

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/03 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.

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Paper 3 series overview

This year's paper saw a broad range of responses across all four questions. Many candidates demonstrated a strong grasp of key theological concepts and engaged critically with the material. The most successful responses were those that maintained a clear focus on the question, structured their arguments coherently and supported their points with scholarly ideas and, (where relevant) scriptural evidence.

Question 1 and Question 4 tended to produce more varied and thoughtful responses, often because candidates could link them to contemporary examples or debates. Responses to Questions 2 and 3 were sometimes less focused, with some candidates appearing to rely on pre-prepared essays. They often followed a three-paragraph structure and then worked backwards to make it fit the question, not always successfully. While it may be tempting to learn an essay plan for each topic in advance of the exam, this technique often does not lead to a high-level response, partly because the candidate is not able to demonstrate an appropriate selection of material relevant to the question. In many cases, one or perhaps even two of the three paragraphs may not even be relevant to the question and so do not support a strong answer.

It was pleasing to see that at all levels candidates were able to use Biblical knowledge in their responses, with less successful candidates still earning marks by selecting and applying a range of accurate Biblical knowledge to the questions set.

The usual broad range of scholarly views were acknowledged, with Bonhoeffer, Dawkins, Freud, Barth, C. S. Lewis and Daly used. Dawkins in particular appeared in a number of questions and was used by some candidates to support any vaguely atheistic or sceptical position, whether he has dealt with that issue in his published work or not. It is worth noting that 'scholarly views' does not always mean the inclusion of named scholars as sometimes persistent name-dropping can disrupt the flow of a candidate's argument, especially if these views are shoehorned into an answer rather than carefully woven through it.

With regards to AO2, most candidates were able to offer a logically structured argument even where the AO1 was limited. However, for AO2 a number of candidates were reliant on terms such as 'incoherent', 'illogical', 'weak', etc. These terms were sometimes used, in effect, as an entire argument on their own and often without a clear understanding of what they actually mean or with any developed discussion as to why the argument referenced could be seen as 'incoherent', 'illogical' or 'weak'. This limited the candidates' ability to move further through the levels.

Misconception

Some candidates referred to most of the thinkers that they used in their responses for this paper as 'philosophers'. This perhaps suggests a lack of understanding of the different disciplinary approach required in this paper in comparison to Papers 1 and 2. Helping candidates to accurately reference the scholars they use would be useful in this regard. If in doubt, 'thinker' is a good substitute.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• used their introduction to outline their thesis and demonstrate a full focus on the question • began each paragraph with a clear line of argument, focused on the question, which carried through the essay • understood that success in responses comes from answering the specific question set, which may mean choosing to leave out elements of the topic not relevant to the question • understood that Christianity is a complex religion, with a range of diverse views even within denominations, and reflected this in their responses • used well-selected Biblical passages or scholarly views to evidence their line of reasoning.	• did not focus on the question set • tried to shoehorn in or name-drop several scholarly views without explaining them or making them relevant to the question • used pre-planned 'topic-based' essays to answer questions • became side-tracked and wrote about tangential matters • used evaluative language as the only form of argument, e.g. stating a view is incoherent or illogical.

Question 1*

1* Evaluate the claim that Christianity should play no part in public life.

[40]

This question produced a broad range of answers and enabled candidates to draw on the wider specification with varying success. More successful responses analysed different areas of public life such as education, law and government, and demonstrated commendable use of statistical data regarding the religious makeup of the UK population, which added depth and contextual insight. Less successful responses saw candidates veer away from the specific focus on public life and instead explore secularism more broadly, missing opportunities to engage fully with the question's central theme. Less successful responses also tended to focus on religion as an abstract idea or as a general element of public life rather than focus explicitly on Christianity, which is what the question asked for. The example of French *laïcité* was common, as was recognition that the UK is not legally a secular state. This was one place where Christianity was likely to be mentioned explicitly, sometimes with examples of Christian practices (wearing a cross) being restricted while those of other religions (wearing a hijab) are seen as having more protection.

More successful responses focused on the role of Christianity in 'public life', making it clear what the candidate understood this term to mean. For example, successful responses discussed the role of religion in education or government and often referred to different forms of secularisation (e.g. programmatic or procedural) in the context of public life. They also identified that the question was specifically about Christianity rather than religion in general. Candidates that made the most successful use of one of the main scholars within this topic, Richard Dawkins, focused on his views on faith schools, rather than his views on Christianity or religion in general. These candidates often recognised that there are a variety of faith schools in the UK and were able to evaluate whether his description of faith schools is applicable to all. In the most successful responses, candidates acknowledged that there are different views within Christianity about the role it should play in public life, with some drawing on the work of Rowan Williams concerning procedural secularisation.

