

GCSE (9-1)

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

J625

For first teaching in 2016

J625/04 Summer 2019 series

Version 1

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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. 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 can be downloaded from OCR.

Assessment structure change

Following feedback from teachers and examiners, we are replacing the 6-mark combined assessment objective questions in GCSE Religious Studies J625. These changes will make our assessment more straightforward for students, teachers and examiners. We have also made a minor change to a level of response descriptor in the mark scheme. These changes will be introduced for the 2020 exam series.

What has changed?

- For Components 01–05 (Beliefs and teachings and Practices) the 6-mark question which was previously assessed using a combination of AO1 and AO2, is being replaced by a 6-mark question which will be assessed using **AO1 only**.
- For Components 06–10 (the religion, philosophy and ethics papers) there are two 6-mark questions. One will continue to be assessed using AO1, and the other which previously used a combination of AO1 and AO2, will now be assessed using **AO2 only**.
- In our levels of response descriptors we have changed 'adequate but underdeveloped' to 'satisfactory'.
- We **haven't** changed 15 mark questions which are assessed using a combination of AO1 and AO2, or made any changes to the specification content.

How are we supporting you?

We have updated the sample assessment materials to reflect these changes for 'Christianity Beliefs and teachings and Practices', 'Religion, philosophy and ethics in the modern world from a Christian perspective', so you can see what our new question papers and mark schemes will look like. These can be found under the assessment tab on the GCSE Religious Studies qualification pages. We will update the sample assessment materials for the remaining components ready for teaching in September 2019.

In September we are hosting a webinar which will add further clarification to this update, and answer any questions which this might raise. Look out for more information on how to book your space on this in the next few weeks.

In September we will also provide a candidate exemplar resource, which will provide more details about these changes to help your students become familiar with the knowledge and skills needed in our qualification.

If you would like further information please contact the Religious Studies Subject Advisor on 01223 553998 or email religious.studies@ocr.org.uk.

Paper 4 series overview

J625-04 is the GCSE Religious Studies paper that focuses on beliefs, teachings and practices in Buddhism. It is marked out of 63 with each of the two questions marked out of 30 with an additional 3 marks for spelling, grammar and punctuation (SPaG) available on Question 1. All parts of all questions are compulsory.

Candidates are assessed on AO1 (knowledge and understanding) on parts a-c on each paper while on parts d-e they are assessed on a combination of AO1 and AO2 (analysis and evaluation).

Half of the 30 marks available for each question (excluding the 3 SPaG marks) are in part e and candidates therefore need to be well prepared for this in order to perform well in the question. In order to gain good marks in part e questions candidates need to make references to sources of wisdom and authority such as the teachings of the Buddha or to figures who are respected within the religion such as the Dalai Lama. They also need to discuss the similarities and differences that exist within Buddhism as these are related to the issues raised by the question (in this case the comparative importance of wisdom and compassion, and of different festivals.) Candidates should identify where ideas have universal or near-universal importance to Buddhists and where there are significant differences. These differences could be between different schools of Buddhism (Mahayana, Theravada, Pure Land etc.), between Buddhists in different countries, between lay and monastic Buddhists or within other groups such as rural/urban Buddhists or different genders. Candidates should also evaluate the arguments they present rather than simply stating different arguments without further comment. For example, candidates could suggest a counter argument to the one they have just given or suggest why an argument is weak or strong.

On the whole, candidates appear to have been well prepared for this paper and the level of performance was generally good. Most of the responses suggested that candidates had good knowledge and understanding of Buddhism and that they were able to discuss issues arising from their knowledge.

Most, if not all candidates were able to attempt both questions and to finish within the time allowed. As both questions were compulsory there were no rubric errors except for a very small number of candidates failing to answer all parts of all questions. Where candidates did not attempt a question, this tended to be one or other of the part d questions although there was also a very small minority who did not attempt the part e.

Most candidates had a reasonable level of technical and specialist vocabulary, which they were able to use accurately.

