

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/03 Summer 2024 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 3 series overview

As usual, this paper elicited a wide range of responses. At the heart of successful answers was a clear understanding of the complexities of Christianity. While examiners are aware of the artificial nature of an exam specification, higher marks tended to be given to candidates who knew that there were more than a couple of liberation theologians, who understood the Bible to be more significant than some isolated quotations, who understood that relationships with other faiths go beyond Scriptural Reasoning and inter-faith dialogue and so on. There was a real sense to the most successful responses that candidates were able to 'think like a Christian theologian'. Level 6 responses really had a feel of nuance and holistic writing, as expressed in the levels of response.

Some candidates were rather scathing about Christians: for example, presenting evangelicals as out-of-date and therefore automatically wrong; Catholics as the epitome of negative morality and so on. This is perhaps an approach that should be challenged by centres earlier in the course while teaching the nuances of religious studies.

As always, some scholars featured across all four questions: Augustine, Bonhoeffer, Dawkins and Freud made appearances regularly, with varied success. Level 5 and 6 responses were able to be given to candidates who made use of unnamed scholarly views, rather than a menu of scholars – indeed, starting a point with the view, rather than a name, tends to lead to an essay that is driven by the AO2, rather than the AO1.

Assessment for learning



Candidates should consider how best to make their essays 'AO2-driven'. For example, they might plan their essays by being clear on the arguments to be used 'for and against'. They might begin each paragraph with a clear argument and might get into the habit of not introducing AO1 material until the second sentence of a paragraph. Introductions might also be argument-based, rather than stating that something has been an issue for hundreds of years.

It was pleasing this year that fewer candidates seemed to be trying to reproduce pre-planned essays. There were some attempts: three paragraph answers on the Bible, agape and the Bible, church and reason and three possible sources of Christian ethics (without returning to agape throughout) or Liberation theology essays that were essentially critiques of Marxism, rather than engagement with the question of social issues. However, this aspect of essay-writing was pleasingly more precise than in previous years.

Attempts to 'be synoptic' had varied success. While there is more obvious overlap between ethics and Question 3 and between philosophy and Question 4, some candidates seemed to be writing with an essay structure that expected a link – however tenuous – between either the topic in the question and another topic or between this paper and another paper. This sometimes led to time being wasted exploring other topics that did not significantly increase credit for the question being answered – for example, long discussions about feminism in Question 1, about secularism in Question 2, about models of understanding the conscience in Question 3 and about Plato in Question 4.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• began responses with a clear line of argument, which carried through the essay• wrote coherent paragraphs that began with a point 'for or against' and then explored this point• had adopted a thinking and writing style specific to success in this paper, rather than one that would work in philosophy or ethics• understood that success in responses comes from answering the question, whether that is perceived to be a narrow question or a broad question• understood the Bible to be the key source for Christian thought and within Christian practice, more than just a source.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• did not focus on the question set or the nuances of the question set• focused on one AO or the other rather than creating unified essays• rushed their third essay• used pre-planned 'topic-based' essays to answer questions• became side-tracked and wrote about tangential matters.

Question 1*

1* Critically assess liberation theology's engagement with social issues.

[40]

Students were able to discuss the difficulties of applying an atheist ideology to a theological approach and the issues this poses to Christians but there was occasionally a sense that Liberation theology was reduced by some simply to this discussion. In these cases, the second half of the question was not always as successfully addressed – that is, the consideration of Liberation theology as something that tries to address social issues, whether the approach be 'bread before theology' or structural sin.

Where Liberation theology's concern with the alleviation of material poverty was a focus, candidates often considered the notion of the 'preferential option for the poor'. Excellent responses understood that this preferential option is a stalwart of Catholic teaching and practice but is not, for many, the same as the aims and objectives of Liberation theology. There was some good evaluation of this with the importance of spiritual poverty. There was useful consideration of the Biblical position, although some candidates became distracted by the material from the Jesus section of the specification.

