

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in
Religious Studies**

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/06 Summer 2025 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 responses 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.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 6 series overview

The paper is one of three components that candidates need to sit for the OCR Religious Studies A Level. Candidates need to attempt three out of the four questions. All the questions attract the same number of marks. There are two assessment objectives. AO1 attracts 40% of the marks and AO2 attracts 60%; therefore, marking is weighted towards consideration of candidates' argument, analysis and evaluation.

Overall, most of the candidates seemed very well prepared for the paper and there were some excellent responses, some of which went well beyond the expectations for candidates at this level. Candidates used their knowledge of Buddhist concepts and scholars as well as their analysis/evaluation skills to respond to the questions on the paper. For example, most candidates understood the key terms and concepts such as karma, samsara and dukkha in the questions and could explain, analyse and evaluate them in relation to the topic and in relation to broader Buddhist concepts. Most candidates made good use of scholarly views, and these came from a wide range of sources. There was a greater range of scholarly view being used than in previous sessions.

Most candidates' responses gained Level 4 or above, particularly on Questions 1, 2 and 3. There was no evidence that candidates struggled to complete the paper on time. Most candidates answered Questions 1, 2 and 3. Question 4 was the least popular question by a significant margin.

Where candidates did respond to Question 4, they often had extremely good knowledge and understanding of Mahayana Buddhism. However, where it was less effectively answered responses were vague and often involved a degree of educated guesswork. Questions 1 and 2 tended to produce responses similar to those envisaged in the mark scheme, which typically achieved high Level 4 to low Level 5. Responses were quite similar in nature with candidates sticking to the more obvious points. However, there was more obvious differentiation in Question 4, with candidates either not reaching Level 4, or displaying a higher level of nuanced critical thinking. The highest scoring individual responses tended to be for Questions 1, 2 and 3.

A small number of candidates only answered two questions, more than in previous years, but no candidate did all four questions. Candidates do need to remember to read the question carefully and answer that specific question. Some candidates only briefly mentioned the concepts stated in the question and wrote about other concepts almost exclusively. This did not help them gain the higher marks.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- answered the question set rather than the one they wanted to be set - made clear and well-thought-out points, which they developed, argued for and supported with evidence - exemplified their points to show that they understood key concepts and ideas - were concise and precise in their explanations and analysis. They avoided long and overly complex points, especially where these did little to address the question	- did not answer the question - did not develop their analysis to show a clear point of view, which was developed and justified - did not recognise the key terms accurately and therefore did not address the question. For example, dukkha or Western Buddhism - could not show how and why concepts interlink/contrast with each other - did not link concepts together in a meaningful way

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• had clear knowledge and understanding of the concepts named in the question • could show how different concepts interlink/contrast with each other: • for example, rebirth within samsara and is determined by karma, which in turn can be influenced by the three poisons (greed, hatred, ignorance) and three antidotes (generosity, loving kindness and wisdom) • another example was dukkha is caused by tanha but can be overcome through magga.	• did not give examples to support their explanation and so their understanding • have a clear point they were attempting to argue, which was reasoned and supported with evidence • added irrelevant extraneous material that distracted from the response to the question.

Question 1*

1* Critically assess the relationship between kamma/karma and the wheel of samsara.

[40]

Many candidates wrote about the bhavachakra (Tibetan Wheel of Life) and showed how karma linked to each of the pictures on this. This is not what the question asked, and this approach did limit candidates' ability to fully discuss the relationship between karma and samsara. The bhavachakra is not mentioned in the specification, whereas the term 'wheel of samsara' is used. The specification did not intend for this term to be used in such a limited sense and the candidates who interpreted the term more broadly were able to bring in a wider range of concepts and analyse them more fully.

Many candidates wrote responses that would have benefitted from greater insight. They linked karma to samsara via rebirth and discussed the six realms. This is all perfectly correct but misses some of the more subtle and nuanced ideas within these concepts. Some of the more successful responses could see that the relationship between karma and samsara was more than just the obvious idea that karma influences the realm one maybe reborn into. Some candidates could show that on a more subtle level a person's previous karmic fruit influences decision making at both a conscious and an unconscious level. The more mindful a person is of this then the more likely they are to understand the true nature of samsara. Some developed this further by suggesting that overcoming karmic actions and fruits leads to nirvana; good karma (while positive in terms of rebirth) does not lead to nirvana.

