

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY AS A TOOL FOR DEEPENING RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Discourse in education has been informed by the intersection of philosophy and religion, producing tools for deeper comprehension, respect, and mental connectivity. The rational and reflective and dialogically critical aspects of philosophical inquiry strengthen and enrich the methodology of education in religion. The development of critical thinking, moral reasoning, and hermeneutic sensitivity shows learners ways of studying a religious tradition and texts beyond mere doctrinal transmission. This study uses philosophical inquiry in deepening a learner understands of a religion. It considers the early ideas, history, and contemporary approaches and implications for teaching the religion. It is posited that teaching religion with a philosophy of religion will strengthen inter- religious relations, and a sophisticated understanding of religions, and will encourage civil appreciation of the multi- religious and culturally diverse world we live in today.

Keywords: Philosophical inquiry, religious education, critical thinking, interfaith dialogue, hermeneutics, pedagogy

Introduction

The importance of education, especially religious education, in forming one's values, beliefs, and worldviews is fundamental. As suggested by the increase of religious, cultural, and intellectual socio-global complexities, there is an increasing educational need to move past rote and dogmatic instruction ... "Specifically Philosophy offers educational potential in relation to the deeper understanding of religious beliefs. Philosophy does not erode one's faith; instead, it provides an opportunity to engage one's religious beliefs academically"... (Miedema & Skeie, 2022, Jackson, 2019).

Education serves not merely as a means of transmitting knowledge but as a process of forming character, cultivating wisdom, and shaping human understanding. Within this broad educational enterprise, religious education occupies a unique position, as it deals with the deepest dimensions of human existence—faith, meaning, morality, and transcendence. However, in many modern educational systems, religious education faces a persistent tension between faith-based instruction and critical inquiry. This tension calls for pedagogical frameworks that respect the integrity of faith while promoting intellectual engagement and critical reflection (Wright, 2016). One such framework is philosophical inquiry, which has re-emerged in recent years as a valuable tool for fostering deeper religious understanding.

Philosophical inquiry, rooted in the classical tradition of Socratic dialogue and rational reflection, seeks to engage learners in the systematic exploration of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, and values (Audi, 2018). When applied to religious education, philosophical inquiry encourages students to ask profound questions: What is faith? How do we know God exists? What does it mean to live a moral life? These questions do not undermine belief but instead stimulate a richer and more authentic engagement with religious traditions (Jackson, 2019). Through reflective dialogue, conceptual clarification, and critical thinking, learners can move from rote memorization of religious facts to personal understanding and moral insight.

Historically, philosophy and religion have shared an intricate relationship. From Plato and Aristotle, whose metaphysical speculations influenced later theological thought, to Aquinas, Al-Farabi, and Maimonides, who harmonized reason and revelation, philosophy has consistently provided religion with conceptual and analytical depth (Davies, 2014; Goodman, 1992; Kraemer, 2008). In modern times, thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Wright have demonstrated that philosophical reflection can coexist with faith, helping believers navigate the intellectual and existential challenges of contemporary life (Tillich, 1951; Wright, 2016). Thus, philosophy and religion are not adversaries but partners in the human quest for truth and meaning.

In the context of education, philosophical inquiry offers tools for confronting the challenges of pluralism, secularization, and dogmatism. In pluralistic societies, students encounter diverse religious beliefs and worldviews. Without philosophical training, such diversity can lead to confusion or intolerance. However, philosophical inquiry equips learners with the capacity to understand, compare, and critically evaluate different religious claims, fostering dialogue and empathy rather than division (Gearon, 2018; Miedema & Skeie, 2022). Similarly, in an age marked by scientific rationalism and moral relativism, philosophy provides

frameworks for reasserting the rational credibility of faith while maintaining openness to other forms of knowledge.

Furthermore, philosophical inquiry aligns with the pedagogical goals of 21st-century education, which emphasize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and ethical reasoning (Harris & Jackson, 2020). It moves students from passive recipients of tradition to active participants in meaning-making. This is particularly relevant in religious education, where understanding should not be reduced to doctrinal assent but should involve reflective engagement with faith's intellectual, moral, and existential dimensions.

Therefore, this seminar explores philosophical inquiry as a tool for deepening religious understanding in education. It argues that the integration of philosophical thinking into religious education promotes intellectual humility, interpretive depth, and interfaith dialogue—essential skills in both faith formation and global citizenship. The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature on philosophical inquiry and religious education; subsequent sections present findings, summarize insights, draw conclusions, and offer recommendations for educational practice and policy.