Less successful answers often responded to the question with a discussion on whether religion is good or bad, or with a generic presentation of the views of Freud and Dawkins, rather than selecting appropriate material in order to respond to this question's focus on the role of Christianity in 'public life'. Some responses did try to translate personal belief (or personal neurosis) into a matter of public concern, but overall understanding of Dawkins appeared more readily applicable to the question than Freud for most candidates. Less successful responses tended to use examples of religion in private life which were not always made relevant to the question, for example the choice parents have to baptise their children, or hell houses in the USA. Some responses used the title as an opportunity to discuss gender, ethics or inter-faith dialogue, which, while potentially useful examples, did not answer the question set.

This question also probably saw more uncritical assumptions than any of the others: the meaning of 'public life' was generally assumed to be self-evident, democracy was assumed to be an unequivocal good, and religion and Christianity were treated as synonyms. Both secularism and atheism (sometimes undifferentiated) were presumed to be egalitarian, liberal and accepting, even when examples like Mao's Communism were being cited elsewhere in the essay. There was also a common assumption that only Christians and those other religions are influenced by anything other than objective fact when making decisions. A lack of nuance in the discussion, particularly when complex matters were framed in binary terms, or supported by generalised assumptions, restricted the strength of critical analysis and evaluative insight.

Exemplar 1

		FREUD IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST ADVOCATORS FOR A SECULAR SOCIETY, AS HE DOES NOT VIEW RELIGION IN A POSITIVE LIGHT. FREUD ARGUES THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION IS JUST AN EXCUSE FOR PEOPLE TO ACT UNETHICALLY, AND THEN TO REPENT TO GOD AND BELIEVE ALL WILL BE FORGIVEN. FREUD ARGUES THAT RELIGIOUS PEOPLE JUST ARE MERELY JUST LEADING THEMSELVES INTO A PSYCHOSIS. THIS ONE OF FREUD'S MAIN ARGUMENTS IS 'WISHFULFILLMENT'. THIS IS THE IDEA THAT IN ORDER TO SOOTHE PEOPLE'S ANXIETIES ABOUT THINGS OUT OF THEIR CONTROL, THEY JUST USE A 'GOD OF THE GAPS' MINDSET. THIS ARGUMENT STATES THAT RELIGIOUS PEOPLE JUST USE GOD AS A REASONING FOR THINGS THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND. IT IS ALSO USED TO ALLEVIATE ANXIETY BY GIVING RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD, PROVIDING AN EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL (BELIEF THAT EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS, IS DUE TO AN OUTWARD FORCE, SUCH AS GOD, AND NOT ONE'S INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS). FREUD'S
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This exemplar extract shows an essay where the introduction discusses secularisation in general terms and then this paragraph outlines Freud's analysis of religion, namely presenting religion in a negative light, without any reference to the focus of the question on the role of Christianity in 'public life'. This candidate seems to have responded to the general topic in this section and so is unlikely to go beyond Level 3.

Assessment for learning



Candidates would do well to use their introduction to demonstrate that they are answering the specific question set rather than showing more general knowledge of the topic area that the question has been selected from. For this question, it would have been helpful for candidates to outline what they understand by the term 'public life' and perhaps outline their argument as to whether they thought Christianity should have a role in it or not. An introduction focused on the general topic area might suggest that the candidate is answering a slightly different question.

Question 2*

2* Critically assess Christian views about theological exclusivism.

[40]

This question was well tackled, with most candidates demonstrating familiarity with the threefold typology of the theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. However, a notable number of responses did not fully focus on the question, often launching directly into discussions of inclusivism and pluralism without first establishing a clear understanding of exclusivism and linking all other discussions back to the question.

More successful responses critically assessed exclusivist positions, such as those of Barth, Kraemer or Augustine, before contrasting them with alternative views. These candidates often drew on Biblical support for this position, explained Catholic views of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the Church there is no salvation") and sometimes drew successfully on documents such as *Redemptoris Missio*, although this was not necessary to secure top marks. Candidates who maintained a clear focus on the exclusivist dimension and evaluated its theological and practical implications scored more highly. These candidates were also able to interrogate exclusivist views using inclusivist and pluralist arguments with genuine critical engagement.

