It was clear that the majority of candidates had prepared well for this demanding examination. While this is to be applauded, there were still too many candidates who appear to have prepared responses to questions in papers from examinations of previous years. In these cases, many candidates did not nuance their responses to refer specifically to the stimulus items in the 2015 examination questions.

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. In particular, it is important that candidates demonstrate that they can structure a response that includes relevant detail, explanation of main points, and evidence in support of their discussion.

The following extract from last year’s report provides clear direction as to what is required in each of the four responses:

- 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.
- 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 which means that information that is not relevant will not be rewarded. If the question requires that two ethical approaches, for example, be examined and applied to an ethical issue, then it is important that responses include detailed explanation of two rather than one approach only.
- 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.
- 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.
- If the marker has to search to find evidence that candidates have addressed each of the criteria, they cannot expect to do well.
- 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 was not required when fewer than 10 candidates answered a question.

Question 1

This year, the examiner set a question that required candidates to examine the response of a religion to the quote: ‘Only those who fear punishment will feel obliged to treat others well.’ This quote was designed to launch a discussion that was logically developed, and that incorporated evidence of knowledge and understanding, and an ability to support a position.

JUDAISM

There were a good number of excellent responses to the stimulus where candidates tied in Jewish practices to the basic beliefs raised by the question. Students focused on God as a moral being who wanted his people to lead a good life (best expressed through the concept of tikkun olam or mending the world) rather than fear of
divine punishment or going to hell. Those who did not do so well often wrote profusely about Jewish rituals and practices but failed to relate this to the stimulus. The Covenant was also central to the question though it was surprising how many candidates could not spell the word correctly. One good source for future reference is Rabbi Harold Kushner’s *To Life! A celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking*. Chapter 5, ‘What we believe about God’.

**ISLAM**

On the whole, this was not very well done as many candidates seem to have not looked closely at the question. An obvious start would be to refer to the Cardinal Principles of Islam including *Akhirah*, belief in a Day of Judgement and the After Life. Many students merely described Islamic practices or fell back on the Five Pillars shopping list rather than reflecting on the nature of Allah and how he wanted Muslims to live this life as well as what the Qur’an had to say on what lay beyond death.

**CHRISTIANITY**

Overall the standard of responses was very high. This may have been in part due to the straightforward nature of the question, which elicited a direct response, rather than requiring analysis of a complex stimulus statement or image as in previous years.

**Criterion 1** Strong responses demonstrated a thorough grasp of essay writing structure. This was apparent in the well-crafted introductions which directly included reference to the statement that ‘Only those who fear punishment will feel obliged to treat others well’, and a thesis statement on where the essay was heading. Strong responses returned to explore the question from various angles, utilising relevant topic sentences and discussion and making definite conclusions which were supported by the introduction and the body of discussion.

Weaker responses lacked the required essay structure. The introduction often failed to respond to the stimulus statement, only being introduced very late in the essay if at all, and lacked coherent discussion. Moreover, the weaker responses simply wrote an essay on the history of Christianity, or a basic overview of Christian beliefs, without incorporating a discussion reflecting the content of the stimulus and the requirements of the question.

The length of response was generally a good indicator of quality – the better responses amounted to three pages or more of quality writing, while weaker response were often only a page in length.

**Criterion 2** Strong responses demonstrated depth of knowledge of core Christian beliefs and differentiated between how adherents of differing variants (denominations) would respond to the stimulus. These responses typically incorporated relevant evidence to support the discussion and included examples to support the thesis statement. Terminology was used in a consistent and sophisticated manner, particularly regarding the nature of the transcendent.

Some of the weaker responses wrote an essay about the history of Christianity, and touched on core beliefs in a superficial way without providing examples or illustrations. These responses tended to lack any discussion and listed facts only.

**Criterion 3** This criterion provides students with rich opportunities to support their discussions with evidence. Many students included reference to the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed when outlining the core beliefs in a Trinitarian God. Strong responses used arguments relating to the requirement that a Christian lives following Christ’s example — compassionate, loving, forgiving, generous — and supported the discussion with reference to relevant scripture - for example the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments, in detail. The very good responses went beyond the primary source of the Bible to include secondary sources such as Aquinas and even Victor Hugo!
Weaker responses either did not include any evidence or examples, or referred to the Ten Commandments or the Bible in a generalised way without quoting specific passages.

