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Notes from the Examination Centre

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1999 Higher School Certificate Studies of Religion 1 Unit and 2 Unit Courses Notes from the Examination Centre

Introduction

Studies of Religion remains one of the most popular and one of the fastest growing of the HSC subjects. Its popularity in schools is continuing to grow.

Both courses are based on the same syllabus and the two examination papers are almost identical; the only exception being the second question on the 2 Unit paper concerning Aboriginal belief systems and spirituality. All other questions are marked concurrently according to the same scale. The questions in Section II which are worth different marks depending on whether the candidate is a 1 or 2 Unit student, are marked on the same numerical scale and adjusted mathematically later.

Each response is double marked by two different markers. If marks awarded are discrepant then a Senior Marker resolves the problem, and thus the question may be marked three times.

It should be remembered that the examination is based on the Outcomes listed for each topic in the Syllabus. The wording of the questions is a direct reflection of these Outcomes. The marks reflect the quality of each response compared with the quality of all other responses in terms of the degree to which they demonstrate achievement of the Syllabus Outcomes and Objectives. Both students and teachers should make frequent reference to this document. It is vital that candidates read all parts of the question and then plan their responses before beginning their written answers.

Specific marking schemes that are developed specify the characteristics of responses that fall into the following five categories:

- A The Best, approximately the top 10%
- B Above Average, approximately the next 20%
- C Average, approximately the middle 40%
- D Below Average, approximately the next 20%
- E Well Below Average, approximately the bottom 10%

Students should be warned of the consequences of prepared answers. These seldom gain good marks and are particularly evident to markers. It is pleasing to see that more candidates are now acknowledging the variants within the religious traditions.

There were fewer candidates who obviously attempted questions for which they had not prepared, which is a most encouraging sign. The standard of the responses continues to rise, particularly in the Cross Religion Studies. There is a concern among markers that some students write lengthy answers simply for the sake of it, not because it was required by the question. Students need to judge an appropriate length for the question asked and respond accordingly.

Note: This report needs to be read in conjunction with the 1999 Examination Paper.

1/2 Unit (Common)

Written Examination

Section I Foundation Studies (compulsory) (10 marks)

Question 1

General Comments

Most students were able to complete part (a) of this question successfully. This meant that the mean for the question was higher than would otherwise have been the case.

For part (b) of the question, Catholic and Pentecostalism were the most common responses. There was frequent misunderstanding about Pentecostalism in this section. When giving reasons in the answer in this part, students often gave invalid responses.

Specific Comments

Incredible generalisations were made about denominations of Christianity with often no acknowledgement of the fact that there are variations within those denominations. Students did not always use terminology correctly in that they equated 'New Age' with denominations such as Pentecostalism. There was also misunderstanding about the 'oriental' religions – too often these were identified as being religions from Asia

Failure to keep to parameters of 1991-96 census data meant that much information about changing patterns of religious belief was given that was not pertinent to the question. Responses were often limited to description of the stimulus material rather than attempting to analyse the information found in the graph. Students must learn to be more specific in detail about the basis of Christian denominations, their teachings and particularities of worship within them.

The interpretation of 'reasons' in part (C) often elicited reading of data from the table but did not include further information about reasons.

Section II — Foundation Studies (10 marks 1 Unit, 15 marks 2 Unit)

Question 2 (according to the 1 Unit paper)

General Comments

The stimulus material provided in Question One probably assisted many students to identify basic facts such as names of denominations. The majority had a good appreciation of the impact that Christianity has had in social welfare and education.

Students were able to answer both (a) and (b) by giving very similar information and still score satisfactory marks. The question seemed straightforward but students did not seem to have focused on this section of the Syllabus. Many tried to pad out in order to hide their unfamiliarity with the topic; many answers were too long and gave little genuine information. In fact, a number of students tended to exaggerate greatly the contribution of the Christian denominations and sweeping generalisations were common. A significant number provided longer responses for part (a) (worth 4 marks) than they did for part (b) (6 marks).

