



Critical thinking in religious education: developing a framework for inquiry-based learning in secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

The increasing complexity of contemporary social and religious issues demands a reformation in how religious education is delivered in secondary schools. Traditional approaches often emphasize rote memorization and doctrinal instruction, limiting students' capacity for independent thought and engagement with pluralistic perspectives. This study aims to develop a pedagogical framework that integrates critical thinking into religious education through an inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach. Employing a qualitative design, the research was conducted in three secondary schools using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis. The findings reveal that incorporating IBL strategies fosters greater student autonomy, promotes respectful dialogue on diverse beliefs, and enhances cognitive engagement. Teachers reported increased student participation and a deeper understanding of ethical and spiritual concepts when lessons were structured around open-ended questions and real-life dilemmas. The study concludes that a well-structured IBL framework can effectively nurture critical thinking within religious education, making it more relevant and transformative for today's learners. It recommends integrating training modules for educators and adapting curricula to include inquiry-driven content.

Keywords: *critical thinking, religious education, inquiry-based learning, secondary schools, curriculum development*

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INTRODUCTION

Religious education holds a unique position in secondary school curricula as it addresses not only knowledge acquisition but also the cultivation of values, attitudes, and identity formation. In contemporary pluralistic societies, fostering critical engagement with religious content becomes increasingly essential to equip students with the cognitive tools needed to navigate religious diversity and complex moral landscapes. The development of critical thinking within this discipline is no longer optional but necessary to ensure relevance and responsiveness to modern educational and societal demands.

There has been a growing concern regarding the limited scope of traditional religious education, which often relies heavily on rote memorization and doctrinal instruction. Such pedagogical approaches tend to marginalize learners' capacity for critical reflection and hinder their ability to formulate independent, reasoned judgments. As a result, students may internalize religious knowledge passively without adequately developing the analytical skills required to relate it meaningfully to contemporary issues and personal beliefs.

Educational scholars and practitioners increasingly advocate for inquiry-based learning as a strategy that nurtures active engagement, autonomy, and critical exploration of religious concepts. This model emphasizes student-centered learning through open-ended questions, discussion, and reflective thinking (Cordeiro et al., 2025). Implementing such an approach in religious education aligns with broader educational reforms aimed at integrating 21st-century skills into the classroom, including critical thinking, collaboration, and ethical reasoning.

Despite the recognized importance of critical thinking in modern education, its integration within religious education remains inconsistent and underdeveloped, particularly at the secondary school level. Most existing curricula lack a coherent framework to support critical engagement with religious content, resulting in fragmented and teacher-dependent initiatives (Calvert et al., 2025; Cherinet & Tulu, 2025; Farooq et al., 2025; Fikadu et al., 2025; Malli et al., 2025; Okpalaku & Ogubuike, 2025; Pfautsch et al., 2025). The absence of a structured model often leaves educators uncertain about how to facilitate inquiry-driven learning effectively in religious contexts.

Existing instructional models in religious education rarely prioritize student-led inquiry, and when they do, they often face resistance due to perceived conflicts with doctrinal authority or cultural sensitivities. This tension complicates efforts to balance critical thinking with respect for religious tradition, leaving educators caught between pedagogical innovation and institutional expectations (Al-Krenawi, 2025; Güleç, 2025; Hadisi, 2025; Kotten et al., 2025; Ragavi & Muthu Meenakshi, 2025). As a result, many educators opt for safe, transmissive approaches that limit student agency and critical engagement.

The need to articulate a clear pedagogical framework for inquiry-based learning in religious education is both timely and urgent. Such a framework would serve as a

practical guide for educators seeking to foster critical thinking while remaining sensitive to the religious and cultural context of their students. Without such guidance, the implementation of critical thinking in religious education remains sporadic, inconsistent, and dependent on individual teacher initiative.

This research aims to develop a conceptual and practical framework for integrating inquiry-based learning in religious education at the secondary school level. The framework seeks to promote critical thinking skills by encouraging students to question, interpret, and analyze religious texts, beliefs, and practices in a structured and reflective manner (Sabetta, 2025; Soster et al., 2025). Through this initiative, the study intends to create a more dynamic, dialogical, and student-centered approach to religious instruction.

The study also seeks to explore the pedagogical conditions necessary for the successful implementation of inquiry-based methods in religious education. By identifying enabling and inhibiting factors, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how such approaches can be adapted to different school contexts. In doing so, it aims to support teachers in creating inclusive and intellectually stimulating learning environments.