Exemplar 1

Q1	Critically assess the relationship between kamma/karma and the wheel of Samsara.
	Answer
	<u>Plan</u>
	Karma → Consequence to action
	- can affect rebirth
	- fruitful karma
	The wheel of Samsara = rebirth
	- cycle of life
	- three poisons
	hatred, greed, ignorance
⑦	The Buddhism teaching of karma is represented by a flame being blown out. It symbolises how unfruitful karma distinguishes the flame of rebirth. Unfruitful karma occurs when an individual's action is influenced by one of the three poisons. Hatred, greed or ignorance are represented by a pig, snake and a chicken to demonstrate how when an individual performs an act from the three poisons, consequences of suffering unravel causing a ripple effect of suffering. Buddhists are taught that this will stop their cycle of rebirth because it disrupts the wheel of Samsara.

		However, committing fruitful karma reignites the flame of rebirth to begin a next life. This describes the relationship between karma and the wheel of samsara as significant because karma can extinguish the flame of rebirth, disrupting the wheel of the samsara.
		However, Pure Land Buddhist teachings can suggest that the concept of karma and the wheel of samsara's relationships are ^{is} not significant. This is because Pure Land Buddhists can be forgiven for unfruitful karma by being loyal to the Pure Land Buddha. A.....
		In order to be accepted into Pure Land, and have the promise of rebirth there, is Buddhists must chant the name of the Pure Land Buddha and all is forgiven to be accepted. By chanting their name during meditation they become accepted into Pure Land and forgiven for their unfruitful karma.
		* Annica, Anatta and Maga

Exemplar 1 is a good example of a candidate that knows the key terms and has a general idea of what the question is asking. However, it also shows a lack of understanding of those key terms. It makes use of a good counter point with Pure Land Buddhism, but this could be analysed more successfully. It would not take much to make this a more successful response. For example, showing a greater level of understanding and a clearer point of view so that the Pure Land section fitted better with the overall argument.

Misconception



Karma refers to volitional actions. The results of these actions are part of the natural cycle of cause and effect and are often referred to as karmaphala or karmavipaka. To achieve nirvana all karma has to be overcome. Volitional actions, even positive ones, are generated from a dualistic mind. The concept of anatta reminds Buddhists that this is a fallacy, there is no separate 'I' and 'other'. Volitional actions that generate karma are therefore not going to lead to nirvana.

Question 2*

2* Assess the view that dukkha/duhkha is the most important part of the Four Noble Truths. **[40]**

This was a very popular question. Much like Question 1 though many responses could have shown a greater level of understanding and analysis. Many candidates showed good knowledge of the different types of dukkha and used the correct terminology when discussing them. However, many did not give an example to show that they understood their definitions. Most candidates knew the Four Noble Truths but a significant number discussed them as one idea rather than separating the four concepts out and showing how each interact with each other. Good responses showed that there are areas of importance with each of the Four Noble Truths but ultimately, they are all interlinked. Very good responses showed an understanding that dukkha underpins all concepts as the Buddha only taught suffering and how to overcome it. Quite often candidates included some very good analysis but did not develop this into a meaningful or sustained argument and therefore missed out on potential marks.

Exemplar 2

		However, it could be argued that it is not dukkha that is important but actually what dukkha teaches us. The Buddha taught that craving is the cause of dukkha so we should not cling to the idea of craving as this may be what ties us down and stops us from achieving nirvana. Many people use the analogy of the Dhamma (ultimate truth/reality) and the magga/eightfold path as a raft that carries us to awakening but is no longer needed or used once we are there - as clinging and craving to anything only increases our suffering. Dukkha is something that is of importance to our journey towards enlightenment but may hold us back if we place too much importance on it. It can
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Exemplar 2 shows a very good attempt at analysis, but it does not get developed further. They start to try and show the view of what dukkha teaches, this is important, but not necessarily the concept of dukkha itself. This is a good, well-thought-out point of view, that does get to the very heart of the question. However, the candidate does not fully develop this part of their discussion. It would be better if they had a clear view that they wanted to discuss from the outset. If they had suggested at the start of their response that dukkha is less important than what it teaches and then went on to discuss the pros and cons of this position, that would have made an excellent response.

Assessment for learning



Candidates need to present a clear point of view and follow this view throughout their response to produce a coherent, holistic discussion. Whereas for/against style argument has merit, it is less likely to allow students to fully analyse or critically analyse concepts within a coherent structure. Quite often analysis is limited or superficial and added onto the end of a discussion. A simplistic formula to help get candidates started with this style of writing is to encourage them to have a clear opinion about a question, then develop two reasons why the view would be valid (with any faults or problems fully addressed) and then one view suggesting that this view is invalid (again with any faults or problems addressed).