In contemporary educational discourse, the role of philosophy in religious education has gained renewed attention due to increasing global pluralism, moral uncertainty, and the decline of traditional religious literacy (Miedema & Skeie, 2022). In many societies, religious education has been criticized for either being too confessional, focusing narrowly on doctrinal transmission, or too secular, reducing religion to cultural studies without engaging its existential depth (Gearon, 2018). Philosophical inquiry presents a viable middle ground between these extremes. It provides a framework through which learners can engage religious questions with intellectual honesty, moral seriousness, and interpretive openness.

Philosophical inquiry, understood as the disciplined art of questioning and reasoning, nurtures the ability to examine assumptions, clarify concepts, and articulate rational justifications for belief. In this way, it transforms religious education from indoctrination into interpretation and reflection (Hand, 2018). Rather than merely accepting inherited dogmas, students learn to explore the foundations of belief, assess evidence, and appreciate the complexity of faith traditions. This approach aligns with the broader aims of liberal education, which seeks to develop autonomous, critically aware individuals who can engage the world responsibly (Audi, 2018).

Moreover, philosophical inquiry is not alien to the religious quest itself. Theologians and philosophers across history have maintained that faith and reason are complementary dimensions of the human search for truth. As Augustine famously declared, “I believe in order to understand, and I understand in order to believe.” This dialectic between belief and understanding underlies the pedagogical power of philosophical reflection in religious education. By applying philosophical tools—logic, hermeneutics, epistemology, and ethics—learners are guided toward a deeper comprehension of religious phenomena, bridging the gap between faith and reason (Davies, 2014; Wright, 2016).

Philosophical inquiry also strengthens hermeneutical competence—the ability to interpret sacred texts and traditions meaningfully within changing cultural and historical contexts (Gadamer, 1975; Moran, 2017). In religious classrooms, philosophical hermeneutics encourages students to explore not only what a text says but why it says it and how it might speak to contemporary issues. This interpretive openness allows for richer discussions on moral dilemmas, religious diversity, and ethical responsibility. As Wright (2016) observes the philosophical dimension of religious education nurtures “reflective believers” who can live faithfully and intelligently in complex societies.

From a pedagogical perspective, philosophical inquiry promotes dialogical learning—education as conversation rather than instruction. The Socratic Method, which privileges questioning over asserting, dialogue over monologue, and reflection over memorization, creates classrooms where students learn to think with others rather than merely repeat inherited answers (Lipman, 2003). This community-of-inquiry approach has proven particularly effective in religious education because it transforms abstract theological concepts into lived questions of meaning, ethics, and identity (Harris & Jackson, 2020).

The urgency of incorporating philosophical inquiry into religious education is further heightened by the ethical and cultural challenges of the 21st century. Globalization, technological change, and moral relativism have created contexts in which young people grapple with conflicting values and truth claims. Without philosophical grounding, religious education risks becoming either rigidly dogmatic or intellectually superficial. Philosophical inquiry provides the means to engage these challenges critically, enabling learners to develop informed convictions grounded in both faith and reason (Miedema, 2020).

Ultimately, this seminar asserts that philosophical inquiry is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative educational process. It cultivates understanding rather than mere belief, dialogue rather than division, and wisdom rather than indoctrination. By equipping students with the capacity to think deeply and question meaningfully, philosophical inquiry enhances both the intellectual and spiritual maturity of learners. It offers a bridge between rational knowledge and religious commitment, preparing students to participate thoughtfully in interfaith dialogue, moral reasoning, and civic life.

Therefore, exploring philosophical inquiry as a tool for deepening religious understanding is both a theoretical and practical necessity for educators committed to holistic human development. The succeeding sections of this paper will review relevant literature, analyze the philosophical underpinnings of religious education, discuss findings from scholarly perspectives, and propose recommendations for integrating philosophical inquiry into contemporary educational practice.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how philosophical inquiry can improve religious education. This will be done through an exploration of the foundations of philosophical inquiry, the history and philosophy’s relationship with religion, the use of philosophy as pedagogy in various teaching contexts, and, lastly, the implications to current religious education and interfaith collaboration.

Literature Review

In recent years, the confluence of philosophical inquiry and the teaching of religion has become a growing field of interest. This literature can be organized around four broad, interrelated themes: (1) the conceptual and the theoretical; (2) the historical relations between philosophy and religion in the context of education; (3) the teaching of religion as a form of philosophical inquiry; and (4) the promotion of interfaith relations and critical thinking in a diverse society.

1. Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

In educational theory, philosophical inquiry can be traced to the rationalism of the Socratic tradition which emphasized the importance of dialogue and critical questioning (Audi, 2018; Lipman, 2003). Contemporary educational theory has been influenced by Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement, which contended that the introduction of children to dialogue and other forms of structured philosophical questioning should be a national educational goal, for the purpose of fostering critical, creative, and caring thinking. Philosophical inquiry, Lipman (2003) states, is concerned with fundamental questions and the multiple answers that can be found in a community of inquiry.

