

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/01 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 1 series overview

The Philosophy of religion paper assesses AO1 knowledge and understanding (40% of the marks available) and AO2 analysis and evaluation (60% of marks).

Questions 2 and 3 have been the most popular and, in general, the ones that have elicited some of the best responses. Question 4 on falsification was mixed; candidates invariably have had much more to say regarding the alternative theories surrounding religious language. It is worth noting that one third of the Philosophy of religion component is devoted to religious language. More success was had with a tighter focus on the question by using the relevant material.

Some candidates confused the term 'consciousness' with the term 'conscience'. This shows the importance of understanding the key terminology and the various parts of the specification to avoid this conflation.

Some responses would have been more successful if there had been more fluid writing and less making of lists of ideas. In these cases it would have been better to show full understanding of the topics covered rather than superficial and confused approaches to questions. Candidates could benefit from taking a few moments to read the wording of the question and selecting the relevant material to fully engage with analysis points.

The questions overall required specific knowledge and understanding of scholarly views/academic approaches, etc. and responses fared less well when this was confused, conflated or convoluted.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• embedded the evaluation throughout the essay, using the material as a vehicle for discussion • focused directly on the question rather than more general issues raised by the topic • often outlined what was going to be argued at the beginning of the essay with a hypothesis and reasons, and developed this through the essay • carefully selected relevant material rather than all material around the topic.	• wrote everything they knew from a section of the specification without tailoring it to the question being asked • presented a confusion of philosophical ideas • evaluated by juxtaposition of different views, rather than by developing reasons why one was stronger or less successful.

Question 1*

1* Critically assess the idea that consciousness can be fully explained by material interactions. [40]

AO1: Most candidates recognised that this question was rooted in the philosophical approach of materialism and responded accordingly. There was widespread reference to thinkers such as Dawkins, Aristotle and Ryle in support of the statement. In contrast, scholars such as Plato and Descartes were frequently cited in opposition, though with varying levels of success. Candidates who progressed up the levels of response homed in on the focus on the question and showed how each theory would respond to the statement in the question. Many responses also included the Dawkins Soul 1/ Soul 2 distinction, although in some cases explanation of his ideas needed further clarification.

More successful responses demonstrated a more developed understanding by drawing on scientific evidence or case studies to critically assess whether consciousness can be fully explained through material interactions. Some candidates went beyond the specification content, introducing additional ideas that were well integrated and used effectively.

However, some responses lacked a clear explanation of what is meant by 'material interactions', and there was occasional confusion between 'consciousness' and 'conscience'. A very small number of candidates misinterpreted the question entirely, treating it as one about conscience and focusing on the views of Aquinas and Freud. Greater clarity around key terms and the precise focus of the question would support further progress.

AO2: Most candidates were able to construct developed arguments both in support of and in opposition to the statement, frequently drawing on relevant scholarly views and, in some cases, appropriate case studies. The most successful responses demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept of *consciousness* from the outset and maintained sustained focus on the central issue throughout.

However, some essays drifted into a broader discussion of dualism versus materialism without sufficiently engaging with the specific question of consciousness. In some cases, this led to a lack of direction or coherence. This was particularly evident where candidates juxtaposed physicalist and dualist perspectives without demonstrating a confident ability to evaluate them; Plato's position was especially vulnerable to superficial treatment. There was also some inconsistency in how Aristotle's view was classified, and explanations of Platonic dualism were at times underdeveloped and unanalysed.

Although the question was open in nature, this seemed to present difficulties for some candidates in structuring their responses. The AO2 demands were not always met, with some essays leaning heavily on description rather than analysis and critical engagement. Nevertheless, there were some excellent responses that extended beyond the specification in a meaningful and relevant way. Effective use was made of material on Hobbes' materialism, the problem of interaction, qualia, Skinner and responses from Dennett, as well as Putnam's Super Spartans, all of which, while not specified content, were used to enhance arguments and demonstrate depth of understanding.

Misconception



Dawkins refers to soul two as 'the awakening of the imagination' which comes about through intellectual or spiritual power and the higher development of the mental faculties.

Question 2*

2* 'Anselm's ontological argument justifies belief in God.' Discuss.

[40]

AO1: This question appeared accessible for most candidates, and many demonstrated a good breadth and depth of understanding. The majority recognised that the focus was on Anselm's ontological argument, with frequent reference to both Anselm's and Descartes' versions. Most responses included Gaunilo's island analogy and Kant's critique, particularly the objection that existence is not a predicate. However, the Kantian criticism was sometimes presented in a limited form, with only passing mention of the predicate issue and little engagement with supporting examples such as the thalers analogy.

More successful responses made relevant and thoughtful use of Descartes to support Anselm's overall argument, and some were able to link alternative arguments back in a synoptic and evaluative manner.

However, a significant minority of responses included extended discussions of the cosmological or teleological arguments, sometimes replacing rather than complementing the ontological discussion. These responses often lacked a clear focus on the demands of the question, and in some cases suggested confusion over the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments. While it was encouraging to see candidates engage with these important philosophical concepts, there were instances where the classification became confused or misapplied.