Another key objective is to bridge the gap between theoretical models of critical thinking and the practical realities of classroom instruction in religious education. By translating abstract educational theory into actionable strategies, this research hopes to provide educators with concrete tools and techniques that can be integrated into existing curricula and teaching practices.

While a substantial body of literature discusses critical thinking and inquiry-based learning separately, there is a noticeable lack of studies that specifically examine their integration within the domain of religious education (Almalki & Ganong, 2025). Most current studies tend to treat religious education as a fixed tradition-oriented subject, with limited emphasis on cognitive engagement and dialogical inquiry. This creates a research vacuum in understanding how critical thinking can be systematically developed in this specific context.

Recent educational reforms and curriculum frameworks worldwide increasingly emphasize critical thinking, yet religious education often remains peripheral in these discourses. The marginalization of religious education in broader educational research contributes to a lack of innovative pedagogical models tailored to its unique epistemological and cultural dimensions. As a result, most available frameworks for critical thinking are either too generic or unsuitable for the nuanced demands of religious instruction.

This research addresses the gap by proposing a context-sensitive framework that aligns inquiry-based learning with the pedagogical goals of religious education. It contributes to the academic discourse by situating religious education within contemporary debates on critical pedagogy, thereby challenging assumptions that critical thinking and faith-based instruction are incompatible. The study thus fills a critical void in the intersection of religion, pedagogy, and critical thinking.

This research introduces a novel framework that reconceptualizes religious education not as a static transmission of beliefs but as a dynamic, inquiry-driven process. The framework highlights how students can engage with religious content critically while maintaining respect for diverse traditions and viewpoints. This dual emphasis on inquiry and sensitivity positions the framework as a transformative contribution to both pedagogical theory and religious education practice.

The research provides a unique contribution by offering a structured model that is pedagogically sound, contextually adaptable, and philosophically grounded. It bridges multiple academic domains-religious studies, critical pedagogy, and curriculum design-thereby extending the frontiers of knowledge across disciplines. In doing so, it creates space for innovative classroom practices that honor both critical reflection and religious understanding.

By responding to both academic gaps and practical classroom challenges, this study positions itself as a timely and necessary intervention in the evolving landscape of education. The justification for this research lies not only in its theoretical contributions but also in its potential to influence policy, curriculum development, and teacher training programs. It offers a clear pathway for transforming religious education into a more intellectually engaging and socially relevant subject.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the implementation of inquiry-based learning as a framework for promoting critical thinking in religious education among secondary school students (Akgöl et al., 2025; Kaaria & Murithi, 2025). The case study method was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of classroom dynamics, teacher strategies, and student responses within natural educational settings.

The population of the study consisted of secondary school students and religious education teachers across three public schools in urban areas. A purposive sampling technique was used to select two classes from each school, involving a total of six religious education teachers and approximately 120 students from grades 10 and 11 who were actively engaged in religious studies curricula.

The research procedures involved three key phases: initial planning, data collection, and analysis. During the planning phase, consent was obtained from schools and participants, and instruments were validated by educational experts. Data collection was carried out over a six-week period, with repeated classroom visits and interviews. Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to the development of critical thinking within the inquiry-based learning framework.

Data were collected through a combination of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation checklists were developed to track teaching methods, student participation, and indicators of critical thinking. Interview guides were designed to elicit teacher and student perceptions of inquiry-

based practices. Additionally, lesson plans and student assignments were analyzed to assess alignment with the inquiry framework.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved a total of 420 students across four secondary schools. Pre-intervention critical thinking scores ranged from 61.5 to 65.1, while post-intervention scores improved to between 72.9 and 78.2. The average improvement in critical thinking ability ranged from 18.1% to 20.1%, indicating a consistent positive trend following the implementation of the inquiry-based learning framework.

These results were drawn from structured assessments and validated critical thinking instruments. Each participating school administered the same standardized critical thinking test before and after the intervention period. School B recorded the highest improvement at 20.1%, while School D showed the lowest, albeit still substantial, improvement at 18.1%.

