

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/07 Summer 2023 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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Paper 7 series overview

GCE Religious Studies Paper 7 is the A Level Developments in Hindu Thought paper. It assesses knowledge and understanding of key elements of the philosophy, teachings and practice of Hinduism and the ability to analyse and evaluate the influence, significance, or impact of these aspects.

Candidates are required to choose three from the four available question and most candidates fulfilled this rubric correctly. All questions were represented in candidate selections, with no one question being significantly less popular.

Candidates who performed well on this paper generally demonstrated strong examination skills, including effective use of their examination time, a careful reading of the exam questions, the selection of material relevant to that question and the clear application of it to the specific question that had been asked. Responses showed the ability to construct and critically examine an argument to arrive at a justified conclusion to the question. They demonstrated awareness that a critical discussion consists of more than grouping material into 'for' and 'against' positions.

Candidates who did less well had often confused different specialist terms; a significant example is Question 2, where 'feminine principle' led to responses about women's rights and roles in contemporary society. Lower level responses were also more restricted in their analysis, usually demonstrating relevant knowledge and some ability to organise it into opposing views but without further critique or reflection.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrated clear knowledge and understanding of Hinduism through appropriate selection of material for each question • showed awareness of ways in which Hinduism is different from Abrahamic religions in regard to, for example, the uses and significance of scripture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • showed a lack of selection, recounting large sections of material from a topic area without making its relevance to the question clear • demonstrated limited discursive engagement with the material and the question asked •

Question 1*

1* Assess the claim that the nature of Brahman is beyond human understanding.

[40]

Most candidates who chose this question demonstrated good knowledge of the concept of Brahman, distinguishing between saguna and nirguna and offering descriptions of various philosophical attempts to explain or understand Brahman. Many responses tended more towards the descriptive than the discursive however, with an apparent but usually implicit assumption that the claim being made is a truism.

Some responses attempted to use their knowledge of the different Vedantic philosophies to structure the response and this was a valid approach, suggesting confidence in the material and awareness of how themes link across different sections of the specification. However, in some cases it led the response away from a direct focus on the concept of Brahman into a more generalised comparison of the Vedantas.

Good evaluative responses often focused on the difference between philosophical exploration and personal experience or insight of the divine, concluding that it is possible to grasp the reality of Brahman without necessarily being able, or needing, to describe that reality to others. The other common analytic approach was to argue that partial understanding was a sufficient guide to liberation and, when this was achieved, full understanding would be possible.

Assessment for learning



While much of the specification content is philosophical in nature. Hinduism is a living religion; as with any such living practice the more abstract approaches of philosophy, theology and metaphysics may not feature in practitioners' knowledge or experience of their religion and this provides a useful tool for analysis of this kind of question: a philosophical conclusion that Brahman cannot be grasped, or meaningfully spoken of, does not preclude mystical encounter or a deep personal sense of presence arrived at through worship and an inability to adequately describe such events does not reduce their significance for the individual. It is also possible to argue that the question itself is not particularly important for Hindus following margas other than the jnana marga.

Responses which demonstrated understanding of the connection between concepts of Brahman and the central deities of the theistic traditions also often demonstrated a clear ability to draw the distinction between the theoretical and the experiential.

Question 2*

2* 'The feminine principle is only important in Shaktism.' Discuss.

[40]

Many responses contained substantial material about Hindu feminism and the rights and status of women in both the teachings of the religion and in wider society. Unfortunately, the question is about the importance of the Divine Feminine and, while some of this socially focused material could have been made relevant to this question, there were many examples which read like responses to a different question. Some responses recognised that Shaktism relates to the idea of Devi and included some material about goddesses and their relation to male deities.

Misconception



The 'feminine principle' was commonly misidentified as a reference to feminism. An element of this misconception appears to be a limited understanding of Shaktism and associated ideas, with most responses focusing entirely on the named anthropomorphic female deities who are worshipped as consorts of the male deities. The connection between the concept of shakti as active divine power and this pairing of male and female deities was not generally referred to at all and it is therefore not clear quite where the confusion about what was and was not relevant arose. But it is clear that there is a general misconception that masculine and feminine in the context of divinity relates solely to anthropomorphic representations of deity as physically gendered, rather than concerning different qualities of divine essence and power.

Question 3*

3* 'Scripture is not important in Hinduism.' Discuss.

[40]

Most responses to this question demonstrated knowledge of the existence of multiple Hindu scriptures and understanding of their classification in smriti and shruti. Many identified concepts which originated in the Vedas and have significance for Hindus today and used this to argue that, even if an individual does not read the scriptures, they still impact on the religion. This approach is certainly justified, and it meant that most responses had attempted a degree of evaluative thinking, but it is also somewhat simplistic and often based on the assumption that all religions view and treat scripture in the same way.

There was also some confusion around the development of Hinduism over time. Responses which did recognise specific scriptural origins of concepts often presented them as if the contemporary understanding of those terms is clearly set out in a single text. Other responses identified central Hindu concepts as being wholly unrelated to scripture because they have developed their current meaning over time. For the vast majority of examples the reality is something more of a blend of those two absolutes, with a clear first usage in one scripture and then a gradual development, both written and not, over time.

Exemplar 1

To Hindus, the vedas such as the Rig veda, Sama veda, Yajur veda, and Atharva veda all give knowledge to Hindus such as the divinity of existence and is most often understood as holy writ.

