
GCSE

RELIGIOUS STUDIES A

Paper 2B Thematic studies (including textual studies)
Report on the Examination

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General comments

This was the first examination for this new specification. One or two schools and colleges did not use the correct entry code for their students and in a few cases some students did not realise that they were only supposed to answer two of the themes in Section A along with the textual studies from Mark's Gospel in Section B. Some schools and colleges appeared to have taught their students to answer the compulsory Section B (Themes G and H (Questions 07 and 08) on St Mark's Gospel) first. This seemed to work quite well with the result that, in those cases, there were very few rubric errors. It was very pleasing to see that the questions proved to be accessible to nearly all the students and some of the answers were outstanding. Examiners reported that most were well prepared and were able to demonstrate good knowledge and use a wide range of quotations from sources of authority. Some, however, took some of the quotations out of context and tried to use them inappropriately.

The handwriting of a minority proved to be a challenge for examiners as some scripts were extremely difficult to read and schools and colleges are reminded that there are procedures which allow students to use a word processor or an amanuensis.

A small number did attempt to answer more questions than they were required to do. Where this occurred, most of the answers lacked depth and many may well have achieved higher marks if they had concentrated on four questions as required by the examination. A few attempted to answer the questions completely out of order and this often resulted in one or more questions not being attempted which obviously affected the final mark. This wasn't so much of a problem if the twelve mark questions were answered first and then the other parts in order, although most appeared to run out of time approaching the paper in this way. It is recommended to answer the questions in the order which they are set but ensuring that the length of the response is appropriate for the number of marks which are available. For example, a minority are writing far too much for the two mark questions and far too little for the final twelve mark part.

Those who named the specific religions they were writing about in the longer answers invariably provided stronger responses than those who just generalised by saying 'religious believers'. Many were able to name the Christian denomination about which they were writing. Many responses said that 'Christians believe', implying that all Christians believe a certain thing. It would have been much more accurate in most instances to have said that '*some* Christians believe' etc. Even if it is a view of a relatively small number of believers, it can then be credited despite it not being the majority belief.

A minority explained atheist or humanist beliefs for the four or five mark questions. These beliefs do not qualify as religious beliefs for these questions and consequently could not be credited. Non-religious arguments are valid for all the twelve mark AO2 themes questions (see the bullet point in each question stating that answers 'may refer to non-religious arguments').

Some students when answering Themes G and H brought in material for some questions which is found in one of the other gospels and not in Mark. As these themes are based on St Mark's Gospel, where students did this, responses could not be credited.

The twelve mark questions appeared to be the greatest challenge for many students. Many responses were totally written in the style of an AO1 type answer eg 'Christians teach...' As a result such responses lacked the evaluation and judgement which was required for the highest levels. The bullet points included in the question are there to assist the students with their response and the emphasis is on giving and referring to arguments. It is the reasoning which is

vitaly important and this is stressed by the need for a justified conclusion. Some answers also failed to focus fully on the statement which was made and that had an impact on the mark which could be awarded. Many answers had lots of points on either side of the argument but this tended to make the response rather disjointed with little development. Stronger answers concentrated on fewer points but developed the arguments more substantially.

Section A

Theme A: Relationships and Families

This was a popular theme which was answered by about fifty percent of the students who entered this exam.

Question 01.1

Most made an excellent start to this section as the first question was well answered which the vast majority obtaining the mark. A few did confuse conception with contraception.

Question 01.2

Most responses were awarded the maximum two marks for this question about same-sex marriage. Many responses referred to two Christian attitudes to same-sex marriage whereas others used one Christian belief and a second one from one of the other main religions. Some spent far too long validating the religions view point, writing much more than the two marks worth.

Question 01.3

Most responses outlined the traditional role of men and women in their religion and contrasted it with more modern interpretations. Some referred to St Paul's teaching concerning women being silent in church and only men having the main leadership roles in the Roman Catholic Church. This was contrasted with denominations like the Methodists where men and women have had leadership roles for many years. Others wrote about more secular roles eg the husband being the bread winner and the wife looking after the home and family. A number of responses wrote solely about equality rather than roles, which affected the mark which could be awarded – it was credited, but at a lower level, as it was only rarely linked to roles.

Question 01.4

There were some excellent answers including quotes from sacred writings and sources of authority. Many wrote about the Roman Catholic response to divorce and contrasted it with either another Christian denomination or a different religion eg Islam. A number of responses focussed on the process of divorce in Islam or Judaism although the question was about attitudes to divorce itself. More than half of responses achieved four or five marks for this question.

Question 01.5

Several responses concentrated on discussing adultery, contraception, church views of cohabitation and many referred to sex before marriage as adultery. Where responses focused on the statement, the answers were generally good. This question brought a wide range of marks for the responses with nearly half reaching levels three or four.

