

2020 VCE Religion and Society examination report

General comments

Most students attempted all questions.

When preparing for the examination, students are strongly advised to:

- ensure their handwriting is legible
- learn to discern the focus of questions and how to answer them directly
- use a variety of references that give them different interpretations of the content
- ensure historical accuracy rather than repeating legend and simplistic or romanticised interpretations
- develop analytical skills in their thinking and writing
- effectively use quotations and textual references
- develop understanding of key knowledge points about religion generally.

Specific information

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	1	2	4	9	16	17	21	15	15	5.4

This was a general question and did not ask for specific examples from any particular religious tradition. Responses that did so were not given full marks.

The following purposes are not exhaustive, and they were variously expressed by students. Some purposes of religion are to:

- offer reasons and meaning for human existence
- offer a meaning for suffering and death
- offer a reason for living and ways to live
- offer hope that life has purpose
- offer hope that life continues after death
- provide guidance in how to behave and relate to others and the environment
- offer communal support through shared worldview, beliefs and practices
- provide an individual and a communal sense of identity

- answer existential questions
- give meaning to human relationships
- give meaning to relationships between humans and ultimate reality
- provide connections to the transcendent, or a pathway to the sacred or spiritual.

Each of the four purposes in the response needed to be different. Most students successfully outlined three purposes, but the fourth purpose was often a repetition.

The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Religion provides answers for the mysteries of life, the existential questions such as: Where do we come from? Is God real? What happens when we die? What is the purpose of life?

Religion can also provide a framework of rules and standards to live by. These ethical principles, moral values and codes of behaviour guide moral decision-making for individuals and societies, enabling security and social cohesion.

Religion provides a sense of identity individually and as community. This identity unites people with a shared history and understanding of the world, providing a sense of purpose, security and comfort.

Religion can provide spiritual experiences that give a connection to a transcendent reality and promote a heightened sense of awareness of the world and the purpose of existence, enabling a more fulfilled life.

Question 2

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	2	18	35	31	15	2.4

This was a general question and did not ask for specific examples from any particular religious tradition. Responses that did so were not given full marks.

There were various possibilities for responses, for example:

- Texts record past and present wisdom to guide people in searching for answers to existential questions.
- Texts offer examples of individuals who have successfully found meaning for their existence so others can gain from their insights.
- Texts offer insight into the relationship between ultimate reality and humanity so that humans can better understand why and how to live in relationships with ultimate reality, with others and their environment.
- Texts provide ethical principles and moral guidelines to assist people in how to live a moral life of purpose and value to self and others.
- Texts are a record of theological beliefs and interpretations of these so that people can understand what religious beliefs mean for the way they live their lives.
- Texts provide theological reasons and stories for the basic social structure of a religion, which in principle offers a model for an ideal wider human society.

As indicated above, the responses had to indicate what the texts offer, contain or provide, plus an explanation of how that contributes to humanity's search for meaning. Many responses simply defined texts as sacred texts and stated that they helped to give meaning to people, without further detail. If texts were understood as only sacred texts, full marks were not given.

The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Texts contribute to humanity's search for meaning by outlining the beliefs and ethics of the religious tradition. Some of these texts may be regarded as divinely inspired; the scriptures and others may be interpretations or reflections by religious or spiritual leaders in a written or oral format so that adherents can deepen their understanding of the tradition's beliefs and ethics. Texts provide a religious language for adherents to use in discussion. Various types of texts can also be used as the basis of discussion, preaching, educating and

sermons, all of which aim to inform and enrich understanding of life. Texts may have layers of complex meaning to be analysed and reflected upon, allowing adherents to grow in faith and thus find deeper meaning in life. Additionally, texts create meaning for humanity as they record and interpret the history of the tradition.

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	9	18	22	20	16	10	4	2.6

This was a general question that did not ask for specific examples from any particular religious tradition. Responses that did so were not given full marks.

Some possible responses could be:

- One influence upon the wider society (at least a section of it) is to establish or consolidate positive relations with the religion because there is agreement with existing secular beliefs, norms or practices.
- Another influence upon the wider society (at least a section of it) is to create separation, rejection or hostility towards the religions because their position opposes the existing views and behaviour of the secular society.
- Another contention is that there is little to no influence on the views and behaviour of wider society generally because religion is already separate and of low status or relevance in the society.

