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From Lā Ikrāha fī al-Dīn to the Classroom Semantic Fields of Religious Freedom across Exegetical Traditions

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Abstract

The phrase lā ikrāha fī al-dīn is frequently associated with religious tolerance, yet its educational significance depends on how interpretive reasoning is translated into teaching. This article examines selected configurations of the semantic field of religious freedom in Qur'anic exegesis and develops a framework for Islamic religious education. The study uses qualitative, interpretive library research combining a semantic comparison informed by Izutsu with maqāṣid-oriented educational reconstruction. Commentary on Q. 2:256 provides the principal textual focus, while scholarship on curriculum and religious education informs the proposed pedagogical implications. The analysis distinguishes historical-juristic, rational-theological, and maqāṣid-oriented emphases without treating them as mutually exclusive chronological stages. Classical discussions already contain disagreement about scope, abrogation, and the relationship between compulsion and belief, challenging a simple narrative of movement from a uniformly restrictive past toward an expansive present. The article further distinguishes the lexical meaning of ikrāh, its relational configuration, and contemporary applications concerning responsible choice. Its educational contribution is a translation framework connecting exegetical reasoning, educational purposes, learning activities, and assessment of demonstrated understanding. A comparative matrix and a proposed lesson-design matrix make these connections explicit. Tolerance is consequently presented as a reasoned ethical outcome rather than an unexplained proof-text. Because an identifiable curricular corpus and classroom observations are not available, the article does not establish the prevalence of reductive teaching or the effectiveness of an intervention. It concludes that semantic comparison can inform curriculum design when source statements, normative reconstruction, and pedagogical proposals remain clearly distinguished. Future research should examine identifiable syllabi and classroom practices before testing the proposed framework empirically.

Keywords: Qur'anic Semantics; Religious Freedom; Maqāṣid; Islamic Religious Education; Curriculum Design

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INTRODUCTION

Qur'anic references to religious freedom acquire educational meaning through interpretation, selection, and teaching. The phrase lā ikrāha fī al-dīn in Q. 2:256 is especially important because it connects non-compulsion with the distinction between right guidance and error. An English translation provides an accessible entry point, but translation alone cannot represent the history of its interpretation (Abdel Haleem, 2004). For Islamic religious education, the central question is therefore not simply whether the verse can support tolerance, but how its reasoning is preserved when an exegetical discussion becomes a learning objective or classroom activity.

This question involves a distinction between the meaning of a Qur'anic expression and the uses made of it. In Izutsu's account, the basic meaning of a key term must be considered alongside its relations with other concepts within a semantic field. His studies provide a vocabulary for examining relationships among belief, accountability, and ethical judgment (Izutsu, 1964; Izutsu, 1966/2002). Applied to Q. 2:256, that approach directs attention beyond an isolated translation of ikrāh toward dīn, rushd, ghayy, and the wider language of guidance. Ikhtiyār serves as an interpretive counterpart concerned with choice; it is not a word occurring in this verse or a derivative of the root k-r-h.

Classical commentaries already contain interpretive plurality. Al-Ṭabarī discusses historical reports and the applicability of non-compulsion to communities accepting a particular legal relationship with Muslim authority. Al-Qurṭubī records competing explanations, including arguments about abrogation and scope. Al-Rāzī discusses an account in which compelled belief would undermine the significance of moral testing (al-Ṭabarī, n.d.; al-Qurṭubī, n.d.; al-Rāzī, n.d.). These differences make a uniform account of "the classical position" inadequate. They also caution against a narrative in which reason or inward conviction entered the discussion only in the modern period.

Contemporary contextual interpretation provides further tools for relating these discussions to present educational concerns. Saeed distinguishes engagement with historical circumstances from the uncritical transfer of earlier applications, while Rahman links interpretation with the intellectual renewal of Muslim education (Saeed, 2006; Saeed, 2014; Rahman, 1982). Such approaches do not make earlier commentary irrelevant. They require interpreters to explain how a proposed application follows from textual reasoning and how its present context differs from that of the source. The educational implications of non-compulsion accordingly require an argument, rather than a direct equation between medieval legal categories and classroom relationships.

Maqāṣid-oriented scholarship provides a normative language for this argument. The reading associated with Ibn ʿĀshūr and contemporary discussions of Q. 2:256 connect interpretation with purposes that exceed a detached verbal citation (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1969; Latifahmulyani, 2023). Auda's systems approach and Kamali's account of Islamic law further help distinguish an interpretive purpose from the particular institutional arrangement through which that purpose is pursued (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008). This article proposes that the relationship between religion, reason, and responsible choice can inform teaching. It does not

assume that all classical jurists or all contemporary educators assign identical meanings to those relationships.

