AO1

What is ...
Knowledge and understanding ?

This is the skill that involves *selecting* the relevant and appropriate information, *organising* it and then *presenting* it through a *personal explanation* that may involve the use of supporting *evidence* and *examples*.

TIP

Spot the Triggers!
The words in blue are Triggers – key words and phrases that can help you remember knowledge and understanding in this area.

❝TRIGGER QUOTES❞

If one says that God is very different from anything else, can one really talk significantly about him at all?   **(B. Davies)**

For to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false.   **(A. J. Ayer)**

Theme 4A: **Inherent problems of religious language**

Difficulties with religious language

An intelligible conversation is possible about a brick house because we share a common experience. Not all people, however, have a shared experience of the love of God. Some find this to be an unintelligible claim.

- We use language to communicate **experiences** we have had.
- The success of communication depends on the degree to which we share a **common base** of experiences.
- For instance, if we are speaking about a '**brick house**', my communication will be intelligible if those listening have experienced a 'brick house'. If they have not, it will take much more work to ensure the intelligibility of our speech.
- When our communication is concerned with the world of **sense experience**, there is usually a common experience of understanding and meaning.
- When religious language merely attempts to **describe religious buildings**, the classification of religious texts or the posture of prayer, this language is intelligible because it is concerned with the world of sense experience.
- But sometimes our communication is concerned with the **metaphysical**, that which is 'beyond' (meta) the physical world.
- Much religious language is metaphysical: statements about the nature of the divine world, the attributes of God, the state of one's **soul**, etc.
- Many statements about ideas, emotions, ethics and aesthetics can also be seen as 'metaphysical'.
- It is much more difficult to reach a consensus of meaning about a metaphysical statement ('**God is love**') than about an experience of the senses ('There is a brick house on 5th Avenue').
- **Logical positivists** said that language (other than purely logical formulations) is only meaningful if it can be verified by empirical means.
- When religious believers describe the 'Ultimate' or 'God' as 'infinite' or 'timeless', they are not able to appeal to a common set of experiences with those who are not religious adherents – those who believe that the only experiences that exist are 'in' time and space.
- Religious language is made more difficult by the fact that religious

believers **cannot agree** between themselves on the meaning of metaphysical language.

- **David Hume** has said that statements which did not contain abstract mathematical reasoning or insights about facts and existence based on evidence were nothing more than 'sophistry and illusion'.
- Different words for the divine (God/The Ultimate/Allah/Brahman/Dharmakaya, etc.) are associated with concepts that differ between religions, making religious statements difficult to understand and reconcile.
- A further difficulty is that '**religions of the Book**' (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) use words to declare truths about a God whom they believe to be beyond words – how is this possible?
- Some theologians believe that there is **nothing** that can be said about God because God is not a 'thing' in our universe.

Two types of language

Cognitive language	Non-cognitive language
Is about the external and **physical world** – it relates to objects and fact.	Is **outside** of that which can be empirically proven, such as statements about ethics, aesthetics and religion.
Can be judged as **true or false** because it can be examined by empirical means.	Cannot be judged as true or false because it **cannot be examined** by empirical means.
Involves acts of **cognition** – coming to knowledge through our experience of the five senses (taste, touch, hearing, sight and smell).	Involves acts of **intuition** and/or the claim that knowledge has arisen from a source outside of the five senses.
Can be **verified**, proved true, by using empirical evidence.	Is **unverifiable** because it cannot be examined through the five senses.
Is **falsifiable**, that is, it uses statements which can be questioned and proven false if there is evidence.	Is **not falsifiable** – statements cannot be proven either true or false.

- Religious believers may see their claims (i.e. 'There is a God') cognitively – as claims that can be proven true or false through empirical means.
- Examples of cognitive approaches to religious language include arguments for God which make use of empirical evidence such as the **cosmological** or teleological/design arguments.
- These believers see that their statements **correspond** to their experiences in the empirical world.
- An example of a cognitive approach to religious language is the claim that the intricacy and beauty of the world cannot be explained through evolution alone. This statement **may be debated** and tested through empirical evidence.
- Other religious believers may see their claims as non-cognitive – as statements which cannot be proven true or false through empirical means.
- These believers see that their statements have **coherent perspective** which expresses their convictions about the nature of reality.
- An example of a non-cognitive claim is the assertion by Pascal that we have an existential emptiness that only God can satisfy. This statement cannot be established by **empirical means**.

Specification **Link**

The differences between cognitive and non-cognitive language.

Religious language can be a coherent viewpoint or perspective through which we look at the world. As such, it is non-cognitive but meaningful.