Question 3*

3* 'The spread of Buddhism to the West changed the Buddha's teachings.' Discuss.

[40]

Many of the responses to this question only gave an overview of western Buddhism looking at Knitter, Batchelor, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dalai Lama and Triratna **and** achieved good marks. But quite often responses taking this approach were quite formulaic or superficial. While they did address the question, they did not really grasp the full implications of 1) Buddhism moving out of its traditional areas to the Western world, which has a totally different philosophical outlook and 2) what 'changing' the Buddha's teaching might mean and within the context of the development of Buddhist thought.

More success was achieved by candidates who could show that there are some concepts that have been adopted and adapted over time and some that have been abandoned and evaluated whether this constituted a 'change' in the Buddha's teachings. Others achieved greater success by showing how Western audiences have 'cherry picked' elements of the Buddha's teachings or from Buddhist practice and taken them out of context, thus removing their meaning and in effect 'changing' them. This is the point that scholars such as Bhikkhu Bodhi make when he suggests that some dip in and out of Buddhism as and when it suits their lifestyle choices, rather than Buddhism itself being a lifestyle choice and making their life fit in with that. Some candidates made this point quite forcefully and cited the mindfulness movement as an example of taking a Buddhist practice out of context, thus stripping it of its meaning. The same candidates also applied this same criticism to Paul Knitter's idea of dual belonging.

Exemplar 3

3.	The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, uncovered the Dharma after his journey to enlightenment and realising the middle way. His main teachings consist of the eightfold path with containing teachings about wisdom, ethical conduct and mental development, and the four noble truths, consisting of dukkha, samudaya, nirodha and magga. Buddhism spread to the west in around the sixties due to an emphasis on free thinking, migration and the large influence from the Woodstock festival. However, ^{it could be argued that} the inculturation Western Buddhists or such as Paul Knitter who created 'double belonging' and Stephen Batchelor who created 'secular Buddhism' merely cherry picked the best and most useful teachings for their practices, rather than changing them. However, this could be argued that this somewhat misunderstands the intentions for the teachings and somewhat changes them. Additionally, as a result of inculturation the Buddhist Buddha's teachings have ended up whitewashed and disregarded as important
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as they may not fit into western ideals. Nevertheless, if one could suggest that any practice of Buddhism is somewhat useful and understanding one teachings, merely through Vajras (skillful means).

Stephen Batchelor, ~~was~~ a ~~former~~ former Tibetan Monk, created the 'Secular Buddhist' belief system ~~as~~ due to his warring doubt that he did not resignate with the teachings of samsara and rebirth and therefore could not be a Buddhist. Secular Buddhism, also known as 'Buddhism without belief' focuses primarily on the importance of the four noble truths and the eightfold path. Despite disputing the notion that reincarnation is a literal concept, Batchelor focuses on the importance on cultivating positive virtues and understanding the relationships between ~~anica~~ anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering) and anatta (no-self) in regards to the first noble truth - dukkha. ~~This means~~ This is convincing as Batchelor's westernised buddhist approach still places a tremendous

amount of importance on the ~~the~~ Buddha's key principles and path towards alleviating suffering through detachment and craving. These concepts ~~are~~ were greatly emphasised by Siddhartha Buddha, highlighting the similarities that remain between western buddhism.

// However, it could be argued that this merely picks and chooses what teachings they want to believe. This is evidenced by Dana Nainé who says 'it's ^{like} cherry-picking the best cherries off the tree', here she is supporting the idea of choosing the best teachings; however, it ~~is~~ would be convincing to suggest that you cannot only pick the teachings you prefer as it would likely result in a misunderstanding of the bigger picture and potentially result in different ideas of what the Buddha was trying to get across. ~~Pat Kitter is an ex Brahmin who~~ argues that 'secularism ~~is~~ influenced with a hint of Buddhism', which practically disputes their validity as they ~~not~~ undermine the Buddha's key idea of Samsara and escaping this cycle in

order to attain nirvana. Therefore, it ~~could be the~~ is very convincing the believe that the act of picking and choosing what teachings to follow results in misunderstanding the full picture and ~~changing~~ disregarding/dangling the ultimate goal which buddhists believe to be Nirvana.

