

## Studies of Religion

Course Code: REL315116

In this the first year of the new external examination format it was pleasing to note that the exam instructions were clearly followed and the exam seemed to be accessible to all candidates. Evidence of good preparation and a sophisticated understanding of quite complex philosophical and ethical concepts was evident. Relying too heavily on prepared responses to questions in papers from examinations of previous years appears to be a constant problem for candidates. Not only was there a new course with new criteria, but the external examination questions require students to apply the knowledge and understanding that they have gained during the year within the context of the specific requirements of each question. Given that there are now three questions and an hour allowed per question, greater evidence of considered planning should be evident in responses and many fell short of more than three pages in length.

That said, the following steps offered in previous examination reports still apply and are the hallmarks of the stronger ratings across each criterion.

1. Excellent knowledge of the content of the units studied throughout the year. In answering examination questions not all knowledge is relevant — it is the responsibility of each candidate to select that knowledge which is appropriate for each question.
2. A structured response to the question posed. A response to a question from a past examination paper will not be appropriate for the current paper especially with new course content and criteria. Remember information that is not relevant will not be rewarded. If the question requires that a religious and non-religious ethical approach are required for example, then that is what must be examined in the candidate's response. If candidates are required to write about one key ethical issue they must discipline themselves to one only.
3. Address stimulus material and use your knowledge to nuance your response in light of the content of each of the stimulus materials. There must be a well-developed discussion that both logically addresses the question and incorporates evidence of sophisticated analysis of issues emanating from the question.
4. The discussion must be supported. Lengthy quotations are not expected in an examination situation; however, markers need to be convinced that candidates understand the need to support their claims with evidence. If there is no evidence to support claims, candidates cannot expect to do well.
5. Many of the topics studied have concepts, terms, and language, unique to them. It is important that these be incorporated into responses. Finally, markers must be able to read the response to reward candidates appropriately. Illegible writing, scripts written in lead pencil, or writing that is too small make marking difficult.

A marker's comment is not usually provided when fewer than 10 candidates answered a question, however, as this is a new course, markers provided some brief commentary for use for students in 2017.

### Question 1

For this question across all faith traditions there was a constant theme, namely, that there could have been more interrogation of the stimulus and relating of that discussion to the key beliefs and practices of the chosen faith. The new course demands that all aspects and dimensions of the religious tradition are studied not just the core beliefs. Terms need to be explained, not just listed. In fact, a list is not in keeping with formal essay writing requirements. Focus for most was on only beliefs and other aspects/elements were not discussed in relation to the question. Discussion on how the other elements/aspects of a religious tradition enable the formal expression of the tradition would have added depth and critical analysis to the answering of the stimulus question.

Some quotes were applied but often related to understanding of the core beliefs rather than to answering or discussing the question and supporting writer's perspective. Rote learning of quotes and their application rather than discernment and critical analysis is a common trap.

A limited number of responses dealt with the notion of 'what is a good person' and did not extend this to relate this to the religious tradition and the expression or not of formal faith, this type of response was too shallow and non-specific for the demands of a Studies of Religion course.

## **Judaism**

There were some well-prepared students on Judaism in general, but not much understanding was demonstrated overall of the range of belief and practice among the Tradition. The better responses gave that nuance. There was some tendency to give an overview of the religion without reference to the stimulus question. Rites of Passage became 'rights of passage' and some students said birth and death were rites of passage, rather than the transitions that the rites mark. There was confusion between Tanakh and Torah. It would have been more accurate to use the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) in referring to the God of Israel, rather than Yahweh.

## **Christianity**

This was chosen by a small number of candidates and many failed to grasp the breadth of this religion outside what may be their own confessional background. There was a tendency to explain doctrines from Christianity without reference to the stimulus question. Once again the distinction between beliefs and practices needed to be articulated and a fuller examination of the practices needed to be examined. The complexity of difference between the beliefs and practices between the sub traditions within Christianity is an important reality which needs considered treatment by candidates.

## **Buddhism**

This section had an open question as the stimulus which appeared to confuse many candidates.

There were equal cases for agreeing with and disagreeing with the stimulus which led to many 'information dropping' what they knew about Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Fold Path, Three Marks of Existence, Dharma, suffering and Karma without critically analysing these core beliefs and applying this to answering of the question. A few candidates 'sat on the fence' and attempted to give a perspective from both sides of the stimulus. This led to unsubstantiated claims without supporting evidence.