Quick Revision

Create 10 statements which have nothing to do with religion – make 5 of these cognitive statements (i.e. based on sensory experience) and 5 non-cognitive, which fall outside of sensory experience. Then, make a new list of 10 cognitive and non-cognitive statements about religion. This will help you with an exam question which requires an explanation of religious language.

AO2

What is ...
Evaluation and critical analysis ?

The AO2 skills of evaluation and critical analysis mean engaging with the controversies surrounding a subject. This is more than merely describing or listing the points made about a controversy. To achieve this, one weighs up strengths and weaknesses of various sides and takes a position. On the right are three controversies for each issue – you can engage in these by extending their arguments (adding examples, quotes or other details), weighing up their strengths and weaknesses, and coming to a conclusion.

If God is utterly transcendent and therefore beyond words, is it not a contradiction to claim that there is a book which reveals truth about God?

TRIGGER QUOTES

Genesis (1:2 6) says: 'Let us make man to our image and likeness.' Therefore, some likeness exists between God and creature. **(T. Aquinas)**

Our environment is thus religiously ambiguous. **(J. Hick)**

The experience that would verify Christian belief in God is the experience of participating in that eventual fulfilment. **(J. Hick)**

... without a blik there can be no explanation; for it is by our bliks that we decide what is and what is not an explanation. **(R. Hare)**

Issue:
The solutions presented by religious philosophers for the inherent problems of using religious language

Three evaluative controversies!

Controversy 1: *Experience can be extended by analogy.*
The claims of religions are, literally, '**non-sense**' to those who do not share a base experience with religious believers. Yet, analogies enable us to communicate meaningfully when we do not have a shared **base of experience**. An analogy is, of course, when we speak of one thing in terms of something else. Aquinas said, for example, that if we can understand what a 'good' human being is, then we can begin to comprehend (though never fully comprehend) an infinitely good God. This recognises that language has limits but it also opens up the **possibility** for communication on religious themes.

Controversy 2: *Religious language can be eschatologically verified.*
The **logical positivists** insisted that that the only meaningful propositions are those which are either logically necessary definitions ('all eye doctors are oculists') or can be verified by an appeal to the senses. Many religious believers, such as John Hick, view their faith as real, corresponding to the **objective world** – but that the evidence for this will only be fully known at the eschaton (the end of time). In the meantime, we must employ **faith** in the face of ambiguous evidence. This is called 'eschatological verification'.

Controversy 3: *Religious language is meaningful because it is coherent.*
One criticism of religious language is that it does not correspond to the 'real world' of what can be proven thought the senses. Yet, do we not believe in many things that cannot be proven by the senses: love, moral beliefs, the 'fact' that some things are 'beautiful' or 'ugly'? Religious language is meaningful because it **expresses a perspective** or attitude on life that provides a coherent way of looking at the world, prior to our knowledge gained by sense experience. This can be compared to wearing a set of **lenses** through which life becomes meaningful. The philosopher Richard Hare gives this idea the name, '**blik**' – an unfalsifiable conviction which leads to a meaningful world view.

Sp☀light: Evaluative judgements
This section contains a special insight that you can use to form a judgement.

Can it make sense to both speak about God and say that God is beyond speech? The Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) describe God using a variety of attributes: infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. Yet, these same religions declare God to be transcendent and beyond human understanding: 'Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?' (Job 11:7).

Issue:

The exclusive context of religious belief for an understanding of religious language

Controversy 1: *Language is based on unique and exclusive rules.*
Ludwig Wittgenstein taught that we learn language only through specific communities who have their own rules for expression. He used the concept of a '**game**' to reinforce the idea that each word and phrase we use is guided by certain rules, which one can only fully learn by participating in the 'games' of a community. Just as we would not expect to play the game of cricket by using the rules of backgammon, we cannot expect to understand the language of Islam if we have been raised as a Zen Buddhist. However, Wittgenstein did not say that we couldn't understand religious language – just that it would take an enormous **commitment** to do so.

Controversy 2: *The fact of religious conversions prove that religious language is understood outside of its specific context.*
Every year there are conversions to all of the main world religions. For instance, it is quite popular for those disenchanted with Christianity to become Buddhists. **Sinead O'Connor** converted from Christianity to Islam. This means that the language of specific religions has reached **beyond its context**. However, it could be argued that those who convert never fully understand the religion to which they convert, or that they may **already know** the religion to which they are converting. For instance, C. S. Lewis had a 'Christian' upbringing and converted to the Church which he already knew intimately.

