2021 VCE Religion and Society external assessment report

General comments

In the 2021 VCE Religion and Society examination, students demonstrated an expanse of different case studies for significant life experiences and a diversity of challenges to religious traditions.

The interpretation of the cartoon in Section B and using the supporting evidence from the cartoon itself was well done.

Areas that need further attention include the following.

- Students need to be able to recognise when a question is generic, applying to religion or religious traditions in general and therefore requiring no detail related to specific traditions.
- When given a stimulus quotation or cartoon, students should not merely restate it but explain its meaning and implications.
- If the question requires it, references using primary and secondary sources are needed to substantiate points made. This is more than a numerical reference. Students need to acquaint themselves with the correct methods of citing quotations, authors, books and other sources to validate their points.
- Abbreviations and acronyms need to be explained when first mentioned in the student's paper. However, there were far too many of these in student responses.
- Students should pay greater attention to the mark allocation of a question or its parts to ensure their answer gives the required detail or depth the marks suggest. Students need to realise that if a question is worth 6 marks, then more than one unexpanded idea is expected.
- Students must read questions carefully.
- Students need to study the five required challenges in Units 4, Outcomes1 and 2 to cover each of the types of challenges (theological, ethical and continued existence) and to be able to deal adequately with the key knowledge and key skills of those areas of study.

Specific information

Note: 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.

Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

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

Section A

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	20	54	26	1.1

Too many answers explained the function and purpose of religious beliefs without actually defining the term. It is preferable to use synonyms, such as 'ideas' or 'articles of faith', for the term 'belief' when defining it.

Few students made any mention of ultimate reality or that such ideas are held to be true by adherents.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

> *Religious beliefs are ideas related to ultimate reality and maybe revealed by that ultimate reality in some way, that are confessed as true by adherents, though without verifiable evidence such as provided by historical or scientific method.*

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	2	5	14	21	28	18	12	3.7

Religious beliefs contribute to the human search for meaning by (three of the following):

- offering reasons for living a good – that is, ethical – life and a rationale for moral behaviour that benefits individuals and society
- providing hope and comfort in uncertainty, sustaining an individual or group through hardship or persecution
- contributing to an understanding of past and future actions of individuals, groups and nations
- helping individuals to find personal meaning and spirituality through developing understanding of and relationship with ultimate reality
- offering a structure for understanding existential questions such as the origin and end of things that gives life meaning and purpose
- helping individuals develop an identity that has meaning and purpose beyond the immediate and physical
- defining and supporting a community, giving it a distinct identity and structure for living.

Most students were able to explain three different ways in which religious beliefs contribute to the human search for meaning, with expanded responses scoring highly.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

> *Religious beliefs contribute to the search for meaning by providing answers to existential questions, such as who am I, why am I here, how should I live my life, what happens when I die? clarifying the truth one seeks through these answers, and enabling humans to understand the meaning and purpose of life overall and their life in particular and the role of the divine within it.*

> *Religious beliefs also facilitate religious experiences which may affirm one's understanding of life's meaning. By connecting adherents to an experience of the divine, religious beliefs enable adherents to transcend the ordinary and gain divine direction in their life.*

> *Religious beliefs also can provide an ethical framework through which adherents can model their relationship with the ultimate reality, other humans and the world to achieve a fulfilling and compassionate existence.*

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	10	17	20	21	17	10	4	2.7

This was a generic question, so no mention of specific faith texts should have been made.

Suggested types of texts included the following.

- Foundational texts that set out the original context of religious beliefs, often in story form.
- Sacred texts revered as holy, of divine origin.
- Creeds where religious beliefs are set out and used in worship.
- Acclamation texts such as hymns of praise used in communal and personal rituals.
- Commentaries that offer insights and interpretation of beliefs for adherents in particular times and cultures.
- Structured prayers, meditations and reflections used by individuals or communities to deepen their understanding of the meaning of the beliefs and to develop their relationship with the transcendent.
- Texts produced by the religious authorities to emphasise significant beliefs and official interpretations in order to educate adherents about the beliefs.
- Canonical texts that serve as a basis for justifying particular beliefs or standards of behaviour.
- Formal letters and encyclicals written by the religious leadership addressed to adherents containing authoritative views on teachings and doctrine.
- Responsa or letters by religious scholars written in answer to questions sent by adherents in distant communities.
- Commemorative texts to remember a person, event or the former use of a place of importance to the religious tradition.