Candidates who performed well on this paper	Candidates who did not perform well on this paper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated a sound knowledge of Buddhist beliefs, teachings and practices • Used Buddhist terminology confidently and accurately • Could explain the importance and significance of the issues they were writing about • Could relate the different topics and ideas they had studied to each other confidently, giving them a holistic view of Buddhism • Offered arguments and counter arguments in part e questions so that the response was integrated and evaluative • Gave a clear conclusion to part e questions supported with evidence and reasoned judgement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not demonstrate sound knowledge and understanding • Often had some specialist vocabulary but were not confident in using it and often did not understand what particular words meant. • Did not understand the importance or significance of the issues they were writing about • Did not understand how issues fitted into a wider understanding of Buddhism • Stated arguments for and against the stimulus with no further comment or understanding of how the different arguments related to each other • Did not offer a clear conclusion to part e questions.

Question 1 (a)

1 (a) Describe **one** important event in the early life of the Buddha.

.....

 [3]

Most candidates gained full marks on this question, with the majority referring to the Four Sights and also going on to explain why this was significant or important. Some candidates also referred to the miraculous nature of the birth of the Buddha or to the prophecy concerning his two possible destinies. All of these were acceptable responses. Some gained only 2 marks because they named the Four Sights and what they were but offered no further comment or development beyond this. Where candidates did not gain any marks, it was generally because they referenced an event that does not belong to the early life of the Buddha (such as his enlightenment) or because they wrote about something that could not be described as an event, such as his teachings on the Four Noble Truths.

Question 1 (b)

(b) Describe **one** Buddhist belief about nibbana.

.....

 [3]

Most candidates were able to gain marks here. Many referred to nibbana as a place analogous to heaven in Christianity where people are rewarded after death, and this tended to be given, but rarely to gain full marks. Better responses referred to nibbana as a state of mind or being, or as the state of being extinguished. Some suggested that what was extinguished was suffering or the Three Poisons. Many referred to nibbana as the end of or escape from samsara and from suffering. The question asks for one Buddhist belief about nibbana and so it had to be clear that what the candidate had offered was developments or exemplification of a single idea rather than the beginning of a second idea or belief in order for full marks to be given.

There were a few candidates who clearly did not know what nibbana was and guessed at it being a place, a person or a teaching of the Buddha, but these were very much in the minority.

Exemplar 1

One Buddhist belief about nibbana is that in order to gain nibbana, you have to become a monk or a ~~or a nun~~ in order to ~~you~~ become an arhat and gain enlightenment. They believe Nibbana happens in two stages.

The candidate offers the belief that only monks can become enlightened (1 mark) and then develops this with the link between monks, arhats and enlightenment (2 marks). However, the next point, that enlightenment occurs in two stages, while correct for some Buddhists, is an entirely new idea and so cannot be given.

Question 1 (c)

(c) State **three** of the five aggregates (khandas).

.....

 [3]

This was a question to which candidates either did or did not know the answers. Most candidates gained 3 marks. Those that did not, generally did not gain any marks at all, offering instead either the Three Refuges or three of the Five Precepts. Occasionally they gave three of the Ten Commandments. A few correctly identified two of the aggregates but included dhamma or kamma as a third.

Question 1 (d)

(d) Explain the importance of Bodhisattvas.

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.....

[6]

Some candidates clearly did not know what Bodhisattvas were and guessed that they were teachings of the Buddha or places of pilgrimage and therefore guessed that they were important although they couldn't say why. There were also a number of candidates who did not attempt this question. These were, however, in the minority and most candidates gained at least 4 out of the 6 available marks. The more basic responses tended to say that Bodhisattvas delay their own enlightenment in order to help others to reach it, saying that this was through teaching, advice or example, and suggesting that they were important as they meant more people were able to become enlightened. Some correctly suggested that this was an idea connected with Mahayana Buddhism and that it showed compassion. Stronger responses talked about the Bodhisattva vow. Some of the strongest responses talked about two types of Bodhisattva and gave examples of these. They suggested that help from them could be either practical or more spiritual and that Bodhisattvas could be the object of meditation or contemplation with a view to developing their qualities and that their importance lay in this. Some candidates also suggested that Bodhisattvas had no particular importance outside the Mahayana tradition.

Question 1 (e)

(e) 'Wisdom is more important than compassion.'