The spread of Buddhism in the West has resulted in inculturation and white-washing of the Buddha's teachings. An example of this is poem famous ~~poet~~ singer ~~Thor~~ John Lennen who stated 'what is interested in is Nirvana, the Buddhist heaven', this deeply misunderstands and white-washes the Buddha's teachings of anicca and non idolatry worship through linking it to a permanent God and heaven. This inculturation is observed further through the increasedⁿ popularity of meditation and mindfulness and Buddha statues as decorations. Although ~~the~~ Buddhism is more prevalent in the West, the main focus ~~is~~ on it appears to be about aesthetics and decorations, rather than obtaining a deep understanding and focus on the

the Buddha's teachings. This is a somewhat convincing argument as it ^{only} reveals the lack of spiritual interest the west has in the Buddha's teachings rather than the act of changing the teachings all together. Therefore, in the west the focus is not on changing the Buddha's teachings, but rather on mindfulness.

One could argue that this focus on mindfulness is in fact following the Buddha's noble eightfold path through developing insight and understanding. Due to the spread of Buddhism in the west there has been an increase of ~~Vihara's~~ Buddhist Viharas and funding to poorer monasteries abroad. This means that perhaps a ~~growing~~ there is a growing focus on cultivating the qualities that the Buddha outlined. ~~Additionally, Mahayana Buddhists~~ John Cabot Zinn ~~the founder of the creator~~ starter of a large Buddhist movement focused on developing positive qualities, all in which would likely align ~~with~~ with the Buddha's ideals. This convincingly highlights how the

		Buddhism in the West fit places a focus on ^{only} some of the Buddha's teachings rather than actively changing them.
		To conclude, it is reasonable to suggest that the way in which Stephen Batchelor and Paul Knitter only picked the teachings that suited them, this could merely be skillful means (upaya) in reaching their end goal. This is convincing as Upaya recognises the fact that everyone perceives ultimate truths differently, therefore an adaptation of the Buddha's teachings may be necessary in the west due to their drastically different ways of life.

Exemplar 3 is from a script that got full marks overall. This is a confident response and although the candidate does not include the same amount of evidence that some other responses have, what they do with the material they use is very good. There is a clear, holistic discussion with a range of evidence to support and analyse the points made.

Assessment for learning



Some candidates wrote about female monasticism, which only loosely fits in with the question. This gave the impression that candidates had prepared for or even expected a question on female monasticism and tried to squeeze what they had learnt into the most appropriate (or rather, least inappropriate) response.

Candidates are always better off if they learn everything on the specification. This gives them to greatest chance not only of being able address whatever question is on the exam paper, but also the full range of concepts with which to address those questions. Candidates who achieve the highest marks tend to be the ones who can show how the different concepts interlink on a gross and subtle level.

Question 4*

4* To what extent are the six paramitas (perfections) only important to the bodhisattva path? **[40]**

This was the least popular question. Candidates either knew the content very well or had made an educated guess. Some talked about the six paramitas as one concept, rather than a collection of concepts. Many candidates discussed the six paramitas in terms of the concepts being embodied by various bodhisattvas. However, where candidates did do this, they achieved higher marks than those who simply compared the bodhisattva and arhat paths.

The candidates who achieved higher marks could show that the six paramitas are found in the Jataka Tales (some gave examples- most just named dropped). They also showed that the six paramitas underpin the characteristics of the tathagata in both Mahayana (Zen) and Theravada schools, demonstrating a broader range of knowledge and understanding.

A few candidates chose to write about a couple of the paramitas rather than all six and showed where these concepts could be found throughout Buddhist teachings. While this is not strictly answering the question in its fullest sense, the candidates did present excellent responses. They clearly showed how/where these concepts already exist within the Buddha's teachings and how they are part of existing Buddhist practice. Through this they demonstrated that the paramitas are not only important to the bodhisattva path. A smaller number took the arhat path and showed how the paramitas were found here as well. This was equally good.

Misconception



Zen Buddhism is, in the words of Christmas Humphreys 'very easy to misunderstand'. Many candidates do seem to misunderstand some of the fundamental ideas around Zen. There are two stories which probably best summarise where Zen is attempting to take people. The first is the story of the university professor who is invited to tea by a Zen Buddhist monk. As the monk serves the professor tea, he keeps pouring the tea even when the cup is overflowing. The monk explains that the professor needs to let go of all preconceived ideas (empty his cup). This refers to removing all dualistic thoughts. The second story builds on this. It is a teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh on sunyata. He says that you can see a rain drop in a piece of paper. In other words, all things are interconnected, trees need water, as do lumberjacks, papermills, etc.- to get one sheet of paper the whole universe needs to work together. Zen reflects these two ideas in its practice. Zen is not theory but living those teachings.

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