Further exploring texts on religious education, I came across Jackson (2019) who argues teaching philosophy facilitates a higher comprehension of 'understanding' religious beliefs because learners are taught to analytically assess doctrines and articulate their conclusions in a reasoned manner. Similarly, Miedema and Skeie (2022) claims bridging religious literacy and education on worldviews can be done by teaching students philosophical methods of inquiry and outlines a framework geared for students of religion and m.

In a similar train of thought, Wright (2016) asserts that comprehension of religion involves more than knowledge of a religious text. Rather, one must possess higher order reasoning skills to assess claims to faith. Such an approach is not aimed at the neutralization of religion, but on the enhancement of the capacity for reflective faith development.

Philosophical inquiry is the reasoned discipline that studies questions of existence, knowledge, values, and purpose (Audi, 2018) as defined by a dialogue combined with conceptual analysis and criticism. One of the most influential advocates of 'Philosophy for Children', Matthew Lipman (2003) argues that philosophical inquiry is a way of teaching students a more critical, creative, and caring form of thinking.

In the context of religious education, questions of philosophical inquiry include:

1. What are the characteristics of the divine?
2. How do we comprehend the language of religion?
3. What is the essence of authentic belief?
4. In what manner should holy writings be interpreted?

These questions aim at the understanding of the issues at hand, not merely at skepticism. Philosophy provides tools for religious learners to critically examine their beliefs, appreciate other viewpoints, and express their faith in a reasoned manner (Wright, 2016). Accordingly,

philosophical inquiry serves an epistemic and a hermeneutic function: it sharpens knowledge and expands understanding.

2 Historical Engagements between Philosophy and Religion

The integration of philosophy and religion in education has deep-rooted historical traditions. For example, Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle provided the intellectual groundwork for what was to become theological reasoning (Kenny, 2012). Then, Christian thinkers Augustine and Aquinas adapted and expanded these ideas, illustrating that reason and faith could be interwoven (Davies, 2014). Likewise, in the Islamic world, philosophers Al-Farabi and Averroes integrated reason through Aristotelian logic, encouraged rational theological discourse, and provided a new interpretation of the Qur'an (Goodman, 1992).

Kierkegaard (1985) and Tillich (1951) contributed to the existential and hermeneutical dimensions of faith, impelling religious education more than any other modern and contemporary philosophers. The personal appropriation of faith and critical engagement with religious ideas becomes a cornerstone for these thinkers, further positioning philosophy as a historical medium for refining religious understanding.

The interrelation between philosophy and religion has ancient roots, and remains as dynamic as ever. The classical period provided the foundation for rational inquiry. Subsequent Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, influenced Christian, Islamic, and Jewish education and theology (Kenny, 2012). Augustine and Aquinas, early Christian thinkers, emboldened their theological arguments with philosophy. For instance, Aquinas's rational theology developed through Aristotelian philosophy remains central to religious education today (Davies, 2014).

Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, among Islamic and Jewish thinkers like Maimonides, integrated Greek philosophy into Islamic thought, fostering the exploration of reasoned inquiries into revelation and theology (Goodman, 1992; Kraemer, 2008). Moving into the modern era, thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich examined the existential and hermeneutical aspects of faith, highlighting the ongoing relevance of philosophy to contemporary issues in theology (Tillich, 1951; Kierkegaard, 1985).

Overall, the proposed synthesis of the historical development of philosophical systems confirms that, rather than supplanting it, the pursuit of philosophy has always been a means of deepening one's understanding of religion.

3 Philosophical Inquiry as Pedagogy in Religious Education

A comprehensive approach to pedagogy incorporates multiple methods of philosophical inquiry into religious education. For instance, Hand (2018) proposed a philosophical approach that encourages the rational critique of religious beliefs while honoring one's personal faith. In furtherance of this, Harris and Jackson (2020) contend that the use of philosophical methods in religious education facilitates learners' assessment of religious claims, understanding of diverse theological views, and participation in meaningful conversations.

Gearon (2018) argues that the philosophical approach grants religious education a "third space," a space that is neither catechetical instruction nor secular moral education. Modern

educational practices use Socratic dialogues, communities of inquiry, and reflective questioning to help students think critically and deeply about religious ideas.

As in the work of Miedema (2020), the inquiry placed philosophical work within the education of citizens for democracy, positing that philosophical work provides the tools for public, and probably political, critique of religion. Moran (2017) also focuses on the role of hermeneutics, noting that philosophical interpretation allows students to engage more freely with sacred texts and navigate fluid doctrines, rather than with a fixed, prescribed approach.