The main issue was clearly defining two different types of texts. Most students discussed one well but the second vaguely. The general categories of 'oral and written' texts or 'primary and secondary' texts worked only if students gave an example and explanation of these types of texts within each category without referring to a particular religious tradition. Students had to not only state the type of text but also how it relates to or what it does for religious beliefs.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Primary texts such as scripture convey the beliefs of religious traditions through an overall narrative that has various literary forms such as story, religiously interpreted history, poetry, songs, letters, law codes. These texts give the context for the origin of the beliefs. Such texts may be held as sacred and in some way revealed by the ultimate reality.

Secondary texts such as commentaries, accounts of personal experiences, collections of prayers and reflections for meditation, aim to explain and interpret and illustrate the religious beliefs of the primary texts, especially for changed times and cultures.

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	11	6	12	12	16	15	13	9	6	3.9

This was a generic question, not tradition-specific.

Some suggested sources of challenges to religious traditions included the following.

- Violent conflict or war within a society or from another nation threatening the security, ethics or theology or even the actual continued existence of the tradition.

- Sectarian differences within a tradition promoting different understandings, practices or authority structures that threaten those that are current or traditional in the religious tradition causing internal disharmony.
- New scientific ideas or technological developments that threaten the worldview or significant beliefs of the religious tradition.
- Political ideas or authorities may threaten the religious tradition's freedom to express its beliefs and practice.
- Alternative or radical ideas within a tradition may challenge the existing interpretation of beliefs and practice, leading to splits.
- Changes in leadership or governance may threaten the religious tradition's continuity and cause internal rifts and instability.

Students who chose 'internal' and 'external' as their two sources of challenges still needed to explain these with general examples of types of situations. Unfortunately, some students answered with specific events in a particular religious tradition, which could not be awarded marks.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Religious traditions may be challenged by the governments of the society they operate in due to contrasting worldviews which create conflict. A secular government may also impose laws or normative practices deemed immoral by the tradition, threatening its ethics. A government may also deny it funds or other support limiting its capacity to survive. In extreme cases a government may be the source of challenge due to repressive measures such as killing adherents or denying public worship.

The source of challenges may also come from a tradition's own members, with errant members proposing heresies which threaten important beliefs. Corruption within a tradition's leadership may also create challenge, undermining the confidence of adherents and the integrity of their role. Adherents may also choose to reject certain ethical principles and moral practice replacing them with their own or with those of the wider society.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	4	8	15	18	19	15	12	6	4	3.9

This was a generic question, not tradition-specific.

Some possible reasons for resistant stances include any four of the following.

- To preserve the orthodoxy of their beliefs and so resist or counter ideas and actions that challenge what the tradition holds as truth.
- To preserve the status quo of leadership authority and power structures, religious traditions may wish to silence or discredit whatever or whomever threatens them.
- To ensure the maintenance and observance of certain rituals, religious traditions may resist ideas or actions that would undermine the validity of those rituals.
- To protect the integrity and values of the tradition.
- To retain the loyalty of adherents and avoid loss of membership by resisting any challenge that contributes to its loss of credibility.
- To retain unity within the tradition and block further disputes within the tradition, religious traditions may take action to restore harmony or conformity.

Many students did not focus on why a firm 'stance against' would be taken by religious traditions, but instead discussed different types of challenges or various types of stances, such as 'for' and 'indifference', which were not asked for.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

A tradition may take a stance against a challenge if it is particularly confronting to adherents and causes them to question their faith in or adherence to the tradition. Thus a tradition needs to stand against whatever is causing the uncertainty.

If a challenge threatens to undermine important beliefs and the worldview of the tradition, then a stance against the challenge has to be taken to give confidence to adherents that the answers of the tradition to existential questions remains valid.

If the challenge is seen to be normalising behaviour in the wider society that is deemed unethical by the tradition, then a stance against the challenge would be taken to give confidence to adherents to retain the tradition's ethical teachings and to offer an alternative view to the wider society.