Discuss this statement. In your answer, you should:

- Analyse and evaluate the importance of points of view, referring to common and divergent views within Buddhism
- Refer to sources of wisdom and authority.

[15]

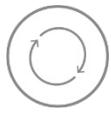
 Spelling, punctuation and grammar [3]

Candidates generally managed this question well, often dealing with complex ideas and teachings with clarity and evident understanding. Candidates were required to make some reference to sources of wisdom and authority in order to move out of Level 1 at AO1 and almost all candidates did this, by referring to teachings of the Buddha. Many suggested that wisdom is specifically included in the eightfold path and in overcoming ignorance which is one of the Three Poisons. Some suggested, wrongly, that compassion is not specifically required or mentioned in Buddhist teaching, although some saw it as apparent in the Buddha's decision to stay on earth and teach after he had achieved enlightenment.

Candidates were required to refer to different views within Buddhism in order to move out of Level 1 at AO2 and in this they were less successful. Some gave well-reasoned discussion based on logic and the teachings of the Buddha but did nothing to suggest that different groups of Buddhists might have different views and so were unable to move beyond Level 1. Different groups could include different traditions such as Mahayana, Theravada or Pure Land Buddhists, or different social groups such as lay or monastic Buddhists or men and women.

Many candidates suggested that Compassion was more important in Mahayana Buddhism, compared to Theravada because of the Bodhisattva tradition of seeking enlightenment on behalf of all beings and not simply oneself. Many took this point further than was reasonable, however, suggesting that compassion has no importance in Theravada Buddhism, or is actively discouraged as it could lead to attachment. This is not the case.

The most successful responses analysed and criticised the arguments they made as they went along, suggesting their strengths and weaknesses and how they could be criticised or contradicted by other teachings or arguments.

	Misconception	A number of candidates seemed to think that Theravada Buddhism is strict while Mahayana is more liberal or 'laid back'. Some also thought that while compassion is central to Mahayana Buddhism, it is not a part of Theravada understanding and might actually be discouraged. Both of these reflect a wrong understanding of the differences between the two schools.
	AfL	<p>Some candidates seemed to be using a template to respond to part e questions that used arguments from different individuals ('The Buddha might say X, the Buddha's mother might say Y, a Christian might say Z') These responses tended to be quite weak, not least because the candidate was generally guessing what each might say, based on no real knowledge. Also, as a rule, there was no direct relevance to the question (particularly when the candidate was referring to Christians or Atheists).</p> <p>While the use of templates for part e questions can be useful in some circumstances, it can also limit the mark a candidate can achieve if it prevents them from genuinely engaging with the question and the issues it raises. 'Buddha would say X, Buddha's mother would say Y, a Christian would say Z' type templates are not successful and are more of a hindrance than a help to the candidate.</p>

Exemplar 2

The diamond sutra represents wisdom that cuts through the ignorance. The Vaishnava Buddhists belief believe that by having knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, knowing and learning views one can gain weak enlightenment. This is a strong argument as many buddhists say that the wisdom must be used in useful/skilful way. The wisdom should 'create conditions in which other people flourish' but wisdom tends to just be a fact.

The candidate has offered an argument that the diamond sutra suggests that wisdom can lead to enlightenment, but then offers a counterargument that wisdom is more than knowledge of facts but must have practical application to create conditions for others to achieve enlightenment. The response continues in the vein, using argument and counter argument. This is evidence of genuine evaluation of the statement rather than presenting arguments for and against the statement but not engaging in them critically. While 'This is a weak argument because' is often not successful (often the reason the candidate suggests is actually a completely new point and not an explanation for why the argument is weak) on this occasion the candidate has genuinely evaluated the argument. The response received full marks at AO1 3 AO2 12.

Question 2 (a)

2 (a) Describe **one** feature of a Buddhist temple.

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..... [3]

Most candidates had no difficulty with this question. Common responses included rupas, gompas, shrines ('altar' was accepted) and stupas. Candidates could not gain more than 1 mark for 'stupa' unless it was clear that they understood what was particular about a stupa, although the vast majority did. Things that might be found in a temple, but which are not a fixed or permanent part of it (such as flowers or incense) were not given. The bodhi tree often found in the grounds of a temple was an acceptable response.