More successful responses demonstrated clear understanding of the *a priori*, deductive nature of the ontological argument and kept their focus tightly aligned to the question, with some beautiful descriptions of Anselm's faith seeking understanding. Less successful responses tended to offer descriptive rather than analytical content and drifted off topic by focusing heavily on unrelated arguments for God's existence.

AO2: Many candidates demonstrated a sound understanding of Anselm's and Descartes' versions of the ontological argument and were able to engage with the question of whether this line of reasoning can provide a justification for belief in God. Evaluation was generally a strength, with more successful responses making thoughtful use of Descartes and Plantinga in support of the ontological argument, and Gaunilo or Kant to challenge it. These responses often maintained a clear focus on the nature of justification and the distinctiveness of *a priori* arguments.

However, some responses lacked this clarity. Some candidates presented simplistic or logically flawed arguments, for example rejecting the ontological argument solely on the grounds that cosmological or teleological arguments exist. There was a tendency in some scripts to juxtapose the ontological argument with *a posteriori* alternatives without sufficiently evaluating the ontological argument on its own terms.

There was also limited engagement with more nuanced aspects of the argument, such as the distinction between *in intellectu* and *in re* existence, particularly in relation to the existence of evil or problematic concepts. This limited some candidates' ability to fully engage with the depth of Anselm's reasoning or its implications.

Less successful responses tended to demonstrate a surface level understanding of criticisms, often referencing Gaunilo or Kant without fully grasping the nature of the objections. Some appeared to misunderstand key concepts or did not relate them back to the central issue of justification.

Overall, while many candidates approached the question with confidence and philosophical insight, greater attention to logical structure, precise use of terminology, and critical focus in the response of whether Anselm's ontological argument justifies belief in God would have improved some responses.

A small number of candidates were able to move beyond Gaunilo and Kant by including alternative criticisms from scholars such as Russell or Frege, and some more successful responses also incorporated Plantinga or Malcolm, using them to engage more deeply with the philosophical issues at stake. Where these thinkers were well understood, candidates typically scored highly.

Exemplar 1

		Anselm establishes that by
		definition, God is "that than
		which no greater can be
		conceived", following the Biblical
		description of God. Anselm
		goes on to argue that as
		it is arguably greater to exist
		in the mind and in reality than
		to purely exist in the mind, God
		must - by definition - exist.

Exemplar 1 shows understanding of Anselm's ontological argument but moves little beyond this description. More successful responses were able to explore the implications of the argument rather than presenting the highlights. There was further development of Proslogion 3 later in the script. This, was a Level 4 response.

Question 3*

3* Evaluate the claim that individual religious experiences are a union with a greater power. **[40]**

AO1: This question was generally well answered, with many candidates making effective use of the works of William James to explore whether individual religious experiences can be considered a union with a greater power. Candidates also incorporated scholars such as Swinburne, Otto, and Schleiermacher in support of the statement, while Freud and Feuerbach were often employed in opposition. High Level responses typically demonstrated clear explanation of key terms and concepts, effectively applied to case studies such as the experiences of St Paul, Teresa of Ávila, and Davey Falcus. These examples were used to support structured arguments that remained focused on the question throughout.

However, there were some recurring areas of possible improvement. Some responses included a list of James' four criteria without offering explanation or analysis, and there was little or no reference to the 'fruits' of religious experience—a key element in James' evaluation. In these cases, opportunities to fully develop AO1 material were missed, resulting in lower marks despite, in some cases, stronger evaluation. Some responses also treated the criteria as if they alone were sufficient proof of a genuine union with a greater power, without considering alternative interpretations or challenges to this position.

A minority of responses appeared underprepared for a question on religious experience, despite the breadth of material available. In some cases, responses focused only on describing types of experience rather than addressing the evaluative aspect of the question. At times, flawed logic was evident; for example, arguing that individual religious experiences are not valid because corporate experiences are, rather than evaluating the distinct nature and evidential value of each.

Less successful responses often lacked clear linkage between the material presented and the question being asked. While general discussions of religious experience were common, they did not always relate directly to the idea of union with a greater power, limiting the effectiveness of the argument. To access higher marks, candidates should make sure they are not only explaining relevant ideas clearly but also linking those ideas consistently to the demands of the question. Evaluation should be rooted in well-developed AO1 content and demonstrate a critical understanding of the complexities surrounding religious experience.

AO2: Evaluation in response to this question was generally strong, with many responses demonstrating a sound understanding of the key sides of the debate. Most responses focused appropriately on whether individual religious experiences can be considered a union with a greater power, and many framed their responses by drawing on both supportive and critical perspectives. Those who argued against the statement often cited neuroscience or psychological explanations, while those in support typically relied on case studies, although these were at times handled in a descriptive or superficial manner, limiting the depth of analysis.

Many responses featured effective use of key scholars such as James and Freud, with Swinburne and Feuerbach as addition, with most responses showing an ability to apply these ideas in support or critique of the claim. More developed answers not only demonstrated a good grasp of content but also made clear connections between scholarly views, relevant case studies, and the evaluative demands of the question.