Theme B: Religion and Life

This was the second most popular theme in Section A and was generally very well answered.

Question 02.1

The vast majority scored the mark for this question although a few thought the answer was ‘quality of life.’

Question 02.2

Although three quarters of the responses obtained the two marks, a number used the teaching from the Ten Commandments ‘Do not kill’ – this does not relate to animals, the original language is applicable only to humans. There was a large variety of answers including reference to stewardship, God’s creation, vegetarianism, cruelty to animals, health reasons, sacred animals etc.

Question 02.3

The full range of marks was awarded for this question. Some appeared to find it difficult to come up with a detailed contrasting religious belief about euthanasia. Some answers for this question were extensive and many obtained all four marks. The difference between passive and active euthanasia was well known.

Question 02.4

This question was well answered with many getting maximum marks. It was the most well answered of the five mark questions although some did not relate the beliefs to actions in this life. Most students wrote about Christian and Muslim beliefs concerning Judgement Day and explained how actions in this life affected whether the departed ended up in heaven (paradise) or hell. Those who chose to answer from one of the Eastern Faiths nearly all referred to how a person’s actions affected their karma.

Question 02.5

Many responses focused on attitudes to the environment, rather than the statement’s focus which was whether or not it is possible to stop abuse of the environment. Many – particularly weaker responses – seemed unaware of scales of ‘abuse’ so just wrote about littering. These were credited but others explained the need for recycling, saving power and the need for renewables. There were good references to sacred writing and links made to stewardship and creation.

Theme C: The Existence of God and revelation

This was the second least popular theme in Section A and it was generally answered either extremely successfully or not very successfully.

Question 03.1

Most students selected the correct option although a minority confused ‘omnipotent’ with ‘omniscient’.

Question 03.2

This was the most well answered question in this section. Most responses achieved the two marks. The usual answers about why some people do not believe in God centred on the existence of evil, the big bang theory, lack of proof that there is a god, unanswered prayers and the presence of suffering in the world.

Question 03.3

Both strengths and weaknesses were worthy of credit in this answer. Some students knew the argument but not its strengths or weaknesses as required by the specification, so could only repeat the argument. Some responses incorrectly focused on the Design argument and several students did not attempt the question at all.

Question 03.4

This was by far the least well answered of the five mark questions although there were some very good answers. Several appeared to not understand 'the divine', despite a number of references to it in the specification under the heading 'The nature of the divine and revelation', and so their answers were very vague. Nearly a quarter of the students choosing this Theme did not attempt an answer.

Question 03.5

It was really great to see some superb answers to this question although the point of view agreeing with this statement was often limited to it being an impossible contradiction. Those who understood the question found no difficulty in bringing in lots of references to religious teachings eg about the Trinity, Holy Spirit, the temple of God and how God cannot be contained by the earth or heavens.

Theme D: Religion, peace and conflict

This was the most popular theme in Section A and on the whole was answered well.

Question 04.1

There was some confusion with 'to reform', but most students selected the correct answer.

Question 04.2

A wide variety of correct answers were given to why many religious believers are against violent protest. Very few responses were not awarded marks on this question.

Question 04.3

Students appeared to find the fact that this was a contrast question challenging. Some appeared to believe that some religions are happy to use nuclear weapons to indiscriminately wipe out the enemy including women and children. However, many responses applied the Just War principles and lesser Jihad rules or wrote about belief in pacifism and contrasted this with the need to keep the peace by having a deterrent.

Question 04.4

This was generally a well answered question, with most students able to include a source of authority against acts of terrorism. Some focussed on Islam and made the point that ISIS type terrorism is an abomination to the Muslim faith. Answers commonly focused on ‘wrong to kill’ and ‘wrong to make innocent people scared’.

Question 04.5

Although there were many excellent answers, some often wrote a response essentially about whether war is okay or not rather than answering the statement. Whilst this gained credit, it was limited. A majority of responses argued whether war did or did not solve problems, with a lesser number arguing that war solved problems versus other options. Many recognized that war should be a last option after other solutions had failed. Many used Holy/Just War as a good solution to problems but often the key words in the statement, ‘solve problems between countries’ and ‘best way’, were ignored.

Theme E: Religion, crime and punishment

This was the third least popular theme in Section A and many students scored high marks.

Question 05.1

Most students knew that forgiveness is not an aim of punishment.

Question 05.2

There were many different responses to the causes of crime with most achieving full marks. A small minority mainly gave examples of crimes instead of the causes. The most popular correct answers included poverty, addiction, mental illness, hate and greed.