The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

If the stances and supporting responses of religions to challenges are in agreement with the viewpoint of a majority or large influential group within society then some cooperation may be achieved to gain their mutual goal, benefiting the general society. This may also lead to more openness between society generally and that religion.

If the stances and supporting responses of religions to challenges are in disagreement with the views of the wider society then there could be a breakdown of relations between the religion and the society in which it exists. Responses from the society could be mild criticism to individuals of the religion or publicly to the religion and its leadership in media, perhaps mounting to hostile criticism, even to physical attacks on the individuals or property of the religion, even to legal action against the religion.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	7	10	18	19	19	16	11	3.2

This was a tradition-specific question. The selected religious tradition had to be clearly stated in the response. Each of the two selected beliefs needed to be accurate for the tradition and clearly articulated to explain how each belief gives a meaning to suffering.

Some of the beliefs about suffering that could be used as a starting point for the required explanation are:

- Suffering is an unavoidable part of the human condition.
- Suffering can have a meaning and purpose.
- Suffering brings humans into solidarity with the suffering of Jesus.
- Suffering is a consequence of original sin.
- Suffering is God's punishment for doing wrong / divine retribution.
- Suffering can be redemptive and transformative.
- Jesus, who suffered, is present with human beings who suffer.

- Suffering is part of the divine mystery.
- Suffering is a test of faith from God.
- Suffering is meant to wipe out sins and should be endured patiently.
- The greatest suffering is given to those God loves the most.
- Suffering exists in life.
- Suffering is caused by selfish craving and personal desire. This cause of suffering can be overcome.

If sources were used, responses had to explain the stated beliefs and how that belief gives meaning to suffering.

Responses often did not identify a specific religious tradition. Students who selected two beliefs from the category of belief, 'the meaning of suffering', addressed this question more successfully.

The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

The Seventh Day Adventist Christian tradition holds the belief that suffering is a consequence of sin and is part of human existence because humans are inherently sinful. The Adventist tradition understands that by sinning in the garden of Eden through eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve marred the image of God in humanity, which introduced suffering into the world. (This is seen in the biblical accounts of Genesis chapters 1–3.) Secondly, the Adventist tradition holds the belief that while suffering is a part of human existence, God uses suffering to shape character and as stated in the letter of 1 Peter, chapter 1, 'to prove faith genuine'. So suffering is understood by the Adventist tradition as part of a metanarrative of life, with God present to support humans through their suffering.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	3	9	20	23	23	15	8	3.3

This question was a general question and did not ask for specific examples from any particular religious tradition. Responses that did so were not given full marks.

Most students selected the aspects of beliefs, ethics, social structure, texts and rituals. For each of the two aspects stated, students needed to give a reason for why that aspect is likely to be involved in challenges, either as the focus of the challenge and/or as the means of response to the challenge. It was not necessary to address both of these areas of focus, but more successful responses did so.

Responses ideally considered that:

- beliefs are often the target for challenge of religions because beliefs are the foundation for the worldview of religions and for the way that other aspects are developed. Beliefs are often involved in the response to challenges, as a reassertion or revision of particular beliefs may be required to protect a religion from the challenge
- social structure can be a likely target of a challenge because it is the most obvious aspect of religion to a wider society, especially the leadership, that may be perceived as abusing its authority or failing to fulfil its role in a religion. Social structure may also be targeted because, in its present form, it may be seen to be at odds with developments in the understanding of how and who is entitled to have power and authority. This different understanding may come from within religions or from the wider society. Social structure is also often involved in the response to a challenge, as the stance and supporting responses to a challenge are led by the authority figures or influential groups within a religion.

High-scoring responses to this question identified two relevant aspects and included a detailed explanation. The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Beliefs are likely to be involved in challenges in two ways. As beliefs are the theological underpinning of every religion they will invariably be the targets of a challenge and they will also be used by the religion to provide the reasons behind the stances and supporting responses to a challenge.

