



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

**GCSE
RELIGIOUS STUDIES – UNIT 1:
CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM
3120UE0-1**

SUMMER 2023

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Unit	Page
Unit 1 Christianity	1
Unit 1 Buddhism	3
Unit 1 Philosophy	6

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

GCSE

Summer 2023

UNIT 1 CHRISTIANITY

General Comments

The paper proved accessible to candidates and the full range of marks were awarded across the paper. Some candidates did not attempt the 'describe' question. However, there was a range of knowledge of Christianity demonstrated in this examination, particularly in the question about beliefs about God. There was evidence of candidates fully engaging with the demands of the evaluation question.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Q.1 (a) What do Christians mean by 'Divine Command'?

Most candidates were able to give a definition of the key concept or some form of a definition of the key concept. When candidates gained full marks, they were able to define 'Divine Command' as something God commands, with some development.

(b) Describe how Christians have been persecuted in the modern world.

Responses to this were varied and unfortunately some candidates did not attempt the question. Some candidates referred to Christians being persecuted because of their beliefs on certain issues, such as abortion and homosexuality. However, when candidates did respond to the question appropriately, they were able to provide examples of how Christians have been persecuted.

(c) Explain Christian beliefs about God.

There were some excellent responses on Christian beliefs about God. Candidates were able to use religious language, extensively, accurately, and appropriately to explain the points they had made. However, some candidates wrote a list, without any explanation. When this happened, the responses included a brief description without any explanation and therefore, candidates were unable to achieve the higher bands.

(d) Forgiveness is the most important teaching in Christianity.

There were a range of responses to this question. Some candidates did not fully engage with forgiveness being the 'most important' teaching and wrote about Christian teachings on forgiveness in general. As a result, they did not achieve the higher bands. The more able candidates were able to fully analyse and evaluate the importance of forgiveness and were able to provide alternative teachings. Many candidates referred to 'love thy neighbour' and stewardship as an alternative.

Summary of key points

It is important that candidates understand the demands of the questions and use religious language appropriately. Ensure candidates are fully prepared for coverage of the whole specification. For the 'explain' questions, it is important that candidates give a detailed explanation for the points that they make. In the evaluation responses, it is important that candidates fully engage with the demands of the statement. Linking points made, to the statement, ensures that candidates are more evaluative in their response. The use of connectives also helps candidates to structure and unpack arguments.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

GCSE

Summer 2023

UNIT 1 BUDDHISM

General Comments

The exam was accessible, with appropriate coverage from the specification. The demand was comparable to previous papers, and the full range of marks were awarded across the questions. Generally, candidates showed good knowledge and understanding of the main areas of Buddhism, and it was pleasing to see improvements in the way that arguments were evaluated and how judgements were made in the (d) answer. The Advanced Information enabled most candidates to be prepared for the themes of the (d) question and most were able to produce answers ranging from satisfactory to excellent.

This year it was noticeable how many candidates were unable to use Buddhist key terms in the (b), (c) and (d) answers, however they were aware of the English translations (e.g. impermanence rather than *anicca*). Few candidates made use of quotes, or referred to sources of authority, beyond Theravada and Mahayana.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Q.2 (a) What do Buddhists mean by 'dukkha'?

Most answers showed a thorough understanding of the *dukkha*; others were partially correct in referring to *dukkha* as 'pain', 'caused by *tan ha*' or 'one of the Four Noble Truths'. It was disappointing that many candidates were not able to answer this question - key terms, once learned, can be used across the answers.

(b) Describe ways in which Buddhists practice *samatha* meditation.

The better descriptions focused on what Buddhists **do** when preparing for and practicing *samatha* meditation, i.e., the positions taken, focusing on an object, communal or solitary practice at home or in a place of worship. Some candidates confused *samatha* with other forms of meditation, such as *vipassana* and *mettabhavana*; despite there being some common practices, these answers were unable to move to the higher bands as they lacked specific details and awareness of *samatha* meditation. A number of candidates seemed unaware of the skill demanded in this question so explained the importance of *samatha* meditation rather than describing 'how' it is practiced.

(c) Explain why the Four Sights were important in the Buddha's life.

Overall, this question was answered well. Candidates answered in different ways: some looked at each of the Four Sights in turn, explaining the importance of each; others looked at the Four Sights as a whole and explained more generally. Either approach was acceptable, allowing candidates to access the top bands. The stronger answers recognised that the Four Sights were a turning point in the Buddha's life, leading to him questioning his previous existence, his Renunciation, following the Middle Way, and the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. More basic answers often only stated that the Four Sights made Buddha realise that he would get old, sick, and die. Some candidates described the Buddha's journey outside the palace and each of the Four Sights rather than explain the reasons why they are important. It is important that candidates are prepared for the different skills and that they read the questions carefully. A minority of candidates answered with reference to the Four Noble Truths, rather than the Four Sights - possibly due to misreading the question. It was disappointing to see so few candidates using relevant Buddhist terms (i.e., anicca, anatta, dukkha).

(d) "Kathina is the most important festival for Buddhists."