Recent Indonesian scholarship addresses Qur'anic curriculum foundations, curriculum implementation, ethical education, and moderate religious identity (Afif, 2026; Junaidi et al., 2026; Supandi et al., 2026; Susetyo et al., 2026). These studies establish the relevance of linking religious values with educational arrangements. However, their broad themes do not demonstrate how a particular school syllabus represents Q. 2:256. That question requires identifiable documents and traceable passages. A conceptual discussion can identify what to examine and why, but it should not substitute general descriptions of Islamic education for a documented analysis of a national curricular corpus.

The educational issue is also wider than the choice of supporting verses. Halstead's discussion of Islamic education and Sahin's work on pedagogy locate religious learning within questions of formation, understanding, and the learner's developing identity (Halstead, 2004; Sahin, 2013). Research on religious education in plural settings similarly emphasizes representation, interpretation, and dialogue (Jackson, 1997; Jackson, 2014). These perspectives suggest that tolerance should be considered both as a social aspiration and as a reasoned educational outcome. The quality of teaching depends partly on whether students can explain an ethical judgment rather than merely reproduce its accepted wording.

This article asks how selected exegetical discussions configure the relationship between non-compulsion and guidance, and what that comparison implies for the design of Islamic religious education. It develops an interpretive comparison followed by a pedagogical framework. Its contribution is to distinguish textual explanation, normative reconstruction, and educational design, thereby making the movement from tafsīr to curriculum explicit and open to criticism. The resulting framework is a proposal for teaching and future document analysis, rather than an empirical finding that particular schools have already adopted or neglected it.

METHOD

The study uses qualitative, interpretive library research. Its first analytical layer compares discussions of Q. 2:256, and its second develops pedagogical implications from that comparison. The design follows the distinction between synthesizing a body of scholarship and reporting a systematic review with documented retrieval and screening procedures (Snyder, 2019). No search totals, screening diagram, participant sample, classroom observation, or intervention outcomes are claimed. The object of inquiry is an argument about relationships among texts, interpretation, and educational purposes.

The principal textual references are the commentaries associated with al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Rāzī, and Ibn ʿĀshūr. Commentary on Q. 2:256 is the primary locator. Online entries supply retrievable locators for the first three; publication dates are not inferred from the authors' death dates (al-Ṭabarī, n.d.; al-Qurṭubī, n.d.; al-Rāzī, n.d.). Amīn's work on al-Kashshāf and Permana's discussion of al-Nasafī function as comparative scholarship rather than independent evidence of modern curricular practice (Amīn, 2007; Permana, 2025). The selection is purposive and represents contrasting interpretive emphases, not the entire exegetical tradition.

The analytical units are passages explaining ikrāh, the scope of non-compulsion, the relationship of rushd to ghayy, and the status of belief or guidance. Lexical relations are distinguished from thematic associations: terms concerning justice, mercy, or moderation may be relevant without sharing the same Arabic root. A mapping matrix records the issue addressed, the accompanying concepts, the scope of the explanation, and the boundary between a source statement and the article's inference. Thematic grouping organizes the comparison without treating interpretive agreement as a quantitative finding (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the educational layer, document analysis supplies a framework for distinguishing document identity, context, purpose, and evidential value (Bowen, 2009). A reproducible inventory of PAI syllabi and passage-level curricular coding is not available for the present study. The educational analysis is therefore restricted to a conceptual translation framework and proposed indicators for future examination. Secondary curriculum studies inform the questions asked; they do not establish the content of unspecified syllabi. Table 2 operationalizes the framework as possible objectives, activities, and assessment evidence rather than observed results.

Analytical credibility depends on separating source description from interpretation and recommendation. Contrasting explanations are retained rather than harmonized into a single position, and the proposed curricular applications are identified as the authors' reconstruction. No independent coding agreement or empirical validation is claimed. Limitations include purposive selection, reliance on available editions and online presentations, and the absence of a documented curricular corpus. These limits restrict claims about historical completeness, the prevalence of particular teaching practices, and educational effectiveness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The comparison supports a distinction between continuity of a focal expression and variation in its explanatory setting. The semantic significance of ikrāh is shaped by the question being asked: who may be compelled, whether conviction can be produced through compulsion, or how a religious community should organize relations with others. These questions overlap across periods. The result is better described as a changing configuration of interpretive emphases than a sequence in which a narrow classical meaning simply disappears and a universally accepted modern meaning replaces it.