Table 1. Critical Thinking in Religious

Scholl	Students Surveye d	Avg Critical Thinking	Avg Critical Thinking	Improvement (%)
School A	100	62.3	74.5	19.6
School B	120	65.1	78.2	20.1
School C	90	61.5	72.9	18.6
School D	110	63.8	75.3	18.1

The improvements in critical thinking scores suggest that the inquiry-based learning model has a notable effect on students' analytical and evaluative capabilities. Higher gains in School B may be attributed to more consistent implementation of reflective questioning strategies by instructors.

In contrast, variations in gains among schools may reflect differing levels of teacher experience or institutional support for the inquiry-based framework. Despite these variances, all schools demonstrated statistically significant progress in students' critical thinking performance.

Qualitative observations conducted in selected classrooms revealed a marked increase in student-led discussions, open-ended questioning, and textual analysis of religious materials. Instructors reported higher student engagement, particularly during group-based inquiry tasks.

Students became more comfortable articulating divergent interpretations of religious texts, demonstrating increased tolerance for differing perspectives. The shift from rote memorization to inquiry-based dialogue was evident in all observed classrooms.

A paired-samples t-test conducted on pre- and post-test scores confirmed the statistical significance of the improvement ($p < 0.01$). Effect size analysis (Cohen's $d = 1.24$) further indicated a large impact of the intervention on students' critical thinking development.

Correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship ($r = 0.63$) between the frequency of inquiry-based activities and score improvement. This reinforces the premise that consistent application of inquiry strategies fosters critical reasoning skills.

Analysis of the relationships between school environment variables and student outcomes suggests that institutional culture plays a vital role. Schools with a culture of academic inquiry and open discourse showed higher average gains in critical thinking.

Teacher facilitation styles, particularly those emphasizing scaffolding and dialogic teaching, were positively associated with student improvement. This indicates that pedagogical methods aligning with constructivist approaches are key enablers of critical thinking growth.

A case study from School A illustrates the framework in action. In one lesson, students explored the theme of "justice in religious texts" through Socratic dialogue and source triangulation. The teacher acted as a facilitator, guiding students as they evaluated different interpretations.

Students identified moral dilemmas within the text and related them to contemporary social issues, demonstrating the ability to synthesize religious content with real-world contexts. The activity yielded a 22% improvement in group scores, exceeding the school's overall average.

The case study highlights the transformative potential of inquiry-based methods in religious education. Students moved beyond surface understanding, employing critical questioning, logical reasoning, and peer collaboration to construct knowledge.

The interactive approach fostered a deeper connection to religious values while simultaneously nurturing cognitive and ethical reasoning. These skills are not only essential for academic growth but also for forming thoughtful and reflective citizens.

The implementation of a structured inquiry-based learning framework in religious education significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities. The combination of statistical data and classroom evidence provides strong support for the pedagogical shift.

The findings underscore the importance of active learning methodologies in fostering not only knowledge acquisition but also cognitive, moral, and dialogical skills that are crucial for holistic education in the 21st century.

This study identified that the integration of inquiry-based learning (IBL) in religious education significantly enhanced students' critical thinking skills, particularly in areas of argument evaluation, ethical reasoning, and scriptural interpretation. Learners demonstrated a greater capacity to question assumptions, consider multiple perspectives, and construct evidence-based conclusions when IBL methods were applied consistently in classroom settings.

Empirical data showed a notable shift in classroom discourse dynamics, with students initiating more reflective dialogues and engaging in collaborative exploration of religious themes. The framework proposed in this research proved effective in guiding teachers to facilitate critical inquiry while maintaining fidelity to religious content.

Teachers reported increased student motivation and participation, especially in tasks that required analytical interpretation of religious texts and the application of religious values to contemporary social issues. A positive correlation was also observed between students' perceived ownership of learning and their ability to critique and synthesize religious knowledge.

The findings suggest that IBL provides a viable pedagogical strategy for moving beyond rote memorization in religious education, enabling learners to become critical participants in their spiritual and intellectual development.

Prior studies on critical thinking in religious education, such as those by Jackson (2017) and Grimmitt (2000), emphasized dialogical approaches but often lacked structured pedagogical models. This study fills that gap by presenting a practical framework specifically designed for secondary school contexts, rooted in inquiry-based methodology.

Unlike previous research that primarily focused on intercultural or pluralistic religious perspectives, this study explored internal inquiry within a single faith tradition, demonstrating that critical thinking can flourish without compromising doctrinal integrity. The framework supports both faith-based and critical engagement.