While there was successful use of named people such as Gutiérrez, the Boff brothers, Segundo, St John Paul II or Ratzinger, there is no expectation of a canon of scholarship that might be seen in the essay. Responses that took an approach that considered ways of engagement, rather than scholars by name, were equally successful.

Where responses were less successful, there was often a general consideration of liberation and less effective attempts to shoehorn other aspects of the course into their answers. Despite the question being broad, candidates who were more successful were able to establish through careful use of an introduction how they were going to respond and examiners were able to apply the levels of response to this context. Some essays were rather theoretical and abstract and students might have been able to take their evaluation further with some concrete examples or case studies of Liberation theology effecting change.

Assessment for learning



A well-judged example of case study, that is not described in great detail, can enhance an essay and improve an examiner's understanding of what a candidate understands. This also serves to consider Liberation theology beyond its purely practical elements.

The best essays tended to be those that situated Liberation theology in the context of South America. Essays that explored other applications of Liberation theology often did not have the breadth or depth of understanding to formulate detailed arguments.

Exemplar 1

		<p>Karl Marx, as mentioned, developed Marxism which approached liberation theology in a more secular way. He was an atheist who focused on over-throwing capitalist systems, and his theories encouraged many to rebel and thus be free. Marx was heavily focused on economic poverty, but that did have its problems; many argued this led to ignoring spiritual poverty which was of greater importance for religious people. Marx emphasised focus on orthopraxis (actions) over over orthodoxy (beliefs) which was another unpopular belief among religious people. Another weakness with Marxism is that millions of those who followed died as a result due to the negative perception authority had of rebelling. This means Marx's views can be dangerous, and also are not applicable to religious people due to him saying atheism is a core aspect of atheism ^{Marxism}. Despite these flaws, Marxism as a whole in liberation theology is still a positive thing. It challenged beliefs no one else dared to which has ultimately led to a shift in attitudes about capitalism. Therefore, liberation theology has engaged well with social issues.</p>
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This extract demonstrates a candidate who has shown knowledge and understanding about Marx, rather than a broader understanding of Liberation theology in action. The essay went on to discuss Jesus' ministry to the poor and then ended.

Question 2*

- 2* 'Christian communities have successfully responded to the challenge of encounters with other faiths.' Discuss. [40]

The best responses to this question were able to differentiate between the responses of different groups or denominations and evaluate each individually, rather than as a homogenous group. However, caution must be taken in approaching this sort of question through exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. As the starting point here is theoretical, it is difficult to explore how successful the encounters are; it is far better to use the material from this specific part of the specification as a way in – undoubtedly it is acceptable to observe that exclusivist Christians will have a different experience in inter-faith situations than Christian pluralists, but it is not really a response to the question to discuss whether inclusivism is theologically persuasive. Some candidates treated exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism as if they were denominations.

A number of responses confused 'other faiths' with 'atheists' or 'secular society' and therefore were unable to access higher levels. For example, essays predominantly on Dawkins did not answer the question.

Candidates often used Scriptural Reasoning to explore whether or not this is successful as an encounter with other faiths, although they perhaps imagined this to be more widespread a practice in Christianity than it is. Others thought that inter-faith dialogue was a specific, narrow activity, rather than an all-encompassing term. There was useful use of the suggested texts from the specification, with some measured responses that explored the potential reaction of others to being described as holding rays of truth (*Redemptoris Missio*) or the change in interaction with people when you are not trying to market your faith and simply are being yourself (*Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*). Other texts beyond the specification were also used successfully. The most successful candidates understood that pluralism, relativism or blind acceptance is not correct by definition simply because of the time we live in; they understood that, for Christians, the centrality of the cross is more than an abstract concept but also that for those Christians who cannot accept other religions as equally true, there is still much to be discovered in the dialogue of daily life or common social action.

Candidates who set out a clear line of argument in their introductions were often more successful at defining what might be deemed as success, in response to the wording of the question. For some, it was defined as the opportunity to evangelise; for others it was about conversion; for others it was a harmonious society. Where this was clear in the introduction, it was easier to apply the levels of response to assess the question.