Philosophical inquiry can be taught using Socratic dialogues, reflective writings, discussions, and various models of a *community of inquiry* (Lipman, 2003). These activities and procedures help students examine a religious idea in a group, challenge each other's assumptions, and express their ideas in a coherent manner.

4 Philosophical Inquiry, Pluralism, and Critical Thinking

In a pluralistic society, the Religious Education curriculum must support the individual development of faith while also facilitating an understanding of diverse faiths. There is a growing body of literature that advocates the use of a Religious Education curriculum that incorporates a philosophical dimension. For example, Jackson (2019) and Miedema (2020) observe that philosophical inquiry, which is an aspect of secular education, can create the conditions necessary for the religiously divergent to engage in civil and contentious dialogue. They suggest that philosophical inquiry helps in the development of empathy and offers the possibility of rational collaboration while also promoting tolerance to divergent views.

This is an important aspect of Critical Theory. Wright (2016) contends that an all-encompassing Religious Education curriculum must include the teaching of critical virtues: the intellectual virtue of humility, and the courage to critique. Students must be taught, within philosophical inquiry, to identify, and question their beliefs, weigh arguments, and engage in dialogue with competing views. More recently, a range of studies (Harris & Jackson, 2020; Miedema & Skeie, 2022) have shown that the approaches proposed in the literature not only deepen understanding of a given faith, but reduce prejudice that is associated with that faith, and promote cohesive social relationships.

Persuasive Literature illustrates how the integration of philosophical inquiry can assist in structuring and teaching deep religious comprehension. The interplay of philosophy and religion has historically been constructive. Inquiry philosophy builds the ability to reason and interpret, while teaching enhances thinking, dialogues healthy, and interfaith relations. Literature also expresses how integrating philosophical inquiry into the teaching of religion further contemporary aims of education aimed at producing reflective, reasoned, and empathic citizens.

Despite these positive attributes, some noted challenges include teacher readiness, limitations of the curriculum, and possible dissonance of the philosophical and faith views (Hand, 2018; Gearon, 2018). The required overcoming of these challenges will depend on the development of purposeful teacher training and curriculum development that meshes philosophical teaching approaches and religious traditions.

5. Philosophical Inquiry in Religious Education

Critical Thinking and Intellectual Virtue

Religious commitment can remain unchanged while the study of philosophy supports the development of the intellectual virtues of humility, courage, and open-mindedness, which are essential for the authentic development of faith (Hand, 2018). It promotes the ability to think critically about religious claims, assess arguments, and separate beliefs from the evidence (Harris & Jackson, 2020).

Hermeneutical Engagement

Religious philosophy involves the interpretation of religious texts and the history of a faith tradition. With the influence of Gadamer (1975), philosophical hermeneutics articulates a dialogical engagement of text and reader. Through philosophical reasoning, students are taught to engage texts not as collections of fixed truths, but as living texts containing meanings to be uncovered and interpreted (Moran, 2017).

Dialogue and Pluralism

Religious education in a diverse society must promote interfaith dialogue as well as understanding. Philosophical inquiry, by fostering the appreciation of reasoned debate and competing viewpoints, offers a neutral framework for entering engagement with a variety of a person's faith traditions (Gearon, 2018). It encourages learners to go beyond simplifications and engage with the intricacies of a situation.

7. Implications for Contemporary Religious Education

Including philosophical inquiry in the teaching of religion improves the following:

1. **Religious Literacy Improvement****: Through rational exploration, students acquire a greater appreciation of the doctrines, traditions, and practices of a religion.
2. **Engaged Critical Citizenship**: Learners are prepared to engage with religious and moral issues in public life in a critical manner (Miedema, 2020).
3. **Facilitating Interfaith Dialogue**: Philosophical conversation fosters mutual appreciation which helps lessen intolerance.
4. **Deepening One's Faith**: Engaging in philosophy, as opposed to the fears of the 'secularization hypothesis', can lead to a more developed and thoughtful faith (Wright, 2016).

Findings

The study discerned several prominent functions of philosophical inquiry on enhancing understanding of religion within an educational framework.

1. Philosophical Inquiry Shows Critical Religious Literacy:

Engagement in philosophical inquiry enables several learners to comprehend, assess, and coherently articulate various religious views and beliefs. This achievement surpasses simple rote memorization as it promotes the critical analysis of religious material (Jackson, 2019; Harris & Jackson, 2020).