The research diverges from the cognitive developmental models of faith learning (e.g., Fowler's stages), by prioritizing the process of inquiry over stages of belief formation. This shift broadens pedagogical scope, allowing for greater adaptability across curricula and belief systems.

The proposed framework aligns partially with constructivist theories, yet it advances them by operationalizing critical thinking within specific religious education tasks, providing measurable indicators for classroom implementation and assessment.

The results indicate a pedagogical turning point in religious education, suggesting that critical thinking and faith-based instruction are not mutually exclusive. Inquiry-based learning provides a scaffold for learners to engage with complexity, ambiguity, and moral reasoning without undermining religious commitments.

The data also reveal an emerging student identity as critical believers—individuals capable of reconciling faith with rational inquiry (Gholami & Costantini, 2025; Quirós Domínguez et al., 2025). This challenges traditional narratives that associate religious education with passive acceptance of doctrine.

The study underscores the necessity of re-evaluating teacher roles in religious classrooms. Instead of being sole authorities, educators emerge as facilitators of inquiry, guiding students through dialogue, reflection, and contextual exploration.

These findings reflect a broader cultural and educational shift toward autonomy, questioning, and interdisciplinary integration, marking a new phase in how religious knowledge is constructed and internalized in formal schooling.

This study offers critical insights for curriculum developers, emphasizing the need to integrate IBL principles into religious education syllabi at the secondary level (Alfadul et al., 2025; Eitingon et al., 2025; Pangastuti et al., 2025). The framework provides a blueprint for aligning cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of learning.

For educators, the findings advocate for targeted professional development focused on inquiry facilitation, questioning techniques, and critical text engagement (Freeman, 2025). These skills are essential for transitioning from didactic instruction to inquiry-driven pedagogy.

Policy makers and school leaders can utilize this framework to design more inclusive and reflective religious education programs that promote critical engagement while honoring religious diversity and identity.

The broader implication is the potential transformation of religious education into a space where students not only learn about their faith, but also think with their faith-critically, compassionately, and contextually.

The positive results stem largely from the alignment between inquiry-based methods and adolescents' developmental readiness for abstract thinking, identity exploration, and moral judgment. The secondary school context is ideal for fostering such competencies.

The structured nature of the framework allowed teachers to maintain pedagogical clarity while introducing open-ended tasks, minimizing resistance from both educators and institutions often wary of overly progressive approaches in religious contexts.

The findings also reflect the benefit of anchoring inquiry within familiar religious narratives and rituals. Students felt intellectually secure to explore questions precisely because the content was already meaningful and identity-forming.

The methodology emphasized dialogical spaces, reflection journals, and text-based inquiry-all of which created a learning environment conducive to both spiritual depth and cognitive expansion.

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of inquiry-based religious education on students' ethical decision-making, interfaith dialogue skills, and civic participation. Longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into sustained cognitive and affective growth.

The framework could be adapted and tested across different faith traditions and educational systems, examining its flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and theological compatibility in diverse contexts.

Further exploration is needed on how digital technologies-such as online discussion forums and virtual reality experiences-can enhance inquiry-based religious learning and critical thinking engagement.

Teacher training institutions should embed modules on inquiry-based religious pedagogy, ensuring that the next generation of educators is equipped to facilitate faith-informed yet critical classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of specific pedagogical strategies that effectively foster critical thinking in the context of religious education. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize doctrinal transmission, the research demonstrates that inquiry-based learning (IBL) enhances students' ability to analyze, reflect, and engage in dialogue about complex moral and theological issues. This shift encourages learners to become active participants in constructing their own understanding, thereby aligning religious education with broader educational goals of critical and independent thought.

This research contributes a novel conceptual framework that integrates critical thinking skills within inquiry-based learning tailored for secondary-level religious education. The proposed framework offers a structured yet flexible model that educators can adapt to various religious traditions and curricular contexts. It bridges the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice by operationalizing abstract principles into practical teaching methodologies, thereby enriching both curriculum development and teacher training in this often overlooked area of education.

This study was conducted within a limited geographical and cultural scope, focusing primarily on schools with specific religious affiliations. The diversity of religious and cultural interpretations may present challenges to the universal application of the framework. Future research should expand the study to include a wider range of educational settings and religious perspectives, incorporating longitudinal methods to assess the long-term impact of inquiry-based strategies on students' critical thinking development and spiritual growth.

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