Less is sometimes more!

Questions that are broader can be harder to score highly in for some candidates. A careful plan that identifies information that will aid the argument, rather than everything they know about the topic, could help some to be more precise and achieve the highest levels. Level 6 for AO2 includes the phrases 'confident and insightful analysis' and 'views skilfully and clearly stated', neither of which needs to lead to extra AO1 content.

Exemplar 2

		Inter-faith dialogue, developed within the UK by Christopher Ford, allows for representatives from different religions (primarily the religions rooted within Abrahamic law) such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to discuss scripture and offer interpretations for its application in today's world. Interfaith dialogue's greatest strength is the sense of shared understanding which is cultivated as a result of discussion. This shared understanding can then apply on a greater scale across the communities which the representatives are from allowing for the facilitation of wider understanding and thus more successful cohesion across different faiths. Interfaith dialogue and Christianity's participation within discussion is especially important in times of religious tensions; for example Ford emphasises 2 aspects of world history when interfaith dialogue has been crucial - in the aftermath of the Shoah at a time of great Christian - Jewish tensions, in which it was vital that discussion between faiths occurred so that such horror would not be replicated; and after 9/11 when the Arab world and Muslim communities and Christian communities in the Christian world, discussed their shared horror allowing for increased understanding and shared sympathies across religious communities of different
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		faith. However, it can be argued that discussion
		between esteemed scholars of scripture, is not replicated
		in greater understanding across these communities as a
		whole, and so the elitist nature of this discussion
		hinders its ability to be a means by which Christians
		can successfully respond to the challenges of encounters
		between different groups and this is demonstrated
		by the continued misconceptions and tensions some
		members of religious communities hold towards other
		faiths. Overall, while inter-faith dialogue and discussion
		provides a means by which Christian communities may
		develop a greater sense of understanding understanding with
		communities of other faiths. The localised and elite
		nature of this discussion means that on a wider scale
		Christian communities have not responded to the challenge
		of encounters with other faiths like what may have
		been possible with greater facilitated discussion.

The example paragraph from this high-scoring essay illustrates that there is much to say in response to this question without needing to rely on exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

Question 3*

3* Assess the claim that love (agape) is sufficient as the only source of Christian ethics.

[40]

This question was viewed by many candidates as a broad question that could use many areas of the specification but the argument required was not always recognised as being quite specific. The most successful candidates often made reference to the distinctiveness of Christianity and therefore the need for a distinctive model of ethics and explored the challenges facing groups who prioritise agape over the authority of scripture or the church. They were able to evaluate clearly the effects of applying agape as an overruling guidance and the universal applicability of this. The understanding of the breadth of agape was a hallmark of strong essays: that loving God and neighbour, according to the gospels, is that on which the Bible hangs; so, a Biblical route into ethics could be argued to be synonymous with an agapeistic one. Thus, agape was seen beyond some isolated quotations from the Bible and beyond the abstract notion of self-sacrifice.

Inevitably, situation ethics featured strongly, often focusing on Fletcher but showing some good understanding of other models. These essays could be successful where they were focused on the question; unfortunately, some wrote a paragraph on situation ethics and then others on either Biblical or church sources of ethics or on natural law and other theories, without maintaining a focus on the question. Some candidates seemed to answer a slightly different question, evaluating whether any of the sub-divisions of the specification were sufficient as the only source of Christian ethics, invariably concluding that a combination is best.

A number of candidates used other elements of the course to undermine people using autonomy to make decisions, coming back to Augustine's views on human nature after the Fall. This is a valid argument to make but could often have been made in a couple of sentences, rather than a significant proportion of the essay. Where candidates spent too long on other sources of Christian ethics, long sections on the immorality of the church as undermining church authority also detracted from the focus of the essay.