Question 05.3

This question was generally well answered. Just a few tried to do contrasting reasons for and against community service by arguing how it is or it isn’t a good punishment, although the question was about similarities. However most used arguments included in the mark scheme. The majority of responses argued that it is a good punishment eg it acts as a deterrent, is less costly than sending people to prison, is suitable for less serious crimes, helps the criminal to think about their crime, helps to bring reformation and pay back to the community. Those that thought it was not a suitable punishment used reasons such as the punishment is too soft, it doesn’t bring reform that a tougher punishment might, as criminals are not locked up they may continue with further crime or often the schemes are not well run.

Question 05.4

Hate crime seemed in many incidents to translate to killing people. Responses could argue well from a Christian view of pacifism with ‘love thy neighbour’ often being used and that people are ‘made in the image of God.’ Usually development of the religious view gained responses the full marks.

Question 05.5

This question about the death penalty was the best answered of the 12 mark questions on the paper. Students were able to use a plethora of arguments and teachings to support and challenge the statement. Good reference was made to sacred writings and religious teachings.

Theme F: Religion, human rights and social justice

This was the least popular theme in Section A and the answers were of a mixed standard.

Question 06.1

Most students selected the correct option for this question.

Question 06.2

This question was not as well answered as the other two mark questions on the paper. Often it wasn't clear from the answers whether or not the students understood what is meant by 'social justice'.

Question 06.3

There were many excellent answers often linked to giving tithes or paying zakat. Many responses quoted 'love thy neighbour', the Parable of the Sheep and Goats or 'the love of money is the root of all evil.' Some ignored the 'responsibilities' of wealth which affected the marks which could be awarded. In these cases, the development of points was often limited to very broad generalisations about helping the poor.

Question 06.4

This was one of the most well answered of the five mark questions. Most were able to explain religious beliefs that show why racial discrimination is wrong and quoted 'People should seek to develop metta (loving kindness)', 'love thy neighbour', the Parable of the Good Samaritan', 'we are made in the image of God', 'we are equal like the teeth of a comb' etc.

Question 06.5

This question invited a wide range of responses. Many used the United Nations Human Rights and the Ten Commandments in their answers. Many responses made the point of not everyone is religious, but then missed the point that the question was about following principles, which anyone can do. There were some outstanding, well-argued responses.

Section B**Theme G: St Mark's Gospel: the life of Jesus**

This was the first of the compulsory themes for Section B

Question 07.1

Most students who answered this question gave the correct answer.

Question 07.2

This question was generally well answered but some responses included references to other Gospel versions of the baptism of Jesus. Some wrote about John the Baptist instead of concentrating on the ways in which the baptism showed Jesus as the Son of God.

Question 07.3

Most were able to give contrasting explanations for the empty tomb of Jesus but some included material from the other Synoptic Gospels which could not be credited eg Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene.

Question 07.4

Some responses muddled the events at Caesarea Philippi with the Transfiguration of Jesus. Others just included general comments on Jesus and his disciples. The strongest answers referred closely to the text and explained why the conversation which took place is important to Christians.

Question 07.5

There were some excellent answers to this question. It provided an opportunity to discuss whether the miracles proved that Jesus was Messiah. The focus of the question was not so much whether the miracles happened or whether Mark's Gospel is a reliable source of evidence although some answers concentrated on these points. The strongest answers looked at what in Mark's Gospel pointed towards Jesus' messianic nature eg the voice from heaven at the baptism and Transfiguration, the statement of the Centurion etc.

Theme H: St Mark's Gospel as a source of religious, moral and spiritual truths

This theme was not as well answered as Theme G. Possibly this was the result of students running out of time.

Question 08.1

Students generally gave the correct response to this question.

Question 08.2

Those that knew this incident generally achieved marks but it appeared not all recognised the incident of Jesus and the children.

Question 08.3

This question invited a wide range of responses as it was about contrasting ways in which Christians can help those who are disregarded by society. There was no requirement to parallel them to Jesus' actions.

Question 08.4

This is a good example of where responses which focussed on the key word in the question, 'cost', did well. Credit could not be awarded to responses which instead identified the rewards of discipleship.

Question 08.5

This question really differentiated. Some just wrote everything they knew about the Kingdom of God. A significant minority quoted the Lord's Prayer – this is not Markan tradition. The strongest answers were those which identified that the Kingdom of God was potentially present and future. Reference to key parables from Mark helped many answers reach the top levels eg the mustard seed, the sower.

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG)

An extra three marks were available for SPaG. Up to three marks were awarded for each of the twelve mark AO2 questions and the best mark given the counted to the total mark.

The quality of the spelling, punctuation and grammar was generally very good this year. Many students were able to spell and use technical terms appropriately. However, 'believe' was often spelt as 'belive' and some students were unable to spell 'conclusion'. Some wrote incredibly long sentences. Commas and capital letters were sometimes left out and/or put in the wrong places.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.