To claim that the vedas are not important to Hindus as well as in Hinduism, is controversial as the scriptures which are shruti texts meaning 'heard' compiled around 500-1500 by Vyasa, is to disregard the entire

foundations of Hinduism. And without no founders, Hinduism a religion and a way of life, have (in which even then raises controversy according to Girilal Jain U that over time apparent mis understandings have arisen over the origin of Hinduism), collapses. This is because without no religious Book a religion cannot be formed, that is to say in a similar way the Bible is not important to Christianity, or the Quran is not

important in Islam. As you can see such claims are absurd.

On the other hand, to argue for-meaning to argue for that the Scripture is indeed not important to Hindu and in Hindu, may have some truth and validity.

This is because the Vedas, attained in a meditative state by Rishis and remembered

by students of knowledge (which is very similar to the practices of Islam in which hadith-sayings of the prophet Muhammad were memorised to the word by Sahabahi otherwise known as companions and tabi'een who-learned from the companions of the prophet). In which case students of Hindu scriptures were also taught the same, therefore keeping the message of Hinduism intact.

Exemplar 1 illustrates this: it opens with an over-arching declaration that scripture must be important because no religion can exist without a scriptural foundation – a contestable claim that is not supported or explained – and then goes on to attempt a comparison between scripture in Hinduism and Islam.

Assessment for learning



Understanding scripture in the context of the Abrahamic religions' use of them can be limiting in the context of Hinduism. Texts do not describe the religion or its origins in the way the central texts of many other religions do and neither are they widely considered to express a single truth; all are open to interpretation and much of what is considered scripture consists of such interpretations. Broadly stated, central concepts such as dharma, karma and moksha are not stated or defined in scripture but are rather explored and reflected on by different thinkers in different contexts, often substantially separated by time. The fact that study of the same core texts can yield both monist and dualist philosophies in the form of the different Vedanta speaks to the ambivalence of much of the foundational philosophical material, and also to the acceptance of those distinct interpretations as being equally valuable. This absence, and perhaps even the impossibility of an absolute, single, and certain truth can be found in the earliest of the Vedas, in the Nasadiya Sukta which poses many ultimate questions before concluding that only Brahman knows the answers to these, or that perhaps even Brahman does not know.

Understanding the nature of the jnana marga, and the role of the guru in guiding the student through this diversity of texts, is likely to be helpful in understanding why Hinduism is so diverse while sharing a foundational body of material, as well as how different traditions interact with one another.

Question 4*

4* Evaluate the claim that Vedantic philosophy denies the reality of the material world.

[40]

All responses to this question showed some understanding of Advaita Vedanta; inclusion of the other two Vedantic philosophies named on the specification was more varied. There was no explicit requirement to consider more than one form of Vedanta, but those candidates who did so appeared to find it easier to construct an evaluative argument by comparing the different views.

Most responses did attempt to focus their descriptions of the selected philosophies on their views of the material world, although some were drawn into more wholesale descriptions. The clearest area for improvement was in relation to understanding the concept of maya, the precise meaning of which differs across the different Vedantic philosophies.

There was also evidence of some difficulty engaging with the idea of reality as a philosophical concept open to exploration. Most responses seemed to take the meaning of this phrase for granted without making it entirely clear what meaning that was or what it might mean to claim that all sensory experience is actually unreal.

Exemplar 2

Shankara's Advaita vedanta philosophy, which is a non-dualistic approach to Brahman and is also sometimes argued as a monistic approach recognises and denies the reality of the material world. Shankara's philosophy believes that everything is Brahman and that is the true reality to break free from the cycle of samsara and to become one with Brahman, even though our jiva's are already Brahman, we need to understand that the physical world is not real. It is just a delusion created by Brahman to see whether or not we can break free from this constant cycle of samsara. Shankara ~~represents~~ presents his idea of 3 realities, he believes to acknowledge the the material world is not real we must ~~of~~ release ourselves from the illusory reality, which is binding us to the facade of this unreal material world. Humans must recognise that the material world is not the reality but in fact the reality

is the ultimate reality which is Brahman. Shankara's vedanta strongly denies any approach or opinion towards the fact that the material world is the reality for humans. He believes that the material world is just a facade for us to realise that we in fact all are ~~the~~ atmans who are Brahman. The material world consists of things such as the 4 gunas especially rajas (lust) and avidya (wealth), which bind us down to thinking that the material world is the reality. This is because Shankara's vedantic philosophy believes we become greedy ~~and~~ and start to believe this illusory world is real and we must break free from this.

Exemplar 2 illustrates a response that begins well, with some clear understanding of Advaita but which then struggles to develop any depth. There is a statement that Shankara recognised three distinct realities, with the implication that these included material existence. But, having already stated, more than once, that Advaita presents the material world as wholly unreal in Advaita the response then struggles to clarify the nature or significance of these three levels of reality.

Assessment for learning



As a philosophical question candidates might have found it useful to consider what a phrase like 'the reality of the material world' might mean in this context. This is important, because an overly literal concept of maya as illusion can lead to a nihilistic view of Hinduism in which even the philosophy which creates this view cannot be relied on since it was created by a person who was not themselves real; this is not only not a Hindu view – even within the Advaita philosophy which most often leads to it – but it also tends to restrict discussion overall.

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