Al-Ṭabarī gives substantial attention to transmitted reports and the legal scope of the verse. His discussion connects non-compulsion with groups for whom jizya may be accepted, while retaining distinctions among categories in the inherited legal discourse (al-Ṭabarī, n.d.). The interpretive point is that non-compulsion is discussed through a historically situated account of relations between communities. A classroom application should explain that setting before asking what ethical implications can responsibly be drawn from it. It should not turn a description of a historical legal category into a general judgment about present students or their families.

Al-Qurṭubī presents multiple explanations, including disagreement about whether the verse is abrogated or remains applicable with a particular scope (al-Qurṭubī, n.d.). His entry therefore supplies evidence of debate within the classical tradition. Reducing it to a single unequivocal rule would lose part of the material

relevant to the article's own argument. Educationally, the entry can illustrate the difference between reporting an interpretation, explaining its reasoning, and accepting it as one's own conclusion. Such distinctions help preserve the intellectual character of religious learning without requiring an introductory lesson to reproduce every juristic detail.

Al-Rāzī includes a rational-theological explanation in which the possibility of choice is connected with moral testing (al-Rāzī, n.d.). This establishes an important qualification to the proposed historical trajectory: an argument against compelled conviction is already present in pre-modern commentary. Al-Rāzī died before al-Qurṭubī, while al-Zamakhsharī belongs to an earlier period than both. These chronological relationships prevent the analytical categories from functioning as successive historical stages. A category such as "rational-epistemic" identifies a mode of explanation, not an era in which all commentators shared the same outlook.

The relationship between rushd and ghayy also needs precision. In this context, rushd concerns right guidance and its distinction from error; it should not simply be translated as a modern developmental measure of psychological maturity. The verse can support discussion of discernment, but the pedagogical language of developing judgment is an interpretive extension. Izutsu's account helps clarify why a key term cannot be read independently of its conceptual relationships (Izutsu, 1964). It does not remove the need to justify a particular educational inference or permit an interpreter to substitute contemporary terminology for the source without explanation.

Comparative engagement with al-Kashshāf through Amīn and with al-Nasafī through Permana broadens the discussion of linguistic and moderation-oriented readings (Amīn, 2007; Permana, 2025). The latter is a contemporary study of a pre-modern commentary, not evidence that al-Nasafī himself was a modern exegete. Distinguishing the date of a commentator from the date of a study about that commentator avoids a false chronology. It also clarifies what a secondary source can establish: an account of how a text is read, rather than direct evidence of how that text appears in an actual school syllabus.

The maqāṣid-oriented layer changes the principal question from the scope of a particular historical explanation toward the purposes that should inform its present application. Ibn ʿĀshūr's commentary supplies an important point of reference, while Latifahmulyani explicitly considers Q. 2:256 through maqāṣid interpretation (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1969; Latifahmulyani, 2023). The article develops this orientation into a pedagogical proposition: protection of religion and reason should invite consideration of how learners understand, deliberate, and accept responsibility. This is the authors' normative reconstruction. It should not be attributed, in every operational detail, to a classical or modern commentary.

Auda and Kamali help situate that reconstruction within wider questions of purposes, interpretation, and legal reasoning (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008). Hajar's discussion adds a contemporary concern that maqāṣid claims remain accountable to Qur'anic guidance (Hajar, 2026). Together, these perspectives support asking how non-compulsion relates to educational purposes, while resisting the treatment of maqāṣid as a label attached to any preferred conclusion. A defensible application must explain its textual basis, identify the institution being discussed, and consider the consequences of the proposed practice. Purpose-based reasoning supplements careful interpretation rather than replacing it.

Human rights discussions sharpen the need for this distinction. Baderin's comparative treatment and Saeed and Saeed's work on religion and apostasy address debates wider than a single verse (Baderin, 2003; Saeed & Saeed, 2004). Fikra and Busyro examine blasphemy and maṣlaḥa within an Indonesian legal discussion (Fikra & Busyro, 2026). These sources establish that religious freedom raises interpretive and institutional questions, but a classroom framework is not a legal ruling on every contested issue. Educational examples should therefore be designed to encourage reasoned analysis without asking teachers or students to resolve complex legal disputes on the basis of a brief lesson.

Table 1. Interpretive registers and the limits of pedagogical inference.

Register and sources	Explanatory focus	Key relation	Educational inference and limit
Historical-juristic al-Ṭabarī; al-Qurṭubī	Reports, scope, and competing explanations	Non-compulsion and historically specified communities	Explain context and disagreement; avoid direct transfer of legal categories to learners.
Rational-theological al-Rāzī; comparative discussion of al-Kashshāf	Choice, conviction, and moral testing	Guidance, error, and accountable belief	Discuss reasons and discernment; this register is already pre-modern.
Maqāṣid-oriented reconstruction Ibn ʿĀshūr; contemporary scholarship	Purposes informing present application	Religion, reason, dignity, and responsibility	Develop a reasoned educational proposal; classroom implications require separate justification.