As with Question 1, in less successful responses, candidates often did not engage directly with the question. Instead, they produced generic essays outlining exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, followed by a loosely structured conclusion. Many wrote extensively about Augustine and the Fall, though this was often only tenuously linked to theological exclusivism. Lower-scoring candidates often spent too much time giving a detailed outline of other positions. For example, when discussing pluralism, candidates gave long biographical accounts of Hick in Birmingham, without any attempt to link this to the question set. A surprising number of candidates attempted to use Bonhoeffer to answer this question, with, in most cases, limited success and an incomplete understanding of his stance on salvation. There was a recurring lack of nuance, with sweeping generalisations about Christians' views. For instance, some labelled Luther a Catholic simply because they saw Catholicism as exclusivist. Exclusivism was frequently characterised in simplistic and negative terms. Conversely, inclusivism and pluralism were often presented as positive alternatives, mainly because they could be reconciled with the belief in God's omnibenevolence, rather than being used as frameworks to critically engage with exclusivist theology.

Assessment for learning



Helping candidates to recognise the diversity of beliefs within Christianity, and the nuance that exists within and between denominations, can support a more accurate and thoughtful understanding.

Exemplar 2

		Exclusivism is not a single point of view. D'Costa distinguishes between universal access exclusivism and
		restrictive access exclusivism. Universal access leaves the possibility of salvation open to all Christians, whereas restrictive access suggests certain denominations are the only right way to salvation. This seems unfair. Augustine and Calvin would disagree though. Due to the Fall, we are sinful and have corrupt natures. God does not need to save anyone. God is not unfair, he is actually unbelievably omnibenevolent for even choosing to save some. However, this viewpoint is very flawed. If we have to know the Bible, be baptised, and live perfect Christian lives to be saved, then not many people will be. Some theologians question how people who lived before Jesus could be saved without hearing his messages. An even stronger argument is to question how babies who passed away before being old enough to comprehend Christianity could be saved, or those in countries where the gospels have not reached. This is a deeply unfair system. Christians who support exclusivism would argue that God has 'middle knowledge' and knows who would be Christian if given the opportunity, but this still seems insufficient. The very idea of how middle knowledge could work without imposing on our free will is hard to defend.

This extract is an exemplar of a more successful response, where the candidate demonstrated a breadth of understanding of exclusivism. Candidates at this level were often able to examine various forms of exclusivism held by different denominations across history, as well as the theological reasoning behind them. As in this example, they explored distinctions between restrictive access and universal access exclusivism, referencing thinkers such as Calvin and Augustine. The essay goes on to examine the views of the Catholic Church both pre- and post-Vatican II.

Question 3*

3* 'Jesus' authority comes from his divinity.' Discuss.

[40]

This question was handled confidently by many candidates. Responses often included references to C. S. Lewis (e.g. the 'Liar, Lunatic, or Lord' trilemma), John Hick, and a range of scriptural passages.

At all levels, candidates showed good knowledge of Biblical exemplars and the events of Jesus' life, although at the lower levels there was a tendency towards storytelling rather than critical discussion. Candidates pointed to the miracles listed on the specification and were able to explain how they could be interpreted in different ways. Many used these, the 'I am' statements in John's Gospel, as well as Jesus' Baptism and resurrection, as evidence that his divinity is the source of Jesus' authority. Some referenced, quite admirably, how the development of Jesus' divinity is reflected in the Church Councils. A number of top-level responses drew from Christian history, including the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea, to discuss differing theological understandings of Jesus' identity and authority, linking back carefully to the question.

The most successful responses explored the relationship between Jesus' divinity and his authority, while using the alternative sources of authority, such as his moral teachings, or role as liberator of the marginalised and the poor as part of a well-woven critical evaluation. Some candidates also engaged with kenotic theology and the implications of Jesus' humanity on his divinity. The highest-scoring candidates were able to give nuanced and successful exegeses of the Biblical passages which they were drawing upon to aid their arguments. For example, discussion of the historical context and validity of the Gospels, Jewish understandings of the Messiah and wisdom teachers in reference to the authority those roles granted, the first century meaning of 'Son of God' and a thoughtful comparison of Jesus' miracles with those of Old Testament prophets. These candidates explored how Jesus' authority may be perceived differently depending on context, whether drawn from his divinity, teachings or work as a liberator.

As in previous questions, in less successful responses candidates often wrote general essays on Jesus as Son of God, teacher of wisdom and liberator, without engaging directly with the question. These essays often explored these sources in three distinct paragraphs, presenting what at times seemed like a pre-prepared answer for this topic.

