Libby Ahluwalia talks about OCR’s new A Level Religious Studies specification and her new textbook

Libby Ahluwalia has extensive teaching and examining experience and has authored numerous successful textbooks for GCSE and A Level. Libby is currently writing Oxford A Level Religious Studies for OCR and the Oxford Handbook for Teaching GCSE Islam for the new 2016 A Level specifications.

What’s new/most challenging about the new specification?
The new specification is great for creating the opportunity for some serious, in-depth study of some of the most interesting and exciting ideas in religion. I like the way that the different strands interrelate, helping us to see how our own beliefs and values compare with the views of great thinkers of the past. I like the way the new specification helps us to see how perspectives we take for granted as being obviously right have been shaped over time; I think it can lead to a realisation that things could have been different and we could have been brought up with different views. I hope that studying this course will encourage people to be more open to considering opinions that are different from their own. For those who are used to following a Philosophy and Ethics route through A level, there is more theology in the new course, which in my view is a big improvement and should equip students much better if they want to take the subject further after A level.

How would you recommend I structure the new course?
There are so many different kinds of school and different kinds of teachers and departments that there won’t be a single ‘best way’ of structuring the course. In my school, we’ve gone for teaching the three strands of the course concurrently, with three different teachers delivering it according to their interests and subject expertise, but this is not possible in every school and won’t suit everyone. There is no need or requirement to teach the subject content in the order of the specification or the textbook (although that would be quite a coherent order to follow); it might suit teachers better to start with something where they feel confident in their own subject knowledge, so that they have time to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of their classes while planning the delivery of less familiar subject matter. Personally, I would plan to put each ‘unfamiliar’ topic immediately after a school holiday, to give myself some extra planning time!

How will your textbook help me meet the challenges of the new specification and ensure my students get the best possible grades?
I hope the textbook will prove to be a very sound tool for enabling the students to do themselves justice in the exams. We have aimed to make it thorough, accessible and engaging, with plenty of support for exam technique and practice as well as suggestions for extra reading. The ‘Think’ questions, we hope, will inspire some interesting discussions in the classroom and encourage the students to become more articulate in expressing their views, and the ‘Apply your knowledge’ questions could be used for written tasks to consolidate learning and stretch thinking skills. I hope our enthusiasm for the subject comes across in the book; Religious Studies is such an exciting course, always about things that really matter.