There appeared a need to define the concepts within the stimulus and the question so that the perspective of 'worship' was not limited to just the worship and practices relating to a god/deity.

There was a concerning increase in the poor use of proper nouns and grammatical conventions. (Criterion 2)

Good responses tended to:

- Show how the quote could be interpreted in a variety of ways according to different Buddhist approaches.
- Added commentary about a range of aspects/elements not just core beliefs which developed the sense of richness to a tradition that is provided by other elements.
- Referred back to the stimulus rather than 'information dropped'
- Supporting quotes related to the stimulus rather than to only the core beliefs.
- Defined what was meant by 'formal' and other key concepts within the stimulus. Recognised that formal experiences are diverse and that a 'good' person is one who continues to live out the tradition through a variety of ways that express through action what is truly core to the tradition.
- Good recall and clarity around what is entailed by terms and concepts within Buddhism rather than a 'listing' of terms. Also used correct grammar and capital letters as needed.
- Attempted to analyse critically what was offered by the stimulus and to give their own opinion and perspective using diverse examples of the elements of the tradition.

## **Aboriginal Spirituality**

Generally, the link between the tradition formal expression of faith and the connection to the land was not conclusively made in responses.

Link to land was secularised as a need for survival rather than the core of spiritual and tribal life.

Candidates needed more relevant terminology and correct grammar associated with proper nouns (names and terms). Some spoke of dreaming rather than The Dreaming.

Good responses:

- Named rituals and linked ceremonies as an outward expression of faith (Increased & Ceremonial rituals).
- Used a variety of examples across all elements (role of art, storytelling, dance, myth, sacred place and people).
- Attempted to define 'goodness' in relation to Aboriginal Spirituality and to connect individual practices to communal good life and passing on of spirituality e.g. tradition, sacred knowledge cannot be passed on by being individually good one has to participate with community to initiate and live The Dreaming through the absolute link with Land/Country.
- Recognised the difference between traditional Aboriginal spirituality and that of modern Aboriginal People as a reason why Aboriginal People living away from country may not see a need to external practise their faith.

## Question 2

The comments made with reference to Question 1 can also be applied to Question 2. Namely, that terminology was not clearly explained and not critically analysed in relation to the stimulus question. Candidates should try to avoid making judgemental statements with no clear arguments provided to support incorrect information. Many candidates did attempt to explain why Aboriginal People may be offended by the term 'trend' which was pleasing to note. Astute candidates noted the timeframe of Aboriginal Spirituality and its cyclical nature as a good case for not viewing Aboriginal Spirituality as a trend. Discussion of the connection of Aboriginal people and their spirituality through the 'blood' or kinship link was a valid and well-argued approach to this question.

## Buddhism

The notion of the religion of Buddhism being described as a "trend" was vehemently denied in the majority of essays. The majority of candidates were able to use the notion of the word "trend" as an example of an impermanent state or attachment to a desire to belong to a popular and temporary shallow movement. Stronger candidates used this as leverage for building in discussion of the Three Marks of Existence, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The many and various methods used to make links from the stimulus picture, quote and question were refreshingly creative. Weaker candidates continued to provide a prepared answer and made little if passing reference to the stimulus.

Islam

The majority of candidate responses rejected the claim that Islam is a "trend". Instead, in their discussions about Islam, they were able to demonstrate a good understanding of Islam as a religion that is for adherents, a lived tradition, rich in ritual and a diversity that results from cultural context.

It appears that candidates had heeded the examiners comments from 2015 and avoided simply providing an overview of the Five Pillars. Instead, they demonstrated a good understanding of the origins of Islam, key beliefs and practices, and were conversant with the sacred texts of Islam.

Responses to the stimulus, therefore, were able to use evidence to engage in a discussion about the ways in which the beliefs, practices and rituals of Islam are significant in the lives of Muslims.