A stance against a challenge will also be taken if it poses a risk to the continued physical existence of the tradition or symbolically through the destruction of places of worship.

Section B

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	2	13	36	49	2.3

The question about this cartoon was a generic one and no reference should have been made to any specific religious tradition.

Suggested interpretations included the following.

- The picture in the clouds suggests ultimate reality is remote and separated from humans on earth.
- This is emphasised by the remote control pointing downwards. The figure is shown as transcendent, above and beyond whatever or whomever is being zapped.
- The figure suggests ultimate reality is male and human-like.
- His face in the cartoon looks angry or displeased, suggesting a judgemental ultimate reality.
- The cartoon suggests the ultimate reality is directing human affairs or the whole of creation. The action of the figure suggests ultimate reality is all powerful, has total control.
- The cloud is shaped like a throne or judgement seat.
- The 'zap' of the controller suggests aggressive action, judgement or switching off.

The cartoon was interpreted well by the majority of students, with many students referring to specific parts of the cartoon to support their interpretative comments.

Some students wrongly referred to the term 'monotheistic god'. Monotheism is the belief in a single god or ultimate reality.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

The cartoon suggests that ultimate reality is a corporal figure, evidenced by the man in human form. Also that ultimate reality is a force of anger and rage indicated by the raised eyebrows and displeased expression on the figure's face. Additionally, this representation suggests that ultimate reality is a punisher, indicated by the remote control and the word 'zap'. The cloud like chair suggests that ultimate reality is above the rest of the world, observing all and all powerful.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Average
%	4	7	14	20	20	16	11	8	3.8

This was a tradition-specific question. It was mostly answered well, although students sometimes had skewed views of their religion and the role of the ultimate reality.

Students who scored highly on this question made a link with the elements of Part a. Whether students were wanting to agree or disagree with those points, they had to elaborate on their religious tradition's views of those beliefs.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response.

Orthodox Judaism would largely disagree with this cartoon. It would not portray ultimate reality as a human form, nor as a force of anger and rage over humanity. Also Orthodox Judaism would reject the notion of the zapping punisher. Orthodox Judaism holds that ultimate reality/God is incorporeal and that God is righteous judge, just and merciful. However, Orthodox Judaism would agree that God is transcendent, master of the universe, above and beyond human understanding, yet present to the world and caring of it.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	6	6	11	12	14	13	12	10	8	5	2	4.7

This was a tradition-specific question.

All four parts of the aspect of 'spaces, places, times and artifacts' needed to be explained and their link to the chosen belief needed to be clearly demonstrated.

Places enable adherents to feel closer to the presence of the transcendent and therefore appreciate the belief more deeply. Spaces can do likewise, but also offer a specific focus, such as a statue or shrine for reflection, meditation or prayer, and can have varied meaning for adherents.

Times provide opportunities for emphasising and witnessing beliefs and engaging with the belief for individuals or communities. A specific link of a special time linked to the chosen belief needed to be given as an example.

Artifacts enrich and illuminate, venerate or commemorate the belief, giving concrete expression to beliefs and personalise the belief for the adherent.

The selected belief was often too vague, such as 'Christology', 'belief in Jesus Christ' and 'suffering', or was made too complicated by joining several together such as 'the life, death and resurrection of Jesus' and 'the Triune and incarnate God'. With these complex beliefs usually only one part of the stated belief was demonstrated through the parts of the aspect. Also if the Triune God was nominated as the belief, alone or combined with another belief, it was usually only one person (Jesus) of the Triune God that was dealt with in relation to the parts of the aspect. Some students unnecessarily discussed two different beliefs when only one was required. Some students wrongly named rituals as a belief, such as sacraments, Baptism or Eucharist.

Frequently, after naming the belief, its meaning was not explained before launching into its connection to the parts of the aspect. While students were generally able to define and find examples of spaces, places, times and artifacts, explanations of spaces and places were often confused or melded into one. In some responses artifacts were not clearly defined **or** were confused with symbols.

Students also struggled to link the parts of the aspect to the selected belief. Some used half of their answer explaining the belief, leaving them little time to adequately develop the relationship to the four parts of the aspect. Others barely mentioned the belief in their answer, but devoted most of their answer to describing the parts of the aspect.