Specific Comments

Prepared answers tended to repeat facts without making links to the question. Social change was mistaken for 'social welfare'. Many gave a prepared answer to a question from a previous year. It is again emphasised that prepared answers always lead to misinterpretation of the question. There was a tendency to focus on the influence of the Catholic Church without recognising it as a variant. Many students were not able to answer the question in terms of describing the formative influence of the Christian church on Australian society in part (a) and Christian responses to social change in part (b).

The consistently 'popular' generalisations may be an unfortunate indication of the quality of information in this area where large amounts of content are required to be digested in a very short space of time.

Question 3 (according to the 1 Unit paper)

General Comments

This question, which was not as popular as question two, tended to be answered by weaker students. Despite this, most students showed an appreciation of the contribution that the different religious traditions have made to Australian society, recognising the need for the legal system to accommodate our multi-faith society. This question was a good discriminator, separating the above average students from the rest.

Specific Comments

Many students tended to concentrate on cultural aspects of religious groups rather than religious aspects, for example, speaking about food and clothing without bringing out any religious significance. Many answers were unnecessarily long, making little reference to 'law'. A number of students either chose to ignore the quotation or misinterpreted it. Answers tended to be descriptive rather than analytical. Moreover students did not focus on 'today' but rather on the historical development leading up to, but not including 'today'.

Section III— Cross-religion Studies

Question 4 Rites of Passage

(30 marks)

General Comments

The majority of students were able to define rites of passage, and gave examples and detailed accounts of how the rituals were performed. Many could distinguish between variants, though some did not actually describe how the ways in which the rite was performed differed. Overall, this was a fair question which students should have been able to answer, since it gave them plenty of opportunity to show what they had learnt.

Very few students used the same rite of passage in part (c) as they had in part (b), – showing that they had definitely read the question.

Specific Comments

There was some confusion about part (b) – if students interpreted the question in one way, the maximum mark they could receive was 7/9. Perhaps it would have been better to have said 'name' instead of 'choose ONE rite of passage'.

Correct terminology was not used well, while spelling was often most creative. Many students still struggle with the beliefs of a tradition, and often, symbols were expressed as beliefs that underpin the ritual. The term 'transformation' was not well understood by many.

Question 5 Religion and Ethics

General comments

(30 marks)

Most students were able to understand and correctly interpret the requirements of the question. Some improvement was noted in candidates ability to identify variants in the Christian tradition, though it should be noted that many often confused a denominational stance for that of the teachings of the tradition. For example Catholic teaching was assumed to reflect the whole Christian perspective, or students made generalised and incorrect statements/comparisons about/between variants. Many displayed a good recall of factual information; only a limited numbers of students, however, were able to justify the responses required in part (c) - this being the significant point of difference between parts (b) and (c). Some tended to provide a personal justification rather than that of the tradition. A small number of candidates inappropriately addressed religious traditions other than those made clear in the introduction to this section (eg Sikhism, Rastafarianism, Aboriginal Spirituality).

Specific comments

Many students were inclined to narrow the focus of the issue, saying for example IVF = bioethics rather than responding to a range of examples on the issue; abortion is an issue often poorly dealt with - candidates failed to indicate whether it was treated as a separate issue within sexuality/marriage and divorce/bioethics. By requiring students to address two traditions in both parts (b) and (c), the questions tended to encourage students to write lengthy responses in part (b) - sometimes longer than those for part (c).

Question 6 Sacred Writings and Stories

(30 marks)

General Comments

The majority of students understood what the question was asking for. Most of those who attempted this question showed a good knowledge of the sacred writings of their own traditions but found it difficult to quote from those of other religious traditions. Unfortunately, some were unsure of the meaning of the term 'genre'.

Answers tended to be either very good or poor, there was little middle ground. The good students resisted the temptation to drift into discussion of ritual, focusing rather on beliefs.