Criterion 4 The ability to link Christian beliefs to the idea of the fear of punishment was at the heart of how candidates needed to respond to this question, and this required analysis and discussion. The stronger responses interrogated the implications of how beliefs would direct personal actions – the beliefs were outlined, supported by primary and secondary sources, and then analysed and evaluated in response to the stimulus.

Weaker responses failed to analyse the implications of beliefs on actions, or if they did make a link, it was stated in simple terms without detail – the ‘why’ was not discussed, or not linked to evidence.

BUDDHISM

A key concept in the question was that of beliefs. The majority of candidates chose to focus on this element rather than the way in which beliefs impact on the way that followers lead their lives.

Candidates focused on naming and defining key beliefs in Buddhism rather than selecting only relevant beliefs that would assist in answering the stimulus question. Many candidates did not use sufficient evidence to support their position. Likewise, the analysis of quotes in the context of the stimulus needed to be much more comprehensive.

The majority of candidates demonstrated a good understanding of key beliefs; however, these were delivered in a rehearsed manner rather than in a manner which made links between beliefs and how, when practised, it would enable a Buddhist to respond to the given stimulus. There was quite a bit of just delivering ‘all candidates remembered’ about Buddhist beliefs rather than explaining their understanding and making the link between theory and practice.

It could be inferred that most candidates did know how a Buddhist would live out their understanding of their belief, but too much explanation was spent on the details of the belief rather than explicitly relating understanding to key concepts in the stimulus: ‘punishment’ and the ‘motivation for treatment of others.’ It was often difficult to discern a valid response in the amount of written material provided on Buddhist beliefs. This indicated that candidates often did not make a specific attempt to respond to or link beliefs to the stimulus question. For example, it would have been an advantage to make a specific point of explaining how suffering could be linked to punishment rather than inferring the two concepts were somehow linked in a Buddhist perspective.

Good responses clearly made a link to the stimulus question in the opening paragraph, followed up with the addition of explanation of relevant beliefs throughout the response and made a clear summative statement in their final paragraph. These candidates also chose relevant examples of beliefs rather than ‘dumping’ all they knew about Buddhist beliefs. Terminology was correctly used, defined, analysed and evaluated. These candidates also used a range of evidence and ensured that they unpacked the quotes, linking them directly to the stimulus. Assumptions were made and conclusions drawn and related back to the stimulus using relevant evidence to clarify perspectives.

Criterion 1 Rather than use the stimulus as a beginning point many candidates launched straight into writing about Buddhist beliefs as their introduction. They did not construct an argument in response to the stimulus or follow this through to a logical conclusion about how Buddhists would live their life, especially with reference to the way they should treat others. Often it was difficult to find the relevance of the information provided.

Candidates focussed mainly on Dukkha or Karma as an entry point. A common response was to provide ‘all’ rather than relevant information about Buddhist beliefs.

Good responses in this criterion provided an analysed, relevant response that was logically developed and reflected the implications of applying beliefs to living. Assumptions were discussed
and links made between beliefs and behaviours. A strong statement was used in the conclusion of discussion to make explicit links between key ideas and the stimulus provided.

**Criterion 2** Candidates demonstrated good background knowledge of Buddhist beliefs and were able to use and define correct terminology within their discussion.

Responses, however, too often just presented the information without due regard to the relevance of the information to the development of a discussion about the stimulus question. Many responses indicated 'rote' learning rather than analysis of information. Discriminate use of material is an advantage in responding to this stimulus question.

A number of candidates did attempt to explain a few of the concepts within beliefs, but needed to clarify their understanding by making explicit links between the belief and behaviour, thus responding to the stimulus question.

A good response made clear connections between understanding the content of the belief system of Buddhism and how this applied to the context of a situation. Analysis of evidence presented was obvious, as was the discussion that expressed the strengths and weaknesses of a Buddhist perspective of what motivates people in the way that they treat others.

