

ISLAMIC STUDIES

Paper 8053/01

Paper 1

General Comments

The general performance as compared to that of November 2008 has not been remarkably different even though, as usual, there are instances where candidates scored very good marks and others very low. As for the level of difficulty, this year compares reasonably well with that of last year. The level of difficulty is therefore not very different.

The question of taking time to read the question properly is still a problem and hence I have no option but to draw attention to this constant issue so that institutions would reinforce the skill of reading questions properly before putting pen on paper. Some candidates seem to latch onto particular key words and run with them. Even though focusing on key words or particular 'registers' is very important, candidates have to read the whole of the question so that they get a comprehensive idea about what is being asked instead of what the question might look like.

There has been more improvement in making references to Qur'anic passages, less so of ahadith to support discussions. Most candidates merely make points without much regard to the Qur'an or Hadith. Even in questions where this is specifically asked for, the general performance has been inadequate. **Questions 5, 6, 8, 10 and 12** for example, cannot be satisfactorily dealt with without references to such passages. However, at this level of their education, candidates are expected to show familiarity with basic relevant Qur'anic and Hadith passages to support their arguments. These are the primary sources for Islamic thought and values and hence such references are crucial to the quality of the answers.

The problem of two-part questions being answered as one instead of attempting both parts separately has lessened a bit. However, there is still scope for improvement. This often leaves the Examiner in a very difficult situation because he/she has to spend quite some time looking for possible starting points for part one/[a] and the beginning of the next part. Linked to this is the problem of some candidates numbering their answers consecutively without regard to the actual numbers of the questions chosen. This creates a problem for the Examiner as it might lead to a confusion of one question with another.

Further, some of the answers were just too short and simplistic to make any meaningful inroads into answering the question. Some even merely presented bullet-points, which is not good enough.

Candidates are also expected to conclude their discussions properly. This is especially important in questions where candidates are asked to take a position and offer reasons for the position they have taken.

There is also the consistently recurring problem of candidates writing so much about the background to the theme/topic and only a bit on the focus of the question. This occurred especially in **Questions 1, 2, 3 and 7**. Candidates should be able to weigh up how much of the background is needed so that they will be able to give more time to the main part of the question.

Further, the age-old problems of lack of sufficient preparation, and poor time management still exist. It is important that these problems are addressed in order that candidates will be able to answer questions appropriately. Some candidates only attempted one question and others took so much time in planning that only three questions were attempted.

Comments on Specific Questions

Section A

Question 1

This question was very popular but many candidates read it wrongly. The question is asking for a discussion of 'main religious beliefs and religious practices'. Unfortunately, many read the second part as 'social practices' and hence went on referring to: alcoholism, abuse of women, some burying their new-born daughters, being warlike, etc. The discussion in part [a] was therefore on the general situation in pre-Islamic Arabia. For the burying of newborn females, the image presented by many was that it was practiced by all people. This cannot be historically true!

For part [b], many had the problem of the 'misreading' of the first part and hence ended up raising issues about how the Qur'an criticises the social practices. As in previous sessions, the conclusion was often abrupt and did not reflect the main line of the question.

Many candidates offered only one-sided emotional arguments condemning the pre-Islamic Arabs. This, on its own, is not a problem. The critical issue is if this attitude is defensible. An attempt to be objective is called for in instances like this. At least there were some positive religious values in that society that one cannot completely ignore. There were only a few candidates who made references to the Hunafa.

Question 2

Even though this question looks a bit straight forward, it did not attract attention as others. However, even though some of the few who attempted it did very well, others left the impression that they did not have a proper grasp of the main details of its social, historical and religious significance.

Even though we caution candidates not to give too much space to background information, in this particular case, one expected references to the Hijrah to Abyssinia as a precursor to Medina.

The theme of Hijrah is of such importance in the socio-religious history of Islam that candidates are expected to be familiar with the basic details. It helped the development of Islamic thought have a solid foundation and this is crucial to any discussion in Islamic History. Issues regarding the 'effect of the Hijrah' on the development of Islam and what might have happened without it did not appear in any answer.

Question 3

This was a historical question asking candidates to examine the caliphates of two of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs with a critical eye focusing on main events. The definition of 'main events' is hence key to the answer. Here, there were many who could not make this identification satisfactorily. The question asked for core/main events but many were too general. Some were spot on mentioning events like: apostasy, false prophets, Zakat defaulters, compilation of the Qur'an, styles of administration, expeditions, rebellions and the defence of the realm etc. Many gave too much time to the life background of the Caliphs.

In each case, candidates were expected to cite specific characteristics which made the different periods stand out. The conclusion should then indicate the final comment on the assessment. Unfortunately, in many cases, the discussion was not that critical.

Section B

Question 4

Those who attempted this question did not show much evidence of a basic appreciation of the *surah* as expected by the syllabus. The question asked for an explanation of the 'main themes' and that is exactly what candidates were expected to do. Identifying the main themes was a problem to many candidates. Emphasis was expected on the power of God, the revelation of the Qur'an and the significance of the Night of Power. In many of the answers, there was no explanation and the points were very simplistic. Some even merely provided translations of the *surah*. Again, cross-referencing with other parts of the Qur'an was expected but unfortunately, this was found wanting. This cross-referencing would have enabled candidates to show clear understanding.

Question 5

This question required candidates to examine the significance of the Qur'an in Muslim life. Even though the question proved a bit popular, the answers were not that relevant. Many went on and on describing how wonderful the Qur'an is, oblivious of the need to explain its significance to Muslims.

Some of the discussions were an emotional appreciation of the Qur'an.