Some responses displayed particularly mature and insightful AO2 thinking. For example, there was thoughtful engagement with Russell's point that personal transformation does not necessarily imply divine encounter, as individuals may also be transformed by fictional experiences. Another sophisticated

line of argument involved critiquing the gendered nature of responses to Teresa of Ávila's experiences, with some recognising the implicit misogyny in the sexualised interpretation of her account, an approach unlikely to be applied to male mystics.

Less successful responses tended to drift away from the question, focusing more broadly on the validity of religious experience rather than directly addressing the idea of a union with a greater power. In such cases, although relevant material was often included, it was not always sufficiently linked to the evaluative task.

To improve responses further, candidates should make sure their evaluation is rooted in well-developed AO1 knowledge, and that their arguments remain focused on the central question. Deeper analysis of examples and engagement with the nuances of scholarly debate will support progression into higher levels of response.

Assessment for learning



William James' ***The Varieties of Religious Experience*** is available as a free PDF. You can use the 'ctrl' + 'f' function in the PDF to find specific parts of the text to be used as gobbets or to find sections quickly. The section on the four marks of mystical experience is short, clear and accessible in this way.

Question 4*

4* 'Falsification successfully shows that religious language has no factual quality.' Discuss. [40]

AO1: There was some confusion regarding the precise meaning of falsification. A common misconception was the idea that falsification meant 'something is true if it is false', rather than the intended meaning that a statement has factual quality if it can, in principle, be falsified. In addition, not all responses made appropriate or effective use of John Wisdom's 'gardener' analogy, despite its central relevance.

Most responses engaged with the parables of Flew, Hare, and Mitchell. Where these were clearly understood and applied to the question, responses tended to achieve marks in the higher levels. However, a notable number of responses misplaced their focus, concentrating instead on Ayer's Verification Principle at the expense of Flew's Falsification Principle. As a result, these responses often deviated from the demands of the question.

Stronger answers demonstrated a clear grasp of the falsification principle itself, often contextualising Flew's ideas in relation to Popper and articulating how these were applied to religious language. Many responses also addressed the broader symposium debate, with Hare's 'bliks' generally more confidently handled than Mitchell's position.

Some responses demonstrated greater familiarity with the historical development of verificationism than with the specific theories themselves, leading to a descriptive rather than analytical approach. More successful responses went beyond mere retelling of the parables and were able to clearly relate them to the scholars' respective views on religious language, maintaining a focus on whether falsification successfully demonstrates that religious language lacks factual content.

Less successful responses tended to show only a superficial understanding of falsification, often repeating the term without demonstrating secure knowledge of its implications. These responses lacked the necessary depth and breadth to progress to higher levels. Candidates should make sure they are confident in the distinction between verification and falsification and are able to accurately apply these principles to questions concerning religious language. A clear understanding of key terminology and theories, supported by focused evaluation, is essential for success in this topic.

AO2: Many responses approached this question descriptively, with a tendency to juxtapose differing perspectives rather than engage in critical analysis. As a result, evaluation was often underdeveloped or missing altogether. While most responses referenced key thinkers, there was frequent reliance on listing viewpoints rather than exploring their implications or relative strengths. This was particularly evident in discussions that drew on other areas of the religious language topic without directly addressing whether falsification demonstrates that religious language lacks factual content.

Mitchell's position was often misunderstood or misapplied, which diminished the AO2 element of several essays. By contrast, Hare's 'paranoid student' example was generally better understood than Mitchell's 'partisan and stranger' analogy. More successful responses were able to demonstrate a secure grasp of the subtle distinctions between cognitive and non-cognitive uses of language, and to apply these distinctions meaningfully in their evaluation.

There were also instances of responses spending considerable time explaining the falsification principle in general, without clearly applying it to the specific focus of the question. More successful responses successfully integrated the views of Hare and/or Mitchell to build arguments either in support of, or in opposition to, the claim that falsification demonstrates religious language has no factual quality.

Less successful responses tended to conflate verification with falsification or drifted into unrelated approaches to religious language, thereby failing to address the question directly. To achieve further success, candidates should aim to develop evaluative points in direct response to the question, showing a clear understanding of both the theory and its application to religious language.

Misconception



The falsification debate is a discussion about whether religious statements are failed scientific hypotheses rather than whether they are 'meaningful'.

Exemplar 2

		At this point one explorer still believes in the undetectable gender while the other questions as to how this belief "differs from an invisible gender or no gender at all". Flew th takes the gender to God and the gender to earth and questions how a belief in something undetectable can be disproven or proved as meaningful if there is
4		no way to dispell the belief. Flew's theory adds strength to falsification's view that religious language has no factual knowledge.

Exemplar 2 shows how important it is to develop the ideas being discussed. The extract shows control of the material and understanding of its application to the question. It was able to achieve Level 5 as the quality continued throughout. Successful responses were able to make the necessary links to the implications of the parables rather than telling the story. It also indicates the importance of positive awarding as the response infers the symposium surrounds 'meaning' rather than whether religious language is a failed scientific hypothesis without factual content.

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