Question 2 (b)

(b) State **three** offerings that might be made at a Buddhist shrine.

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.....
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.....
.....
..... [3]

Most candidates gained full marks on this question with no difficulty. The few that did not either repeated a response using slightly different words (e.g. 'incense' and 'joss stick') or included something that might be found in a temple, but which is not actually an offering, such as mala beads or Buddha rupas. Responses such as music and puja were accepted.

Question 2 (c)

(c) Describe the role of the monastic sangha.

.....

 [3]

Some candidates appeared to struggle with this question. The most common difficulty was over the word 'role'. Most could describe what the monastic sangha was, but some suggested that they were 'very strict' Buddhists or Buddhists focused entirely on enlightenment. The most successful responses tended to describe the relationship between the monastic and lay communities, suggesting that the role of the monastic sangha was to teach and educate the lay community and to provide them with spiritual services such as sermons and leading mediation, as well as to allow the lay community to gain merit by accepting their donations of food, money and robes.

Candidates who understood the monastic sangha exclusively in terms of a physical building gained no credit.

Question 2 (d)

(d) Explain the importance of the main customs practised at Vassa/Rain Retreat.

.....

 [6]

This was the question that candidates were most likely to omit, and it was also one that many struggled to gain more than basic marks on. Some responses were very general and, as the candidates clearly did not know what Vassa is, they gave very general responses about Buddhist practice in general, such as mediation or puja and suggested reasons why these might be important to Buddhists. Others talked generally about 'retreats' as they might be experienced in the west, again with limited success.

Better responses gave specific information on Vassa, and often concentrated on the relationship between the lay and monastic sangha on these occasions, and also on the opportunity for the monastic sangha to reflect on their shortcomings.

Question 2 (e)

(e)* 'Wesak is the most important Buddhist festival.'

Discuss this statement. In your answer, you should:

- Analyse and evaluate the importance of points of view, referring to common and divergent views within Buddhism
- Refer to sources of wisdom and authority.

[15]

Candidates were often less successful here than they were with 1e. Many were aware that Wesak celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha, and wrote about why these were important, they often included little or nothing about the festival itself, how it is celebrated and why this might be important to Buddhists. Knowledge actually tended to be better when describing other festivals such as Obon.

Again, candidates needed to show awareness of different ideas from different groups within Buddhism, which here could also include practice in different countries and the best responses did this very well. Many of the better responses also pointed out that one of the strongest arguments for the importance of Wesak is that it is practiced by all schools of Buddhism.

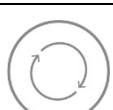
Some suggested that festivals in general were less important to the monastic sangha as they are not directly concerned with attaining nibbana.

Most successful responses

- Wrote about Wesak itself rather than focussing on the birth or enlightenment of the Buddha exclusively
- Offered reasons for the importance of the different festivals rather than just describing them
- Explained how Wesak is celebrated in different countries by different Buddhist schools
- Offered counterarguments throughout and a clearly reasoned conclusion

Least successful responses

- Wrote about the importance of the enlightenment or birth of the Buddha to Buddhism rather than focussing on the festival itself
- Gave descriptions of different festivals and sometimes which Buddhist school was associated with them but without discussing their importance
- Made little or no reference to different views and divisions within Buddhism, or to sources of wisdom and authority such as the teachings of the Buddha
- Used inappropriate templates leading to simplistic responses that were not sufficiently focused on the question.



AfL

As with 1e, templates tended to be unsuccessful and the best responses were those that offered argument and counterargument throughout the response finishing with a reasoned conclusion.

Exemplar 3

Buddha would disagree with this quote and state everything with importance should be equal. This is because he would claim that valuing something more than something else could potentially trigger craving which will prevent you from reaching nirvana.

This candidate has used a template that suggests the views of different figures within Buddhism. While this could be a source of authority (as the Buddha) in fact the candidate is guessing in order to make their response fit the template they have been given and the paragraph is nearly meaningless. The candidate goes on in the next paragraph to say 'Mara, a demon, would say...'. Templates such as this are not helpful and can actually limit the candidates' achievement.

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