## Judaism

As for Question 1 there were some well-prepared students on Judaism in general, but not much understanding was demonstrated once again of the range of belief and practice within the tradition. Reference to other aspects or elements of the faith tradition other than just core beliefs was required in answering this question. The better responses gave that nuance. There was some tendency to give an overview of the religion without reference to the stimulus question in particular discussion of whether Judaism could be regarded as "a trend". Once again Rites of Passage became 'rights of passage' and some students said birth and death were rites of passage, rather than the transitions that the rites mark. There was once again confusion between Tanakh and Torah. It would have been more accurate to use the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) in referring to the God of Israel, rather than Yahweh.

### Question 3

The majority of candidates chose the Stolen Generation as the challenge both historical and contemporary. Candidates had far ranging dates, statistics and needed more accurate supportive quotes and statistics. There was very basic information repeated too often such as Kevin Rudd's apology to the Aboriginal people in parliament.

Greater clarity was needed to explain the context and reason why children were stolen and removed from their Aboriginal families and the impact of this on loss of spiritual connection for all involved (elders passing on information, initiation, care and connection to land as well as the enforcement of Christian values and traditions on removed children).

Candidates need to clearly define (parameters both historically and culturally from within and outside Aboriginal context) the term Stolen Generation.

There was too big a variance in statistics provided e.g. number of tribes and languages prior to colonisation/invasion and in modern time, length of time Aboriginal People have lived in Australia, number of children removed, dates.

Good responses:

- Discussed the central placement of removal from Land (country) and The Dreaming and loss of possibility for passing on knowledge and culture through initiation = loss of identity.
- Used Aboriginal terms (in Aboriginal language)
- Gave the positives and the negatives as well as attempted to give 'expected consequences.'
- Discussed the way identity was not only related to 'skin/blood' but connection to Land, thus loss was related to responsibility for caring and maintaining the Land through the traditions and totems, with no initiation and death of Elders there was 'no going back.'
- Inclusion of political responses (dated) as a consequence for wrong historical actions.

### Buddhism

This was a well answered question, with some candidates demonstrating outstanding knowledge of the key issues concerning Buddhism and the invasion of Tibet. Excellent answers were ones who paired extensive knowledge with a clear analysis of the different ways that the Buddhist community responded to and dealt with the challenge. The question, while being a little difficult in terms of wording, specified quite clearly the key required elements for discussion. Some students spent a good deal of time explaining the history of Tibetan Buddhism before addressing the requirements of the question – this made it difficult for them to achieve high ratings, particularly on Criterion 3.

### Judaism

The Shoah was the challenge covered by all the candidates and there had been some fine work done in understanding this Jewish approach to contemporary challenges. Great use of quotations from recognised texts and comments from local speakers were evident in the papers offered for marking. There could have been more explanation given of why Jews prefer the term 'Shoah' to 'Holocaust' which in itself would add more depth to the written responses.

### Islam

This year the unit 'Significant Challenge and Change – Historical and Contemporary' was, for the first time, a core unit of study. The challenges facing Islam that were the subject of discussion and analysis in these essays varied – women and feminism, the actual historical development of Islam as a new religion in the Arabian Peninsula, the Crusades, the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, and the development of fundamentalist and extremist groups such as ISIS.

The majority of candidates demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the challenge and were able to provide chronologies, detailed descriptions of major characters involved, and good description and explanation of the major events in the challenge as they unfolded.

Overwhelmingly, the content of the responses was restricted to a discussion of the challenge itself, with little or no reference to the beliefs/practices of Islam as a religious tradition. In many ways, the content of the essays on Islam was more akin with an essay from History rather than from the study of a religious tradition. This was also evident in the secular nature of the evidence used to support the discussion.

Better responses were able to clearly identify that the challenge to Islam came/comes from both internal and external events/sources. Embedded in these responses were clear links between the challenge and the beliefs and practices of Muslims in the area where the challenge arose and, more recently around the globe. Likewise, they were able to use evidence from sacred texts, Islamic media, and both historical and contemporary Islamic scholarship to support their discussion about not only the challenge, but the change that was/is a corollary to the challenge.

Given that this subject revolves around the study of religious traditions, students who sit the examination next year are encouraged to be mindful that they must incorporate reference to the beliefs and practices of the tradition in their responses.

Good responses:

- That Buddhism had flourished by moving outside of Tibet (positive) – needed fuller explanation.
- Showed impact from within (loss of spiritual knowledge and religious leaders) and outside the tradition (reason for Chinese challenge).
- Discussed the impact of religious/spiritual loss on the Tibetan culture, sacred places, sharing of knowledge, identity of people, devotees being forced to use violent actions as protest going against core beliefs of pacifism.