Responses that scored highly included a variety of accurate examples, supporting sources and references to add validity to the points made.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response.

> *Judaism holds the belief in Messianism-the belief that G-d the Redeemer will bring about the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age which will bring eternal peace, human immortality, the return of Jewish people to their homeland, Israel and the rebuilding of the temple (third) and God will dwell on earth. All of the parts of the aspect Spaces, Places, Times and Artifacts contribute to adherents understanding of this belief.*

> *The space known as the Kotel or the Western Wall is a physical connection and symbolic reminder of what has been lost and of what will occur in the Messianic Age.*

> *The whole place of Israel is central to Messianism. In visiting Israel Jews are reminded of their past and of the promise of the future when God will return all Jews to their homeland, Israel.*

> *Nissan, the month of redemption is a time to acknowledge the promise of Messianism. On the 14th day of Nissan adherents proclaim 'next year in Jerusalem' as a way of expressing their faith that God will redeem them and return them to their homeland.*

> *The artifact of a special cup (Elijah's cup) placed on the table during the Passover meal allows adherents to remember past redemptions and heralds the future redemption. The cup symbolises that Elijah will be the harbinger of the Messianic Age.*

Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	5	17	34	29	14	2.3

This was a generic question and no reference should have been made to any specific religious tradition.

This question was reasonably well answered, but few students were effectively able to address the two parts of the Maya Angelou quote. Both 'significant experiences' and 'religious beliefs' needed to be addressed in general terms in order to explain the stimulus material. The 'but' in the statement indicates there is a tension between the two parts of the quotation and this had to be dealt with.

Many students were unable to adequately explain in their own words what it means for a person to be 'reduced' by events.

Some students noted that even though experiences can affect the thinking, understanding, emotions and behaviour of a person, they do not need to be negative or destructive to a person if they can claim control of the impact of the experience.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

> *The statement suggests that not all of life's experiences, even significant ones can be completely controlled but how a person deals with experiences is within their control. Existing religious beliefs may help a person to interpret and manage experiences, but the use of the term 'decide' implies that whatever the beliefs a person must decide on the best way forward so that their integrity and their faith are retained and not reduced.*

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	6	8	20	25	21	13	6	3.1

This part of the question was tradition-specific.

Students studied a wide range of protagonists across the faiths. Responses that focused on the degree of change undergone in the selected person's beliefs and could back it up with evidence and quotations scored highly.

Students had to clearly and accurately identify the person (i.e. their name, relevant title, location in time and place) and to which particular religious tradition they belonged, as well as the significant life experience. Other biographical details were unnecessary as the focus of the question was on their understanding of the relevant religious beliefs as they were impacted by the significant life experience. Many students focused a large part of their discussion on life stories and the actual experience rather than on the theology.

The responses also needed to connect the selected significant life experience with the stimulus statements in Question 3a. Students generally knew their significant life experience material and many could show the 'not be reduced' aspect quite well. However, other students merely repeated the phrase 'not to be reduced' without showing what that meant in terms of the person's self-image or their particular religious beliefs. Overall the relevant beliefs involved in the significant life experience were not clearly articulated. Repeatedly stating the term 'beliefs' was not sufficient – students needed to show how the person took control of the experience and grew through it or how the person gave in to depression or loss of faith and in that sense was 'reduced' by the experience. Possibly the person's responses varied, at times reduced and at other times in control of the impact of the experience.

Responses that scored highly quoted the selected individual to demonstrate their beliefs.

Both the degree or type of change in the understanding of their beliefs and the extent to which this agreed or disagreed with the claim of the statement needed to be indicated.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

> *Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was confronted by the violent death of his friend and mentor Fr Rutilio Grande in 1977. This significant event was certainly beyond his control but it was his decision as to how he responded to it. After the initial shock and sorrow, Romero confronted the challenge to his understanding of the belief about the presence of Jesus in the world and the actions that this different understanding demanded of him. He saw the experience as a call from God to walk the same path as Grande and to take assertive action to promote the option for the poor. To make the presence of Jesus more real in the lives of the people of El Salvador, Romero could not let the poor be patient waiting for salvation in heaven, but like Christ he had to work for justice for the poor in this world.*

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	6	7	12	16	15	14	11	8	6	3	2	4.2

This was a tradition-specific question. The focus was to explain why the challenge was or is significant, and why that ethical issue was/is threatening to the religious tradition.