**Criterion 3** As a marker it was difficult to find the consistent application of relevant evidence to discussion of the stimulus question and concepts therein.

Many candidates attempted to apply some evidence though did not chose quotes relevant to the discussion they were attempting to formulate. Often quotes supported descriptions of the belief and not the practise of the belief. Too many quotes/evidences were cited but not unpacked or related to the discussion required by the stimulus question.

Good responses consistently applied relevant evidence to support their discussion and enhanced the link between their knowledge and the concepts within the stimulus question. Drawing relevant and varied conclusions from the evidence is a key to creating a good discussion in response to the stimulus question.

**Criterion 4** The key to responding to the requirements of this criterion is clarity of discussion. Relevant understanding needs to be applied to ensure information and evidence makes links between the content of the belief and the behaviour or lifestyle choices of a follower of Buddhism. (Better responses included a discussion of the way that the different schools of Buddhism would respond to the stimulus in the question).

Some candidate’s answers lacked discernment and added explanations about beliefs regardless of relevance. Information provided needed to respond to the stimulus question and identify weaknesses and strengths of belief systems.

A good response to this criterion would make a distinction between the actual beliefs and the way in which they act as a motivator for behaviours and the way people respond to others.

Strong responses consistently made links between content of beliefs and context of practices. They defined key concepts within the stimulus question and applied relevant quotes and evidence to support their argument. These candidates were willing to evaluate and critique belief systems and to note the different Buddhist approaches which may well lead to different responses to the way a belief is lived out, or what motivates believer’s responses to others.

**Question 2**

It is important that markers be able to clearly identify (a) the religious tradition and (b) which aspect of belief (Sacred texts or Rituals or Structures, practices and festivals or Lived tradition) that the candidate is addressing in his/her response.
JUDAISM - Rituals

Most candidates did well on this question with good use of references and textual quotes. However there were a lot of careless spelling errors particularly Bar Mitzvah (not BAH), Tefillin (not TEPHILIN), and surprisingly ADHERENT. Obviously the best answers tied practices to beliefs and why followers of a faith did these things, especially when it was tied to meaningful rituals. Both the personal and communal nature of the rituals had to be stressed as well. Some candidates did not look carefully at the question which asked for ONE of the aspects, not all of them.

CHRISTIANITY — Lived Tradition

Responses to this question tended to the mid-range grading to the higher grades. Some candidates opted to go into detail about one figure, whilst others went with two — the depth versus breadth response. With only 45 minutes for writing a response, candidates who wrote about two figures often had superficial responses to the question. The better responses focussed on one person, in detail.

Criterion 1  Strong responses demonstrated a thorough grasp of essay writing structure. This was apparent in the well-crafted introductions which directly included reference to the statement that ‘True religion is not about meaningless rituals’, and who the essay was about. Strong responses examined how the personal and communal living out was assisted, often returning to this aspect of the question throughout. These responses utilised relevant topic sentences and discussion and wrote definite conclusions which were supported by the introduction and the body of discussion.

Weaker responses lacked the expected essay structure, and failed to acknowledge the ‘living out’ aspect of the question. The introduction often failed to respond to the stimulus statement, only being introduced very late in the essay if at all, and lacked coherent discussion. Moreover, the weaker responses simply wrote an essay on the history of their person or persons, without incorporating the question’s requirement.

The length of response was generally a good indicator of quality – the better responses amounted to three pages or more of quality writing, while weaker response were often a page only.

Criterion 2  Strong responses went beyond a simple chronology of the person or person’s life, and discussed key moments which challenged belief, or turning points in their lives (metanoia).

Weaker responses wrote a historical account of a person’s actions and did not incorporate any discussion of their beliefs.

Criterion 3  Stronger responses incorporated evidence in the form of specific passages of scripture to support their discussions. Particular reference to The Beatitudes (specifically, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness’; ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’), the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule were explored in detail, and quoted in many cases in full.