This question was looking for a discussion of whether Kathina is the most important festival, so examiners were looking for some analysis of what happens at Kathina and why this might be more important than other festivals. The better answers kept the focus on the statement and were able to consider why other festivals (i.e., Wesak and/or Parinirvana Day and/or Vassa) might also be important. These answers often showed a synoptic view of the Specification by referring to the life of the Buddha, the role of the Sangha, dharma, dana, karma, rebirth, samsara, nirvana. It was pleasing to see some candidates refer to Theravada and Mahayana, showing awareness that different Buddhists might have different reasons why each festival might be 'most' important; including these sources of authority often helped candidates move up the marking bands.

Most responses showed good knowledge of Kathina, Wesak, and/or Parinirvana Day although some candidates did confuse their practices and meanings. Candidates were generally able to explain why each festival was important, but to move into the higher bands they needed to address why they might be considered most important. This year, it was pleasing to see more candidates making judgements of the relative strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. Stronger responses made extensive and appropriate use of specialist language e.g., lay people, monks, dharma, karma, nirvana, dukkha, dana. Weaker responses often lacked focus on the question and sometimes got side-tracked by descriptions of how each festival might be celebrated. Some candidates had a thorough knowledge of the festivals but often failed to move out of the lower bands as they did not answer this question and made little or no attempt to analyse and evaluate. Again, candidates need to be aware of the skill demanded by each question and use their knowledge and understanding to back up any arguments or viewpoints they put forward. Some candidates included reference to what Christians and non-religious people might think about the statement. This was not required and was not included in the instructions for this question. Despite not being necessary, such responses that did make sense were credited. Most, however, were not appropriate.

Summary of key points

- Schools are to be commended for all their hard work to prepare candidates for this exam, especially regarding the improvements in the way that (d) questions were answered.
- Candidates need to be aware of (and stick to) the skills required for each question: description in (b) questions, explaining in (c) questions and analysing and evaluating in (d) questions.
- Candidates need to be able to use religious/specialist language accurately and appropriately; learning the Buddhist key terms will help the overall quality of their answers.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Summer 2023

UNIT 1 PHILOSOPHY

General Comments

Questions 3 and 4 - Religious responses to Philosophical Themes

The paper proved to be accessible to candidates and the full range of band descriptors and marks were awarded across the paper. This section of the paper (Q3 and Q4) required candidates to answer some questions from two perspectives or select the religious perspective they wished to write about, namely Christianity and a second religious tradition. At times, there was a noticeable difference in the quality of the responses from different religions when put side by side. Candidates sometimes confused ideas between the two religious traditions or tended to favour one more than the other, where their understanding of the religion and its traditions/beliefs was shown to be stronger. This was more noticeable in (c) responses.

Many candidates appeared confident in their use of key terminology in this section of the paper and were able to offer insight and understanding into the meaning of philosophical terms. It was also pleasing to note across the paper in Q3 and Q4, an increased use of reference to sources of wisdom and authority and in some cases, successful interpretation of their meaning or recognition of diversity of religious views in their interpretation. Candidates were also required in Q3(d) to include reference to non-religious traditions and many successfully did, although at times, it seemed views were underdeveloped or tokenistic rather than candidates having a developed understanding of these worldviews. Some candidates struggled to show specific understanding of the key elements of the demands of each question style; for example, distinguishing between a (b) question where description is required and a (c) question where explanation is required. It was also concerning to see that a number of candidates chose not to attempt some questions or gave very brief and underdeveloped responses.

The provision of 'Summer 2023 advanced information' proved to be very useful to candidates in their revision and preparing for the highest tariff AO2 questions in this section of the paper. These were answered more fully with many candidates giving detailed extended writing responses.

Comments on individual questions/sections

PART B - Issues of Life and Death

Q.3 (a) What is meant by 'sanctity of life'?

Most candidates were able to give a clear and accurate definition of the phrase 'sanctity of life' with the best responses stating it was acceptance that life was sacred/special or belief that life was a gift. This was frequently developed through the recognition that this was due to life being created by God with some candidates stating it meant life needed to be protected or relating it to topics such as abortion or euthanasia being wrong. Unsurprisingly, some candidates mixed up the phrases 'sanctity of life' and 'quality of life' and some disappointingly chose not to attempt this question.

(b) Describe the Big-Bang theory of Creation.

Candidates appeared to find this question more challenging, reflected in a high number not attempting it, although from those who did attempt it, the full range of responses was seen. Concerningly many gave short and underdeveloped responses beyond recognition of an explosion. There was also some misunderstanding in the cause of the Big-Bang with a variety of responses including mention of planets, comets, atoms, or galaxies colliding to create the universe. The best candidate responses were those that showed clear understanding of what the Big-Bang was, how it came about and then within their response related these beliefs to religious views/interpretations, often including reference to beliefs about how it can be seen by some religious believers to be part of God's plan but by other religious believers to be in conflict with traditional religious views.

(c) Explain from Christianity and Buddhism teachings about the value of human life.