Specific Comments

The better answers in part (a) used quotations and examples of genre as well as sources when describing different genres. Part (b) concerning the theme was well answered with quotation from sacred writings being used appropriately. Some responses, however, were very similar to those on Rites of Passage when the student chose the theme 'death'. Part (c) tended to be answered in general terms, with students relying on information used in part (b). This led to poor quality responses for part (c). Students found it difficult to quote from religious traditions other than their own, thus considerably limiting their responses which tended to be generalised and vague. The better students referred to the reasons why the writings were sacred to a specific tradition quoting historical facts and content and by using examples. These students then explained how the writings were used—as guidelines for living, in worship, continuity of a tradition, legal and ethical issues, creed of beliefs and inspiration.

Question 7: Ways of Holiness

(30 marks)

General Comments

The better answers showed a great familiarity with two religious traditions. This was shown in areas such as distinguishing features of grades of holiness, the influence of sacred texts and other writings as well as cultural and religious influences. Many students confused the concept of 'ordinary' ways of holiness with 'special' ways of holiness. A number were unable to distinguish between culture and religious influences.

Specific Comments

The better students dealt with the question, using specific information with appropriate quotations, showing a clear understanding of key terms and variants within the two religious traditions chosen. Some of the inadequacies noted included the lack of reference to variants within a tradition. Others had little sense of the development and nature of special ways of holiness and there was confusion over the difference between prayer and spirituality. The expression 'cultural influences' was not well understood. Many students resorted to the 'write everything you know' technique and hoped that some of it would fit the question. On the whole this question was handled poorly with generalised answers and a lack of references to sacred texts and sources.

Question 8 Teachers and Interpreters (30 marks)

General Comments

Most students who attempted this question had a good grasp of the content area and responded well to the demands of the question. The students had been well taught and were able to respond very well to the question. Most students who attempted the question had a good grasp of the content area and responded well, showing good communication skills. They were able to sustain an argument and organise content clearly and appropriately.

Specific comments

Average and below average responses gave biographical information rather than the specific teachings. There was some confusion of the historical periods and subsequent location of teachers and interpreters within their tradition. There was also some confusion in part (b) between their influence on socio-political culture and on a particular religious tradition, for example that of Gandhi. Poorer responses tended to repeat information.

Some students struggled with the link between foundation beliefs and contemporary interpretations and the success of this depended largely on the particular teacher and interpreter studied. There was also some difficulty with 'social and cultural factors', which were generally not understood or referred to only briefly.

Whilst it is stated in the Syllabus, there was some concern about the use of the Upanishads in part (a). Students were not disadvantaged by its use since it is included in the Syllabus, but seems more appropriate in Sacred Writings and Stories.

Question 9 Women and Religion

(30 marks)

General Comments

Students' knowledge of the roles of women and the relevant issues across the five major traditions was, on the whole, quite good. Making generalised claims, they were able to place appropriate examples of women in each part of the question.

Many students attempted to respond according to the 'Areas of Study' in the Syllabus, most particularly in part (b) where they wanted to talk about women who challenged a religious tradition rather than such women's interpretation of it. This question really lent itself better to contemporary women studied—part (c).

Specific Comments

Many of the responses tended to be biographical. Parts (a) and (b) did not specify a particular period in history, hence many students tried 'double dipping'. In part (c) the 'social and cultural' factors were not always dealt with. These terms are not explicitly stated in the Syllabus.

2 Unit (Additional)

Written Examination

Section II: Foundation Studies

(15 marks)

General Comments

Overall this question was well answered, by approximately two-thirds of the 2 Unit candidature.

Specific Comments

The quotation proved helpful, particularly in part (a). In part (b) some students still wrote descriptively rather than analytically, but most attempted all parts of the question. The terms 'cosmology' and 'belief systems' tended to be interpreted together, with only the better students bringing out the differences. Linkages were not always as clear as they could have been, the better students, however, handled the question well.