Weaker responses offered no evidence or very general evidence, for example, a reference to the Ten Commandments would not specify which commandment was in discussion.

Criterion 4  This criteria offered rich opportunities for depth of discussion, and this was particularly evident for those who wrote about Bonhoeffer. The stronger responses analysed Bonhoeffer’s internal torment as a result of his involvement with the assassination attempt on Hitler, and linked this internal conflict to his beliefs and scriptural teachings such as the ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Regardless of the focus person, strong responses made direct links between beliefs and actions as the driving force for the person.

Many weaker responses struggled with meeting this criteria, as they did not interrogate the role of beliefs in motivating and guiding a person’s decisions and actions.
ISLAM — Rituals

From the evidence it appears that teachers and candidates alike have taken heed of the 2014 examiners comments on this question insomuch as students, in the main showed a solid grasp of subject matter and structure well beyond a simple re-presentation of the Five Pillars. Candidates endeavoured to respond to the criteria in an organised way. Evidence of planning was in abundance. Paragraphing was uniformly evident as were introduction and conclusion. Those who accuse young people (or this cohort) of being incapable of writing an essay of some stature under exam conditions are mistaken as one hundred and sixty three scripts attest.

In the writing there was a light flutter of “…angles and profits…” (sic.), i.e. angels and prophets. One candidate suggested that ICT had impacted upon rituals, insomuch as ‘if a boy fell ill before his circumcision ceremony’, “…the ritual could be postphoned.” (sic.). It is suggested there only so many applications to which a mobile phone can be put.

Understandably, analysis and evaluation is problematic (and will always be) for some. A strong response on Criterion 4 is typically and historically that which delineates good essays from fine ones.

For analysis and evaluation to be constructed and presented under exam conditions requires candidates to have looked critically throughout the year at relatable phenomenology. Moreover it is suggested it needs to have entered not only the psyche but in some ways also the senses before the exam. No easy task for Year Elevens or Twelves. Perhaps if authoritative commentary on weaknesses, strengths and contradictions inherent in the faith are presented along with the phenomenology, then, candidates might uniformly prosper on Criterion 4. To expect or demand that candidates who have a modest grasp of a related phenomenology to then develop robust analysis and evaluation under exam conditions is simply a bridge too far.

Wider reading often translates into deeper thinking. The scripts that indicated wider reading and deeper thinking were rewarded.

When students get fair and reasonable questions as was the case this year, it inspires confidence and brings out the best in them, not only in this question but for the rest of the paper.

ISLAM — Structures, Practices and Festivals

Of the nine candidates who chose this there was very little in detail to delineate them from Islam - Rituals (see above). Whilst the responses in the main were beyond a simple regurgitation of the Five Pillars, I bring your attention to page 8 of 13 in the 2014 Studies of Religion Assessment Report.

Question 3

This year, the examiner set the quotation, ‘The killing of others is wrong’, as the stimulus piece. It is essential that when the question specifies two ethical frameworks (religious and/or philosophical) that candidates clearly incorporate this into their responses. Candidates who chose only one framework (or two variations of one framework) could not be rewarded, even when they wrote extensively about this.

It should also be clear to the marker what ‘religious and/or philosophical’ approaches have been selected. Several candidates who chose Christian ethics as a religious ethical framework neglected to identify that within the Christian tradition there is more than one ethical approach.

A number of candidates who chose Buddhist ethics as a religious ethical framework tended to simply present a list of Buddhist beliefs about suffering and karma and neglected to address the specifics of the question.

The question was well-designed to allow candidates to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the ethical frameworks and the philosophy which underpins these frameworks. There were a number of strong responses in which candidates demonstrate thorough knowledge and the frameworks and an ability to apply the frameworks to aspects of the quote. Some candidates were very creative in their interpretation of the quote and in their design of possible examples from lived experience to support their application of the framework to the quote.
Very few candidates were deterred by the fact that there were tenuous links between the ethical issues that they may have studied and the focus of the quote on the ‘killing of others’.