This question was attempted effectively by many candidates and the full range of responses was awarded with the application of the band descriptors. It was good to see many candidates referring to phrases such as 'sanctity of life' or 'quality of life' and to link their responses to issues of study in this paper such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment, although this is not exhaustive, and some candidates referenced issues from the Unit 2 paper or from knowledge outside of both papers which was credited if relevant. Some answers from candidates had more of a descriptive feel to them rather than explanatory but the best responses effectively made use of key religious beliefs held, often showing awareness of the diversity of views within a religion and fully explained the reasoning behind life having value, making good reference to quotes or paraphrasing ideas from sources of wisdom and authority. For some candidates, there was a noticeable difference between the explanations of the two religious traditions studied, with one religious response often being favoured as the stronger out of the two.

(d) 'Only religious believers have a responsibility to care for the environment.'

It was pleasing to see many candidates attempted this question and a full range of responses were seen, often giving multiple views in this extended writing response. The best candidate responses showed awareness of a range of religious and non-religious views that highlighted beliefs such as stewardship and dominion whilst also showing understanding related to concepts of responsibility for caring for the world due to everyone living in it or caring about future generations. In some candidate responses, reference to non-religious perspectives seemed brief and supporting evidence for these views was lacking. Excellent responses tended to demonstrate application of the skills of analysis and evaluation with clear lines of argument that led to an overall final perspective; these regularly used religious teachings and referenced sources of wisdom and authority appropriately.

PART B- Issues of Good and Evil

Q.4 (a) What is meant by 'free will'?

This question was well answered by many candidates who confidently stated free will was linked to the idea of making your own choices and usually developed with reference to not having anything restricting a person's choices. The best definitions offered by candidates usually linked this to God not determining choices but humans being free agents and some excellent responses even linked this to ideas of Adam and Eve being given free will. A small number of candidates failed to offer any response to this question.

(b) Describe the work of prison reformers.

Some candidates found this question difficult or misunderstood the central focus of the question; instead of focusing on prison reformers, they gave a response solely centred around the work of prison chaplains. The demand of the question was exploring the work of reform within the institution of the prison rather than specifically of the prisoner; however, all responses were credited through the application of the band descriptors. The best answers referred to specific examples of prison reformers such as Elizabeth Fry/John Howard and used examples of the actions that prison reformers took to bring about change in the prisons such as improving prison conditions. Some less creditworthy responses focused on why it was important to give prisoners a chance to change rather than what actions were performed to bring change in prisons.

(c) Explain Christian and Buddhist attitudes towards forgiveness.

A range of responses was seen to this question; the best referenced religious beliefs, teachings, and sometimes individual stories of forgiveness to answer it successfully. It was encouraging to see references being made to appropriate sources of wisdom and authority and where relevant, candidates explained ideas rather than taking a descriptive stance and simply stating them. Some candidates unfortunately needed to include more explanation in their responses and terms such as 'because' would enable them to do this effectively and show a fuller understanding of the beliefs studied. For some candidates, there was a noticeable difference between the explanations of the two religious traditions studied, with one religious response often being favoured as the stronger out of the two.

(d) 'The death penalty is never right'.

This question was attempted by most candidates and a range of responses were seen which varied from excellent to limited. It is encouraging to see that candidates enthusiastically responded to this statement with a variety of views that encompassed both religious, non-religious and philosophical perspectives and often offered extended answers. Answers that achieved the top bands focused on religious beliefs and justification of their views using teachings and reference to religious sources of authority and wisdom, whilst also showing awareness of arguments that included the aims of punishment and offered insight into the balance of views of the rights of the victim, their family and the prisoner. Credit was given for relevant inclusion of moral arguments or non-religious perspectives. Some candidates were only able to offer one-sided arguments or views that were not developed that were credited within the framework of the band descriptors. A small minority of candidates failed to offer any response to this question.

Summary of key points

- Candidates should be encouraged to learn all key terms and use them not only when required to give definitions, but also within all responses where terminology can be used to reflect understanding of key ideas.
- Candidates should be reminded to read the words of the question carefully and use the wording of the question in their responses to help direct their answers towards success. They should also make sure that they try not to 'blanket' content and focus on what the question is asking to be able to access the higher bands.
- Candidates need to respond to the specific demands of each style of question; in (b) style questions, candidates are required to give only a description whereas in (c) style questions candidates are required to give an explanation. Often inclusion of the word 'because' in c style responses will help to develop explanation skills beyond descriptive responses.
- Furthermore in (c) style responses in Q3 and Q4, candidates should be reminded of the need of 'balance' between the two religious traditions they have studied; responses where the demand is to know the content from two religious traditions should do so in equal measure.
- In all d style responses, candidates must remember to include a range of views with appropriate lines of arguments that they should reflect on, to offer a critical evaluative approach to the statement provided. Use of connectives and evaluative language in responses will help to achieve this. For Q3 and Q4, candidates should be reminded to offer *different* views which may, or may not necessarily be, agree and disagree.



WJEC
245 Western Avenue
Cardiff CF5 2YX
Tel No 029 2026 5000
Fax 029 2057 5994
E-mail: exams@wjec.co.uk
website: www.wjec.co.uk