs articulating and examining. The impact of Buddhism as a global religion was well articulated and the role the Dalai Lama has played in bring Buddhism to the world was expressed clearly by candidates.

Judaism

Once again, a small set of well-prepared essay responses with several good quotes and references evident. Candidates had a clear scaffolded approach which ensured they could approach the challenge presented by the Shoah with confidence. Reflecting on the emergence of different levels of adherence within the tradition as well as an appreciation of the different responses in the Jewish community to the Shoah, to social justice imperatives of care for the earth were all evident and commendable.

STUDY 2 – ETHICS AND MORALITY

This year the question moved to a short answer response and was allocated just 30 minutes. Students were requested to analyse one ethical perspective on an issue in contemporary Australian society. Most candidates resisted the temptation to write about more than one approach which was pleasing to note. The extent to which a candidate could lay a foundation of detailed understanding of the philosophical or religious perspective and its strengths and weaknesses determined their overall rating.

There was much to do in this short answer format in the time provided namely: discuss an issue, showcase knowledge of a chosen philosophical or religious ethical perspective on that issue and, finally, make explicit links to key questions that are raised – from that perspective – on the issue. Stronger candidates managed all three demands.

Marker's noted that weaker responses did not engage with key words, phrases and explicit requirements of the short answer question sub-set demands in Ethics. Too many students simply regurgitated a very general and prepared response. Candidates need to clearly link the words and phrases used in the short answer question throughout their response. The essential role of stronger paragraph structure cannot be stressed enough, and clearly needs support and review in class.

Candidates need to use evidence, exact quotes from ethical texts or significant people, incorporate some form of conventional referencing (in-text), highlight current statistical information about the issue or provide contemporary examples/case studies or quotes to really highlight the currency of the issue.

Paragraphing was an issue – if candidates are using more than three body paragraphs, they will need to ensure that they are using clear topic sentences to put each paragraph into a context and to ensure that they are writing full paragraphs of generally equal length (not 2 sentence paragraphs). Strong comparing and contrasting of the weaknesses and strengths of the approach with respect to the issue was vital. Leaving time for a strong evaluative conclusion that makes a number of clear judgements and evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of this chosen ethical approach based on argument and reason was vital for success.