
EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS – MAY 2003

World Religion

The experiences of the examiners were rather different this year. A few saw almost no problems with research questions and approaches, while the others continue to identify problems with lack of specificity and appropriateness in research question, and bias in approach. Two examiners claimed that this year's essays were consistently better than previous years; two claimed that they were worse. Four examiners mentioned a narrowing of topics; the others were happy to see a wide variety. Statisticians, I suppose, would claim that these things even out over time.

In general, it was a pleasure to get to moderate the essays marked by other examiners this year. It meant that I got to read many more truly excellent essays, a real pleasure when the essays I was assigned this year were much worse than in previous years.

My sense of the essays submitted this year is that there continue to be several excellent essays on a wide range of topics. I was pleased that the topic "*Women in Islam*" was less prevalent than the last few years, when it seemed that every other essay addressed it. Unfortunately, there were many more mediocre essays this year, even if the good news is that there were also fewer really bad ones. With the exception of one school that submitted 11 essays, none of which included an abstract, a table of contents, or any real scholarship, the overall level of presentation has improved dramatically. The research questions continue to suffer from an inability to frame a question, which makes the development of an argument to answer the question next to impossible. Most essays are organized around a topic, and usually an overly broad topic at that. There continue to be far too many "same and different" essays, too often a recitation of obvious and superficial differences and a naïve attempt at forcing similarities.

While many students handle the difficulties of being objective about their own religious commitments with at least incipient dexterity, two groups regularly do not even attempt objective analysis: conservative evangelical Christians (both Protestant and Catholic) and Ba'hai's. There continue to be far too many essays that attempt to demonstrate (or debunk) the truth claims of a religion. I am close to suggesting that creationism be ruled off limits, since the approach of assessing the role of creationism within the religion is never actually used. The same is true of "progressive revelation" in the Ba'hai tradition.

Source material used has in general improved, with fewer essays depending exclusively on a few confessional websites and a textbook. Still, there was a problem, especially evident in the essays I was assigned, with using only sources from one tradition for material on another. Too many students continue to use their own personal interpretation of scripture without seeming even to be aware of the existence of scholarly analysis. This naïve hermeneutic is especially problematic when assessing a tradition other than their own. Students can make good use of interview material, but most rely instead on a single interview with one practitioner, the perspectives of whom they accept uncritically.

Analysis and argument continue to be the heart of the extended essay. Here the essays continue to rely far too frequently on subjective analysis and too few insights, without either analytical depth or logical argumentation.

Without sufficient analysis and argument, the production of a solid conclusion is next to impossible. I found the conclusions generally weak, with most that had any conclusion at all merely summarizing the essay.

The abstracts continue to be a problem. I rarely find an abstract that actually fulfills its function. It is not meant to be an introduction or a summary, but rather a systematic (if brief) explication of question, approach, and conclusions. Few essays accomplish this task, in my opinion.

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Formal presentation was better this year, with many more 2s, but still too few 3s.

Holistic judgments varied, especially the willingness to give the highest and lowest marks. That is to be expected from a subjective criterion where we are prompted to cluster our marks in the middle.

The subject criteria continued to be somewhat disconnected from the general ones. I mean that students could score very high on the general criteria and low on the subject areas, although it was more commonly the converse. Objectivity was often a problem. This was true not only of students who demonstrated bias in their essays, but also in the sense that students did not address their own arguments objectively, considering counterarguments and taking into account the perspective of practitioners. There continue to be serious errors of fact, including at least one essay which purported to quote from the Quran and the Gospels, while in fact quoting from Hindu devotional tracts. Sensitivity, really getting a feel for the religion from the inside, remains somewhat weak.