Many students made poor choices of ethical issues. Ethical principles and teachings and moral values and standards were rarely articulated or explained. The historical events selected by many students were better suited to discuss challenges to theology and continued existence rather than ethical issues.

Ethical challenges that were relevant included:

- abortion
- climate change / environment
- euthanasia / voluntary assisted dying
- artificial contraception
- Riba in Islam
- COVID-19 – how it affected religious practice
- women's ordination
- child sexual abuse
- homosexuality / acceptance of LGBTI+ / same-sex marriage
- justice for refugees / asylum seekers in Australia
- ultimate reality / corruption after the Black Death / Martin Luther's criticisms.

Ethical choices that **did not** pertain to the question or had the wrong approach included:

- Protestant Reformation
- medieval antisemitism
- the Crusades
- Islamophobia
- Vatican II
- Arian controversy
- the Great Schism
- Heliocentrism / Galileo
- Roman persecution of early Christians
- modernity
- the Nazi Holocaust
- rise of Islam
- Hasidism

Students generally provided good details about the problems raised by their challenge but did not adequately show how those problems arose and engaged ethical considerations. A variety of appropriate supporting sources and references needed to be utilised to add validity to the points made.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response.

The Catholic Christian Tradition faced a challenge to their ethical principles around the value of human life when in 2008 the Victorian Government proposed the Abortion Law Reform Act which aimed to decriminalise abortion. Combined with the ethical code of the Ten Commandments which includes the prohibition on killing, is also the ethical principle that life begins at conception so any abortion is unacceptable to Catholic ethical teaching. Furthering the significance of this challenge is the conscience issue for medical personal who are Catholic adherents or working in Catholic run hospitals. … The Law was passed and it remains an ongoing significant challenge to Catholic Christianity especially as it is not the only recent Law that has the potential to undermine the authority of the Church in guiding moral decisions and providing ethical standards for adherents and the wider society.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	8	5	10	14	15	14	13	10	6	4	2	4.5

Responses to this question were demonstrably better than those for Question 4, but many students did not relate the selected challenge to the stimulus quotation.

Students who overlooked the instruction printed above this question in italic and repeated the same topic as in Question 4 were awarded no marks for Question 5.

Basic information that needed to be clearly identified included the name of the religious tradition, a brief description of the selected issue, period of time and location and which aspects were challenged.

Challenges that were suitable to address the stimulus quotation included:

- death of Mohamed
- early Muslim persecution
- modernity
- Benedict Spinoza
- the emergence of Hasidism
- Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation
- Industrial Revolution and abuses of human dignity
- Heliocentrism and Galileo
- Darwin's theory of evolution
- the Crusades
- Vatican II
- the Holocaust from a Christian view
- medieval antisemitism in the ultimate reality
- Arian controversy
- Roman persecution of early Christians
- the Great Schism.

Responses needed to emphasise what the religious tradition was actually aiming to achieve with its particular stances and supporting responses and the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the stimulus statement. Students needed to argue whether the religious tradition or denomination was 'resisting change and defending the existing way' in dealing with the challenge.

Some students noted that more than one type of response to their challenge was offered by the religious tradition and so at times the tradition was supporting the quotation and at other times was aiming to achieve change.

More theology should have been incorporated into answers, which often overly discussed historical details rather than explaining the religious issues in some depth.

Responses that scored highly included a variety of accurate supporting sources and references to add validity to the points made.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response.

During the 1700s and 1800s CE Jews living in Europe were faced with the challenge of how to respond to the Age of Modernity, which made possible significant changes to their lifestyle. The responses were varied and created different movements within Judaism some of which were in agreement with the statement and emphasised resistance in order to maintain the status quo. Others were in partial agreement with the statement, accepting parts of Modernity yet also retaining distinctive features of Judaism. There were also Jews who responded to Modernity by abandoning Judaism aiming to 'gain recognition as patriotic Jewish citizens' (Rabbis Goldberg and Rayner) thus completely opposing the claim of the statement.