The majority of candidates had obviously heeded the advice in previous examiners comments. Essays were generally well-structured with introductions that clearly addressed the question (including reference to the stimulus quote) and with conclusions that provided an appropriate summation of arguments. The majority of candidates were able to demonstrate that they were conversant with the frameworks and could incorporate appropriate detail into their responses. The difference between stronger and weaker responses was clear as the former wrote in detail and included much explanation of the both frameworks and how they would respond to the quote.

The use of evidence was generally poor and very few candidates demonstrated that they had actually engaged with the writings of key thinkers whose writings contributed significantly to particular frameworks — for example, to discuss Natural Law ethics without mention of at least, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas suggests a lack of thorough preparation. Likewise to neglect to mention Bentham and Mills when discussing utilitarianism is equally remiss. The philosophers whose thinking and writing underpins the frameworks have all written extensively and material from any of these writings would be expected to be used as evidence in a very good response.

Candidates who were able to incorporate solid detail and explanation of the frameworks and appropriate evidence into a well-written response that interrogated the quote demonstrated their capacity to incorporate critical and analytical perspectives into their responses.

Question 4

The majority of candidates demonstrated that they had a clear understanding of the nature of the historical challenge that they had studied. Too many candidates focussed their response solely on the chronological details, the characters, and the historical event itself. As a consequence, they neglected to interrogate the quote which specifically mentioned the reality that “over time many of these traditional ‘answers’ have been questioned and rejected.” In order to address this, it is apparent that candidates need a thorough knowledge of the tenets of the religious tradition, specifically those which were questioned in the aftermath of the particular historical challenge that they had studied — for example, how did Jews explain the apparent absence of the God of the Covenant in the concentration camps?; or, how to Buddhists account for the incidence of self-immolation as a form of protest?; or, how does Islam as a religion of Peace and Submission to Allah respond to the events of September 11, 2001?

Responses which covered the Reformation were often disappointing as candidates just described the events and did not analyse the way it questioned established views and then failed to evaluate the response.

Essays on the Holocaust by contrast were very well answered, reflecting on how Jews responded to this tragedy in their history.

Essays on Tibetan Buddhism demonstrated a good knowledge of the chronological and historical detail. Stronger responses clearly addressed the way that particular beliefs have been challenged and were able to clearly evaluate the response of the religious tradition to the challenge.

Question 5

On the whole, this was well answered but again candidates needed to note that the question asked them to analyse and evaluate the response, not just say what happened. Many writing about Islam seemed to be obsessed with FGM (female genital mutilation) and the hijab as if these were the only issues affecting women, forgetting that most of the world’s Muslims live in South and SE Asia where FGM hardly exists, if at all. Good answers also stressed the difference between culture and basic beliefs on the role and status of women, referring to the progressive attitude shown by the prophet Mohammed towards the status of women in seventh century Arabia. There are now a lot of books available on progressive Muslim women’s voices even if the media focuses on repression. Answers that focused on Terrorism needed to look beyond the theology of ISIS (if it can even be
called that) and draw on current responses by the vast majority of the world’s Muslims that totally reject terrorism as incompatible with the message of Mohammed and the concept of Islam as a message of Peace.

Several essays on women in Judaism were well answered, referring to the earlier role of women reflected in the Tenakh and modern developments, both in Israel and in the West.

**Question 6**

0 papers (no report)

**Question 7**

On the whole response to this question fell into two camps – those who examined ‘Biblical literalist/Scientific materialist/Mainstream Christian’ approaches, and those who examined Christianity and Science broadly. There was a spread of grades across the spectrum with even numbers across the C, B and A ratings. Most candidates were able to demonstrate a fundamental knowledge of Big Bang cosmology. Nearly all candidates mentioned Red Shift/Doppler Effect/Hubble’s Law and Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation as evidence, but the better responses explained in detail what this meant.

All candidates responded utilising a Christian religious tradition lens.

**Criterion 1**

Strong responses demonstrated a thorough grasp of essay writing structure. This included well-crafted introductions with a thesis statement, relevant topic sentences, discussion, and conclusions which were supported by the introduction and the body of discussion. These responses regularly explored the question, of whether both positions could coexist and contain elements of truth, or whether they were mutually exclusive.