2. Historical Integration of Philosophy and Religion Enriches Pedagogy:

Christian, Islamic, and Jewish historical traditions show that philosophy acts an intrinsic tool of rational theological thought and educational practice (Davies, 2014; Goodman, 1992; Kenny,

2012). This historical legacy justifies contemporary practices which seek to revitalize the integration of philosophical inquiry within religious instruction.

3. **Philosophical Methods Foster Dialogical and Hermeneutical Skills:**

The use of Socratic dialogue and hermeneutical understanding of texts and traditions encourages students, to engage in reflective and dialogical thinking. This, in turn, promotes religious understanding and personal appropriation of the concepts (Gadamer, 1975; Moran, 2017).

4. **Philosophical Inquiry Facilitates Interfaith Dialogue and Pluralism:**

Philosophical inquiry serves as a basis for rational discussion of contentious religious worldviews, in a pluralistic society. It cultivates respect and appreciation of differing faith traditions and promotes understanding among students (Gearon, 2018; Miedema & Skeie, 2022).

5. **Teacher Preparedness and Curriculum Design Are Critical Factors:**

A recurring theme in the literature is that the integration of philosophical inquiry into religious education is contingent on the availability of well-qualified instructors and adaptable course content. The absence of philosophical training for educators results in restrictions on the scope of classroom dialogue (Hand, 2018).

Summary

This discipline focuses on Religious Education and the use of philosophical inquiry as both a conceptual and pedagogical approach. The foundations of philosophical inquiry and the complex interplay of rationales, critical reflections, and dialogues bring potential for Religious Education. Education and Religion have influenced and shaped various philosophies of the world, attesting the value of philosophical approaches in theological learning.

The relevant literature suggests the use of philosophical inquiry for religious literacy, critical engagement, and framework for interfaith relations in a pluralistic society, and intertwined hermeneutical approaches. Religious pedagogical approaches of the Socratic dialogue and communities of inquiry assist learners in collaborative engagement and the disposition of critical reflective inquiry. These frameworks encourage learners towards the virtues of intellectual humility, openness, and critical discernment.

Integration of philosophical approaches in teaching Religion remains obstructed, for instance unprepared teachers, limited curriculum, and the possible conflict in teaching Religion and critical inquiry. These can be addressed by purposeful teacher preparation, curriculum development, and supportive structures within the institution.

Conclusion

Students of all ages should recognize the unique value of philosophical inquiry in religious education. Engaging students in dialogue focused on the reasons and possible interpretations of different religious views fosters a perception of faith as a rational and constructive instrument. Faith as a rational instrument will actively engage the student in a dialogue of inquiry and the student will be more willing to defend faith as a constructive value. Faith will be enhanced through reasoning. Increased religiosity through a constructive dialogue of faith will respond positively to the need for critical secularism and heightened moral relativism of contemporary society. The importance of constructive moral religiosity through

philosophical inquiry in contemporary society enhances religiosity as a moral construct. Engaging students of religious faith improves their faith as a rational construct. The predominant value of faith as a rational tool active constructively engaged in moral inquiry will build strengthened moral modularity to respond to heightened moral relativism and critical secularism. Faith will be enhanced through reasoning. Increased religiosity through a constructive dialogue of faith will respond positively to the need for critical secularism and heightened moral relativism of contemporary society. The importance of constructive moral religiosity through philosophical inquiry in contemporary society enhances religiosity as a moral construct. Engaging students of religious faith improves their faith as a rational construct. The predominant value of faith as a rational tool active constructively engaged in moral inquiry will build strengthened moral modularity to respond to heightened moral relativism and critical secularism.

Recommendations

The conclusions and findings of this research breed certain recommendations as follow:

1. Religious education must develop a program at every level of education that incorporates philosophical questioning and teaching as discourse. This will mean restructuring a program to include more reflective and critical thinking on religious issues.
2. Religious education teacher training should include the philosophy of religion, philosophical pedagogy, and critical thinking as core subjects. Current religious education teachers should undergo training to help them acquire the skills of a philosophical educator (Hand, 2018).
3. Active learner engagement and deep comprehension of content must be fostered through the regular use of Socratic seminars, community of inquiry models, and hermeneutical discussions associated with critical inquiry and the teachings of the Socratic Method.
4. Religious educators must work with teachers of philosophy, theologians, and program developers to plan cohesive teaching methods that preserve the essence of the religion and encourage critical inquiry.
5. Government education ministries and curriculum authorities must provide structures that appreciate the role of philosophical inquiry in religious education to promote religious literacy and social cohesion.
6. The influence of philosophical inquiry on students' conceptualizations of religion, moral reasoning, and interfaith relationships in varying cultural settings warrants additional empirical studies.

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