Social structures are also likely to be involved when a religion is challenged, as they provide the means of communication between the members of a tradition to tell them the nature of the challenge, and how and why they should respond to it. Within the overall social structure of a religion it is often the authority, policies and practices of the leadership that are both the focus of the challenge and also provide the strategies to guide the responses.

Section B

Question 1a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	2	10	31	35	22	2.7

The person needed to be clearly and accurately named and located in place, time and a particular religious tradition. The significant life experience had to be described, along with a location of the significant experience in time and place.

The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Malcolm X (El-hajj Malik Al-Shabazz) was an American Muslim minister and human rights activist during the 1960s civil rights movements in the USA. His significant life experience was as a result of his spiritual and physical journey to various Islamic countries and to Mecca for the hajj. His whole perspective on life was changed as he came to experience something he had been unaware of: the oneness of Allah as expressed in the united community of Muslims from many countries and races.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	3	4	7	12	14	15	14	12	10	5	3	5.2

Responses needed to include how the person's:

- understanding of certain beliefs (identifying clearly) was influenced (showing exactly how)
- faith in those beliefs (making clear what 'faith in' means) was influenced (showing exactly how)
- adherence (making clear what adherence means) to those beliefs was influenced (showing exactly how).

Responses also needed to explain how the person responded to the various influences experienced upon their understanding, faith in and adherence to certain beliefs and their expressions. That is, what did they do, think and say in response to the various influences of the significant life experience upon their beliefs and expressions of those beliefs? For example, did they go to particular sources of information and guidance of their tradition or outside the tradition to seek help?

Responses to the influences of the significant life experience may be immediate and short term, and other responses may be lasting. They could be demonstrated outwardly in dramatic nature or in gentle, gradual changes, or they could be internalised with no obvious outward signs. Responses needed to deal with both 'influenced by' and 'responded to' in relation to the significant life experience stated in Question 1a.

Students needed to support their responses with appropriate quotations or references.

The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

As a Muslim, Malcolm belonged to an extremist group, Nation of Islam, and had an ill-informed view of Islam. He did not know about the central belief of Islam, oneness ('Tawhid') and saw Islam as a religion for the black people of America to free them from the white dominance. He aimed for separation of whites and blacks in America, but not as it had been.

During his spiritual and physical journey through Islamic countries, this understanding of Islam and of human relations was radically changed. Malcolm saw people of all colours and races, male and female, treating each other with respect. In Mecca he experienced the oneness of Allah and humanity in the ritual of hajj. Everyone wore the same white cloth, participated in the one ritual and said the one prayer towards the same point to the one God.

Malcolm subsequently wrote a letter from Mecca to the USA. In this he confessed he was brainwashed by Nation of Islam, in particular its leader, and that the Islam he had followed was false. He now saw Islam as the one religion that could unite American society because of its belief in oneness, Tawhid of God and of humanity.

Question 2a.

Mark	0	1	2	Average
%	8	34	58	1.5

The religious tradition selected needed to be clearly identified. The outline of the selected belief had to be more than a title word. For example, 'The belief in resurrection' was not sufficient. The one or two statements outlining the belief should clearly give its meaning.

The following sample response shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Orthodox Judaism affirms the belief that God is the creator of the universe in its entirety, the cause and power behind the universe who 'created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1) with divine fiat (intention).

Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	6	7	13	16	12	12	11	9	7	5	3	4.4

The religious tradition needed to be the same as in Question 2a. Students needed to refer to the belief outlined in Question 2a. Correct responses stated clearly which aspect, either rituals or ethics, they would be using.

If both rituals and ethics were used in the response, only the first aspect was awarded marks.

If ritual was selected, responses had to unpack how particular words, actions and symbols within that ritual expressed the nominated belief.

If ethics was selected, responses had to establish how particular principles, moral values, norms and practices expressed the nominated belief.

The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

The ritual of Shabbat is a weekly, 25-hour period, where work is ceased and 'spiritual rejuvenation' is promoted (Rabbi Wayne Dosick). During Shabbat the belief in God the creator is remembered and

celebrated in numerous ways. The cessation of unnecessary work during Shabbat acknowledges that the creator God ‘rested on the seventh day’ (Genesis 2.2) and humans are to make holy that day of rest.