Assessment for learning



Candidates might do well to have secure breadth and depth of understanding of what agape is and how it applies to ethical demands. One possibility might be to begin with the New Testament and broaden outwards, ending up with a review of situation ethics. A range of expressions of agape might be explored: the teachings of Jesus, the example of Jesus, the exemplification made by St Paul along with the idea that Jesus' teachings completed the scriptures and did not replace them.

Exemplar 3

		<p>Theonomous Christians, advocates that the Bible is the sole Scriptura (only scripture) and anything else is not it is all a Christian need to live a morally Christian life. The Protestants, rejects the Church, as the Bible provides all the knowledge / rules for the basis of moral principles. We see An illustration of this, is the 10 Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). These are clear guided rules on which which is effective to Christian ethics to live in an orderly cohesive society.</p>
9.43	11	<p>The Bible is fallible (of truth) it is therefore our ^{if all scripture is inspired by God} when we misinterpret the Bible A not God. The Bible is the direct word of God and they proposed we shouldn't take any other approaches as it will be infallible / prone to error. Scholar Nethertheken, this heterodox Theonomy approach, shared by Protestants is faces some challenges. Scholar, Barth, believes that we should not take the Bible at face value, we instead individuals should read it with interpretation to avoid misleading individuals in engaging with Biblical - reading the Bible, viewing it as divine status. The Bible does Furthermore the Bible does not reflect the attitudes of the west of today (outdated). The notion of prohibiting certain garments or shaving beard has no relevance today, so although the Bible may give individuals moral rules of Christian moral principles, that they should not take it literally. Perhaps the better approach is Holism (consider, the bible, reason and the church).</p>

This extract shows an essay that has gone from discussing Fletcher in the previous paragraph and will move on to a consideration of the Bible, church teaching and reason as a combination. It can be seen that there is little breadth in the discussion of the Bible and the lack of referral to the question or agape as a reference point in the paragraph illustrates why the AO2 mark was unlikely to go above a low Level 4 mark.

Question 4*

4* Critically discuss different Christian interpretations of what heaven is like.

[40]

The majority of candidates approached this question by using the sub-divisions on the specification: heaven as a physical place, as a spiritual state and a metaphor for earthly life. Many candidates also considered the question of what it is like by considering who might get there. There was a good use of both the set texts and a wider range of passages from the Bible that suggest what heaven will be like. There was good consideration of philosophical concepts from some and the issue of identity after death and extensive discussion about the nature of time in heaven, with many candidates engaging deeply with Bernard Williams' criticism of infinite time. The most successful use of this employed this scholarly view to evaluate different views of heaven, rather than simply using it to dismiss heaven's existence outright.

Some responses spent too much time rejecting the existence of heaven, using Marx, Dawkins, Freud or science where the question required a consideration of different Christian theologies of heaven. Some spent too much time considering hell and purgatory, although both could provide appropriate context – hell as a contrast and purgatory as a demonstration of the purity of those in heaven.

Some candidates tried to identify physical, spiritual and metaphorical interpretations with specific denominations and more nuance might have been required for candidates wishing to take this approach. AO1 tended to be stronger than AO2 in this question because candidates fell into the temptation of writing all they knew about an approach, followed by a sentence beginning, 'However.'

There was a sense in some candidates, who perhaps scored lower in this question than their other two essays, that it had been harder to move from GCSE standard to A Level standard. They perhaps were fixated on using the Bible as a truth text, rather than a source text. Some candidates, however, showed advanced understanding of St Paul's teaching on resurrection bodies and used Jesus' resurrection as part of their discussion of evidence.

In discussing the concept of the Beatific Vision, some candidates lacked precision and could have drawn further on scholarly sources. Excellent responses understood the position laid out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for example, although there is no expectation of a specific source of authority being used.

Assessment for learning



There was more use of 'new earth' theology this year than when this topic has been assessed previously and this enhanced many answers. A consideration of the notion of the transformation of space and time at, perhaps, the Parousia, might broaden some candidates' repertoire.

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