The question was looking for internal evidence to explain its significance to contemporary Muslims and hence references to various passages were needed. Candidates were expected to show general familiarity with the Muslim scripture but this did not come out clear enough. Muslims understand the Qur'an as the primary source of guidance and hence in both life and thought references are made to it. This is not only about daily rituals but also in social relations and how to face the modern world. If candidates are not able to do this adequately, then there is a problem with their basic familiarity with the text of the Qur'an.

Question 6

This question was deemed to be very open and since there are many passages on the theme of Tawhid in the syllabus. Quite a lot of candidates attempted it and did relatively well. Most of the candidates focused on *Surat al-Fatihah* and *Surat al-Ikhlās*. However, the discussions were basic without much detail and reference to other parts of the Qur'an. If, as the question suggests, the whole of the Qur'anic message is founded on the concept of Tawhid, then the references have to be wider to reflect this.

Candidates could have examined the implication of the whole theme of Tawhid to social relations. For example, one could argue that the concept enables Muslims to see the world as one and hence there should not be any discrimination. Further, interfaith relations could be improved since member of all faiths will see themselves as coming from and serving the same one God. Such details were not found.

Section C

Question 7

This was a popular question but the attempts were not that adequate. The question specifically asks for the historical, social and religious significance. However, most answers merely told the story of the Hajj or just described how it is carried out. Even though the actual practice of Hajj might be useful as background information and to enable one to bring out the significance in any of the three levels, just describing the rituals does not answer the question. This is possibly one of the cases where candidates hang onto registers in the question, in this case being Hajj, and then just carry on. As the mark scheme indicates, reference to the linkage with Adam, Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar, was important for the historical part. For the other parts, mentioning of social and spiritual cohesion, show of unity among Muslims, the celebration of the *'Id al-Adha* and its social and spiritual meaning, would be very helpful. Candidates might have looked back at the pre-Islamic Arabia and showed how some of the rituals became tainted with idolatry and some uncouth practices. The significance of the changes brought by Islam was then to be emphasised.

Question 8

This question was also relatively popular as it was expected. However, candidates' performance in some of the parts was not very good.

What was not adequately dealt with was citing enough references from the Qur'an and Hadith to make comprehensive discussion.

In [a], the question is looking for a good discussion on events that could be described as 'pre-determined' and those that humankind have control over. However, it was expected that candidates will mention the fact that the nature of God enables Him to know things even before they happen and not that He is necessarily the active cause of all events. The emphasis is hence on the 'Absolute Knowledge of God' or His foreknowledge. Some candidates even read this as 'afterlife' and hence went on talking about the events of the next world.

In [b], and [c], candidates were a bit more satisfactory but many gave basic points with very little reference to the Qur'an.

In [d], some read it 'the prophet' as a general term and hence spoke of 'the prophets' in general. The definite article should have pointed to the Prophet Muhammad. This reading was accepted as a possibility though and marked on its own merit.

Question 9

This question was also very popular and many of the candidates who attempted it did well. However, others just described the Five Pillars of Islam without showing how they promote communal solidarity as the question is clearly asking for.

It was expected that candidates would look at each of the Pillars mentioned and explain how it indicates the communal solidarity. The way the *Shahadah* enables every believer to come under the same One God, and all serving Him together; how the various positions of *Salat* instil the consciousness of one family; the way *Zakat* fund is issued to help out the poor; and how *Sawm* trains people to feel for the poor are some of the points expected.

Section D

Question 10

In general, this question was not that popular.

Most of the candidates who attempted it gave basic and simplistic answers. They often explained how wonderful the teachings of Islam are and how the modern world should embrace them.

The question is however specifically asking for an analysis of how new developments in the world could be accommodated within the teachings of Islam. Perhaps, the answers given here were the poorest in the whole paper.

The thrust of the question demands a discussion of the traditional methods of interpreting Qur'an with the help of the *Sunnah*, and by applying *Ijma* and *Qiyas*. Answers could have referred to contemporary issues and how Muslim communities around the world are dealing with them within the ambit of Islam without looking like living in medieval times. Better answers could make reference to the new developments in many Muslim minority communities where special *Fiqh* discussions are going on in order that they will be able to survive the onslaught of new ideas. Unfortunately, there was not much of this in any of the scripts.

Question 11

This was very popular and it was generally well answered. Many candidates were able to identify the four bases and explain them. However, the way they relate to each other was often not adequately explained.

In referring to the 'School of Thought' in Islam, there was no mention of Shi'i Schools. This needs to change.

Candidates should hence say categorically that they are discussing 'the Four Sunni Schools of Legal Thought' to make their statements academically valid. The question is very direct and hence answers were expected to be clear and forthright. The discussion of the four main sources: Qur'an, Sunnah, Ijma [Consensus] and Qiyas [Analogy] and how these relate to each other should form the foundation of the answer. Examples of how this actually takes place in practice would have benefitted answers.

Question 12

In [a], many candidates were able to give some satisfactory points. However, most of the answers were simplistic without much reference to Qur'anic passages reinforcing the significance of the Sunnah. Examples such as: 4:80; 16:44; 21:107; and 33:21, 45 - 46 would have been very useful. If the Qur'an is the primary source of legal thought, then with the Sunnah explaining the Qur'an it goes without saying that its place in shaping and explaining legal thought in Islam is very prominent. No legal thought can be understood properly without recourse to the Sunnah.

For [b], most of the answers were, again, simplistic even though this is a very familiar topic when dealing with Law [*Fiqh*]. Someone, somehow, read this as *Jihad*. Even though the roots might be the same and performing *Ijtihad* could be argued as a form of *Jihad*, the two are not the same and this is not what the question is looking for. Comments on how *Ijtihad* explains the attempt in Islam to encourage people to think for themselves instead of merely following others could have been referred to.