Another part of the overall ritual of Shabbat is attendance at synagogue (‘house of God’) where adherents develop their relationship with God through readings and prayers that express the beliefs about the creator God. Another time where many small rituals are enacted during Shabbat is at the meal table. The ritual of lighting the two Shabbat candles symbolises the purpose of Shabbat, which is to ‘remember and observe’ the holy day of the creator God. The lighting of the candles can promote spirituality and expresses the belief that God’s first act of creation was ‘to let there be light’ (Genesis 1.3)

Question 3a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	14	30	30	20	2.4

The religious tradition selected needed to be clearly stated and the challenge clearly identified.

Students might describe one principled response as the initial and continuing stance of the tradition to the particular challenge, or a number of principled responses showing how the tradition changed its stance over time or due to unsuccessful supporting responses. Either style of response was acceptable.

The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

The destruction of the first temple and the subsequent exile from Judea to Babylon in 586 BCE posed a significant challenge to Judaism. The stance was to accept and embrace the realities of the exile in order to maintain the integrity, authenticity and identity of the Jewish religious tradition.

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	9	7	11	13	13	12	12	9	7	5	3	4.4

The question asked students to identify which aspects were involved in the stance(s) taken and how they were used to achieve the stance(s). Students could distinguish between the intention and the actuality of the use of the particular aspects.

High-scoring responses included appropriate, relevant and accurate reference to sources.

The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

Due to the destruction of the temple, the place and form of worshipping God through sacrifice was destroyed, thus to achieve the stance of preserving the religious tradition, a new ritual of prayer was developed and to facilitate the gathering of the community in prayer a new place was created, the synagogue or ‘house of God’. Prayer in the synagogue was done ritually facing the direction of Jerusalem to uphold the belief that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, given by God as an ‘everlasting possession’ (Genesis 17.8). These new places and rituals allowed Jews to maintain their relationship with God. They replaced the ritual of animal sacrifices in the temple. Further, since the Kohanim (previous religious leaders) lost their authority upon the destruction of the temple, new social structures were developed with leaders being scholars, rabbis, to maintain religious life in the community and to teach and transmit religious values.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	8	6	10	14	13	12	12	10	8	5	3	4.6

Basic information required in responses was the name of the religious tradition selected and the identification of the challenge and its historical period. Responses needed to address how the reputation of the tradition had been influenced. They could also discuss how:

- the credibility of the tradition's ethics and beliefs has been influenced
- the supporting responses influence the religious tradition
- certain aspects of the tradition have been influenced.

For example:

- The challenge could offer an opportunity for the social structure of the tradition to be changed, such as membership of the leadership of a tradition.
- The challenge could have impacted on the number of members.
- The challenge may change the status of certain groups within the tradition, which may influence the whole tradition. It could result in splits within the tradition.
- The challenge could offer a chance for new insights, whether from within or outside the tradition, to change understanding and interpretation of certain beliefs and texts. This could flow on to other aspects of religion within that tradition.
- The challenge could create a changed relationship, positive or negative or both, between the tradition and the wider society.

High-scoring responses included appropriate, relevant and accurate reference to sources. The following sample response (part of a longer response) shows the type of information a high-scoring response would include.

From the 1970s onward, the Catholic Church has faced the challenge of numerous sexual abuse allegations that have affected the church in a primarily negative way. Historically the Catholic Church took a stance that refused to acknowledge the allegations openly. Internally the leadership was against such abusive behavior, but primacy was given to maintaining the reputation of the church so the supportive responses were to quietly remove the abusers to different church locations in the hope and belief that they would not reoffend. This strategy did not succeed.

As public awareness of allegations grew, the church moved to another strategy, large monetary payouts, which again worked against the church, as when it became known, the church membership and wider public felt disillusioned and betrayed by the church. The reputation of the church was dramatically marred. Archbishop Coleridge of Australia stated that the 'credibility of the church was shot to pieces'.

In dealing with this new stage of the challenge, the church developed a number of contemporary responses to reshape the relationship between the church leadership and its members and with the wider society.