Weaker responses lacked the expected essay structure. They made simple statements lacking discussion and evidence.

**Criterion 2**

This criterion really sorted the ‘wheat from the chaff’! It was apparent that some students had written rote learnt or formula essays, as a substantial number of papers approached the question in the same way – these papers all discussed the same elements: the Biblical Literalist approach, the Scientific Materialist approach, and the cosmological argument. This was disappointing, as the papers became repetitious and lacked originality. However, even within these responses there were some excellent essays.

The strong essays included detailed discussion about the differing Christian beliefs concerning creation, and referred specifically to Genesis 1 and 2. They went on to discuss the Young Earth and Day-Age/Old Earth creationist perspectives, and why these positions are held. Some responses also included reference to Paley’s Watchmaker analogy.

Some responses spent a little too much time discussing Darwin and the theory of natural selection and did not effectively establish relevance to the actual question – the inclusion of Darwin needs to be linked to the changing ideas about the creation of the universe, for example Darwin as a broader exemplar of the rise of science in explaining everything, and not simply a discussion of evolution, as this is not the focus of the topic.

Some respondents mentioned the ‘God of Gaps’ but did not adequately explore the consequences of this; e.g. the idea that God is relegated to explaining the unexplainable, and as more is explained by science, God is ‘weakened’ and removed further, thus challenging the position of a transcendent God as all powerful and creative (omnipotent).

This topic demands a reasonable understanding of cosmology, and most responses were able to adequately demonstrate this. This included use of and demonstration of the understanding of the
terms such as cosmology, singularity, red shift, Doppler Effect, Hubble’s Law, expansion, galaxies, cooling, elements, matter, etc. Good responses were accurate in explaining the age of the universe and the Solar System.

Weaker responses were very superficial in detail, and mentioned the Big Bang without explaining what it was, or stated that ‘the Bible says …’ without accurately including the information.

Criterion 3  Strong evidence for cosmology included references to Lemaitre, Einstein, Hubble, Dawkins, Dennett, and other scientists to support Big Bang cosmology, in addition to evidence of red shift and CMBR.

Young Earth Creationism included reference to Morris, Ham, and Ussher’s genealogy, and made explicit comment on Genesis 1 and 2.

The stronger responses also included discussion on the ideas presented by Barbour and Polkinghorne and Cunningham as Day-Age creationists who subscribe to scientific orthodoxy on the topic to support an argument that truth exists in both religious and scientific explanations.

Criterion 4  This question required solid evaluation and analysis of evidence in order to support a position on the question, and this was apparent within the stronger responses.

There was duplication across a number of essays analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the cosmological argument and Dawkins’ belief in a multiverse – this hinted at the possibility that a cohort of candidates had prepared responses to what was always going to be a reasonably predictable question. Whilst these evaluations were sound, the lack of originality of analysis and argument was repetitious.

Weaker responses did not offer any analysis, other than to say there was some truth in the statement!

**Question 8**

This question required candidates to evaluate the ways in which one theist and one non-theist would explain the existence of suffering and how to respond to it.

Too many candidates chose to focus solely on one of more of the theodicies and neglected to demonstrate that they were equally as familiar with non-theist responses. Candidates who did not incorporate a non-theist perspective into their response could be rewarded for a thorough knowledge of a theist perspective only.

The focus of the question was clearly ‘suffering’. Many candidates, however, chose to write on the question of the existence of evil instead. Clearly, the two phenomena are related, but, they are not the same. Better responses were able to articulate the difference between questions about the existence of suffering and those questions about the problem of evil. These candidates were able to demonstrate their capacity to incorporate a dialogue between these two significant questions into a well-formed and well-supported argument.

Many candidates simply wrote all that they knew about the theodicies and neglected to address the specifics of the question.

The majority of candidates demonstrated that they were able to structure an appropriate response in essay form with a clear introduction and conclusion.

The use of evidence was clearly a problem with candidates simply providing detail with supporting their claims with appropriate evidence.
Question 9

2 papers (no report)