#### Question 4

- Challenges focussed on: colonisation/invasion impacts including removal from land, introduction of foreign species and missionary activity, Dispossession from Land and loss of connection, loss of values and impact of Christianity.
- Clarity needed for historical incidents (dates, statistics, direct Primary quotes, acknowledgment of quotes).
- Need as required by the question to differentiate between evidence from Aboriginal People and sources and 'outside' the tradition.
- Lack of use and reference to key terminology and spiritual concepts (The Dreaming, Kinship, connection to Land, loss of rituals and impact on initiation of loss of cultural identity).
- Tendency to retell a historical story with little evidence and factual support rather than focussing on how the challenge impacted on Aboriginal Spirituality.
- Candidates often referred to social issues from loss of connection to land but not linked back to the spiritual losses of tradition, ritual, knowledge and continuation of The Dreaming.
- At times responses were more sociological rather than specifically addressing the impact on Aboriginal spirituality

#### Buddhism

The candidates who answered this question used the topic of Tibet and Buddhism – although this could have also been used in Question 3 it was deemed an acceptable field for discussion. This was a generally well answered question; candidates demonstrated a good knowledge of the historical, religious and social context surrounding Tibet and China. The requirement to use evidence from “both within and outside” the tradition proved to be challenging for some students and resulted in slightly lower marks on Criterion 4. Candidates would be well advised to ensure that they give adequate attention to each aspect of the question. Some candidates spent the bulk of their time recounting the details of Tibetan / Chinese relations and gave relatively little attention to the question of whether the tradition changed for the better or worse.

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## Question 5

This question was quite broad in scope and afforded candidates the opportunity to choose both their ethical issue and two ethical frameworks. As a result, the standard of responses was high and there were some exceptionally good answers. While the overwhelming majority of the candidates chose euthanasia as their ethical issue, there were other strong essays written about abortion, war and genetic engineering. Stronger candidates demonstrated the ability to present two different ethical frameworks and critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each theory. This analysis was more strongly evident in the answers that incorporated the information into each paragraph – not just as a brief paragraph prior to the conclusion. Candidates need to ensure that they read the question carefully and respond accurately – there was a clearly requirement to select both a religious and non-religious ethical approach – candidates who selected two non-religious approaches could not be fully rewarded for their response.

Criterion 5 proved to be the most demanding criterion. To achieve a high grade, candidates needed to give a detailed consideration of both the similarities and differences of each theory, the strengths and weaknesses of their perspective as well as an acknowledgement of the complex nature of applying theoretical positions to real world problems.

Strong answers included excellent explanations, replete with relevant terminology, of the approaches chosen, aptly applied to the ethical issue selected (itself well-explained in detail), with suitable references to and quotations from relevant authorities, and considered explorations of the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches in the light of clearly explained examples of ethical dilemmas arising. It was unfortunate that students sometimes incorrectly spell well-known technical terms, common words and the names of famous persons.

### **Question 6**

Once again in Question 6 the requirement to provide one particular religious approach and analyse and evaluate how it has contributed to public debate on an issue seemed to be challenging to candidates. It should have been possible to draw on the study of the ethical dimension of at least two religious traditions studied within the year for a religious approach. Natural Law ethics as the ethical approach of the Catholic Christian Church was well discussed and understood by candidates.

Sound understanding of the nature of the ethical issue and how response to ethical debates can be divisive and complex was evident and pleasing. Good overall understanding of the ethical frameworks was obvious to the marker, a warning to watch that terminology is learnt and spelt correctly and accurate distinctions are made between terms like deontological and teleological. Allowances are made for working under pressure but terminology used incorrectly can really detract from an otherwise strong response.

Perhaps as a direct result of the stimulus question on the 2015 examination paper the majority of responses seemed to pick up on the topic of Abortion and Euthanasia this year. Please feel confident that the course does allow for the study of a greater range of ethical issues. Candidates who were aware of current debates, recent discussions in the media and a good understanding of public debate were well rewarded. Be encouraged to read newspapers, watch current affairs programs and engage with the latest findings and research on your chosen ethical issue it makes for a more sophisticated, mature and nuanced response and will be well rewarded.