Controversy 3: *Religious language is related to the objective world.*
Richard Swinburne argues that religious statements are 'realist' and should be regarded as scientific hypotheses; he appeals to the vast number of religious experiences and **arguments for God**. John Hick believed that the differences in beliefs between religions can be accounted for by the fact that they share a '**common core**', which is interpreted though culture, history, language, geography, etc. However, the fact that many do not recognise the scientific nature of religious statements nor the supposed 'common core' is grounds to doubt these ideas. As there are no proofs for religious claims that would satisfy a **logical positivist**, we must conclude that religious language is not understood beyond religious contexts.

TIP

If you decide to use a Trigger quote in an exam response, always take time to briefly explain what the quote means and how it fits into your argument.

Quick Revision

Find three phrases that specific religious believers might use in the religion you are studying (e.g. 'Our Father who art in heaven ...' [Christianity] or 'Hare Krishna' [Hinduism], etc.). Now, make a case of why these three phrases are incomprehensible and meaningless to those outside of the religion AND make a case of how they could be seen to be meaningful. This will help you with an examination evaluation question on religious language.

TRIGGER QUOTES

One does not have to know exactly what a word means in order to have some understanding of it **(B. Davies)**

... the meaning of a word is its use in the language. **(L. Wittgenstein)**

Sp⚫tlight: Evaluative judgements

This section contains a special insight that you can use to form a judgement.

It is possible to view religious language as non-cognitive (that is, not able to be judged as true nor false) and see that its meaning can be understood outside of its particular contexts. R. B. Braithwaite viewed religious language as a way of stating ethical convictions. For example, asserting that 'God is love' is a way of announcing one's intention to follow a loving way of life. It is possible for two religions to have (and recognise in each other) the same policy for living – they just use different stories to illustrate their moral intention.

AO1 Trigger revision activity

A

ZIP

Difficulties with religious language

1 There are no Triggers in this zip file! Find and add in the relevant Triggers.

➡️

2 Now put the Triggers in the same order as they appear in the AO1 section above.

➡️

3 Practise 'downloading' your zip file of Triggers from memory. See how many you can recall on first attempt.

⬇️

6 Now read through your definitions and think about ways in which you could develop these using your Trigger quotes.

⬅️

5 Attempt to write one clear sentence to define each Trigger.

⬅️

4 When you are confident enough, order the Triggers into a list as you may do in an examination situation.

B

ZIP

Two types of language

coruscant	intuition
empirical means	non-falsifiable
	cosmological
cognition	correspond
verified	feud
falsifiable	outside
electrostaff	muddled
unverifiable	true or false

1 Find the unhelpful Triggers! **This zip file contains several inappropriate or irrelevant Triggers**. Find these and replace them with the real Triggers from the AO1 section.

⬇️

2 There's another problem: the Triggers are out of order! Put them in the same order as they appear in the AO1 section above.

⬇️

3 Practise 'downloading' your zip file of Triggers from memory. See how many you can recall on first attempt.

⬇️

6 Now read through your definitions and think about ways in which you could develop these using your Trigger quotes.

⬅️

5 Attempt to write one clear sentence to define each Trigger.

⬅️

4 When you are confident enough, order the Triggers into a list as you may do in an examination situation.

AO2 Trigger revision activity

A
ZIP

Solutions for the problem of religious language

1 There are no Triggers in this zip file! Find and add in the relevant Triggers.

→

2 Now put the Triggers in the same order as they appear in the AO2 section above.

→

3 Practise 'downloading' your zip file of Triggers from memory. See how many you can recall on first attempt.

↓

6 Now read through all your sentences and think about ways in which you could develop these using your Trigger quotes, further examples, and noting strengths and weaknesses.

←

5 Attempt to write one clear sentence to define each Trigger.

←

4 When you are confident enough, order the Triggers into a list as you may do in an examination situation.

B
ZIP

Religious language as exclusive to context

Objective world, arguments for God, common core, political lobbyist

Religious conversions, Sinead O'Connor, hyperspace, already know

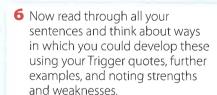Exclusive rules, Ludwig Beethoven, monopoly, commitment

1 Find the unhelpful Triggers! **This zip file contains several inappropriate or irrelevant Triggers**. Find these and replace them with the real Triggers from the AO2 section.

→

2 There's another problem: the Triggers are out of order! Put them in the same order as they appear in the AO2 section above.

→

3 Practise 'downloading' your zip file of Triggers from memory. See how many you can recall on first attempt.

↓

6 Now read through all your sentences and think about ways in which you could develop these using your Trigger quotes, further examples, and noting strengths and weaknesses.

←

5 Attempt to write one clear sentence to define each Trigger.

←

4 When you are confident enough, order the Triggers into a list as you may do in an examination situation.