Less successful essays either focused on a discussion of whether Jesus was or was not divine, rather than a focus on divinity as a source of his authority or took a philosophical approach rather than a theological approach, seeking to dismiss Jesus' divine claims from an atheist perspective, rather than evaluating whether the source of Jesus' authority does come from his divinity.

Misconception



A small but significant minority of candidates confused Moses and Jesus, asserting that Jesus parted the Red Sea.

Exemplar 3

3		The divinity of Jesus Christ is a particularly important element of Christian faith, it is what establishes its uniqueness compared to other Abrahamic faiths. Within Christian religion Jesus is believed to be the Son of God. His divinity recognised and affirmed throughout scripture, particularly through his miracle work and resurrection. Despite this Jesus is also known, within Christian faith, for his teachings and liberation. The question over his divinity therefore seems an important one to consider, if Jesus is to be established as unique from other prophets prophets. Despite this, this essay will argue that although important, Jesus' authority is not necessarily contingent on this whether his divine identity. Instead, Jesus' authority may be seen through his profound influence and affirming attitude towards life.
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This exemplar is a great example of a strong introduction which focuses fully on the question set. The candidate makes reference to the two other main sources of Jesus' authority, but the candidate will be centring the discussion around Jesus' divinity. It is beneficial for the candidate here to let us know the argument that they will be making. Setting out the thesis in the introduction gives the impression of a confident line of argument.

Question 4*

4* Critically discuss Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 3 (the Fall).

[40]

This was another very popular question with the majority of candidates demonstrating knowledge of what the Fall was and its implications, as well as the distinction between pre- and post-lapsarian world with its effects on human nature. Many candidates evaluated Augustine's interpretation with reference to the theological debate with Pelagius. However, a common weakness was the tendency to jump straight into a critique of Augustine's views, particularly his perceived pessimism, without first outlining his interpretation of Genesis 3. Once again, lower-scoring candidates did not focus on Augustine's interpretation and instead summarised the Genesis 3 narrative. Many conflated Genesis 1 with the later chapters and cited their favourite quotations from the creation account, without clear relevance to the question.

The most successful responses systematically examined Augustine's interpretation of the Fall and the doctrines that he presented as a result. They tended to avoid lengthy descriptive narratives of the Fall, which, although not irrelevant, were unnecessary and took up candidates' time. In the more successful responses, candidates had clear command of the technical language (e.g. concupiscence, original sin, caritas) and used this appropriately in their explanations. They successfully used the views of a range of scholars to critique specific aspects of Augustine's interpretation of the Fall. Social contract theorists, including Hobbes, Rousseau and Rawls were commonly used to support the view human nature is inherently unpleasant and Hobbes' observation of human life as 'nasty, brutish and short' was often quoted in this context. Dawkins was also commonly cited as proving that the Fall cannot be literally true. While this is a valid criticism of the theory, it would have been beneficial for candidates to demonstrate awareness of the context in which Augustine was writing, for example, recognition that Augustine could not have known contemporary theories of evolution. Those who critically engaged with Augustine's theological reasoning, rather than simply dismissing it, were rewarded accordingly. Top-performing candidates engaged meaningfully with Augustine's thought, used his specific terminology and grappled with the theological issues he sought to address.

A characteristic of less successful responses was an AO1-heavy, detailed description of the story of the Fall which meant that discussion sometimes appeared as something of an afterthought. While candidates were aware of the idea of Original Sin being passed to the rest of the human race by Adam and Eve and often aware of the connection between this and human lust, in less successful responses the more detailed or nuanced aspects of Augustine's thinking were less commonly dealt with, although biographical detail was quite common and often not made relevant to the question. Some candidates did not clearly delineate between the content of Genesis 3 and Augustine's interpretation. For example, they argued that Augustine asserted that women were punished with severe childbirth and presented it as something Augustine had introduced to the story. With less successful arguments, candidates classified Augustine as being unfair, pessimistic and illogical, with limited explanation as to why.

Some candidates were able to introduce some potentially interesting synoptic links, for example discussing the impact of Augustine's interpretation from a feminist perspective. These candidates successfully drew out Augustine's interpretation of the role of Eve in the Fall and the subsequent impact on church views on women. However, the majority of candidates who attempted this tried to do too much in too little time to be able to present a coherent, developed argument or ended up straying too far from the question.

Assessment for learning



While many top-scoring candidates were able to weave relevant synoptic links into their responses, for some it can be a distraction and lead them down a tangential path. For example, with Question 4, some candidates veered off into discussions of the problem of evil, comparing the Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies from Paper 1, and others focused too much on gender from another topic on Paper 3, often with limited success.

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