The first pedagogical implication is to distinguish guidance from the attempt to compel a declaration of belief. Religious education necessarily selects content, explains a tradition, establishes classroom routines, and assesses learning. Those features do not make every form of educational authority equivalent to coercion. The issue is how authority operates and what it demands. Abou El Fadl's distinction between interpretive authority and authoritarianism, together with Sahin's critical account of educational formation, provides a useful basis for examining this relationship (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Sahin, 2018). A teacher can explain a religious position while making reasons and questions part of the learning process.

This distinction also requires care when discussing the learner. Biesta's account redirects attention from measurable performance alone to educational purpose and helps formulate questions about opportunities to reason and participate (Biesta, 2010). This is a comparative educational resource, not a substitute for Qur'anic interpretation. Its relevance lies in making the institutional implications of a proposed value visible. If a curriculum values responsible judgment, its activities and assessment should give learners opportunities to demonstrate reasoning rather than equate learning solely with the repetition of an expected answer.

Table 1 summarizes the principal interpretive registers. It separates a text's explanatory focus from the article's educational inference. The registers are analytically related and historically overlapping; the table should not be read as a ranking of interpreters or proof of a single inevitable development. Its purpose is to make visible the steps through which an educational implication is derived and the

evidential limit attached to each step. Where a conclusion is pedagogical, it is identified as a proposed implication rather than presented as a direct statement by a source.

The second pedagogical implication concerns how interpretation is represented. Jackson's interpretive approach and Grimmitt's collection on religious education provide resources for designing encounters with religious material that combine attention to meaning, representation, and learners' responses (Jackson, 1997; Grimmitt, 2000). Applied here, an age-appropriate lesson can contrast two explanations of the verse, identify the question each addresses, and ask students to explain a difference. The aim is not to imply that every interpretation is equally persuasive, but to make the grounds of an interpretation available for discussion and evaluation.

Comparative policy resources similarly distinguish education about religions from the uncritical imposition of a particular religious identity. The Toledo Guiding Principles and Jackson's Signposts address fairness, representation, and dialogue in plural educational contexts (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007; Jackson, 2014). Their institutional settings differ from confessional PAI. They should therefore inform a comparison rather than be transferred unchanged. Their useful contribution is to foreground questions about how students are represented, how disagreement is handled, and whether classroom participation is compatible with respect for persons holding different convictions.

A proposed lesson sequence can begin with Q. 2:256, introduce its key terms, compare selected explanations, and examine a short classroom scenario. Students might consider a discussion in which a learner asks why tolerance is justified and is discouraged from asking further questions. The task would be to distinguish respectful guidance, disagreement, and silencing, then explain which evidence supports the distinction. The scenario is illustrative, not a reported event. Gilly's preprint provides a contemporary argument about coercion in compulsory education, but its status and different institutional context limit its evidential weight (Gilly, 2026).

The assessment should evaluate the quality of the response rather than treat a declaration of inward conviction as directly measurable. Possible criteria include accurate representation of the verse, recognition of an interpretive difference, use of reasons, and respectful engagement with another perspective. Sahin's discussion of identity formation and Halstead's account of educational aims support considering learning as a process of formation and understanding (Sahin, 2013; Halstead, 2004). The rubric proposed in Table 2 is not a validated instrument. It would require adaptation to the age group and institutional setting, followed by empirical examination before claims of effectiveness could be made.

Table 2. Proposed lesson-design and assessment matrix.

Learning objective	**Proposed activity**	**Possible evidence**	**Assessment focus**
Identify textual relationships	Read Q. 2:256 with a short glossary.	Annotated verse and concept notes.	Accuracy of terms; distinction between text and inference.

Learning objective	Proposed activity	Possible evidence	Assessment focus
Compare interpretations	Contrast selected historical and rational explanations.	Brief comparison using source locators.	Fair representation and explanation of difference.
Explain an ethical judgment	Discuss an illustrative scenario of respectful questioning.	Reasoned response to the scenario.	Relevant reasons and recognition of disagreement.
Evaluate a proposed practice	Review the alignment of a classroom rule with a stated purpose.	Short recommendation with a justification.	Consistency among purposes, actions, and evidence.

Recent Indonesian studies provide a context in which these proposals may be relevant. Afif links Qur'anic epistemological concerns with curriculum development, while Junaidi and colleagues discuss barriers to curriculum implementation (Afif, 2026; Junaidi et al., 2026). Supandi and colleagues examine ethical education and tolerance, and Susetyo and colleagues discuss spiritual pedagogy and moderate identity (Supandi et al., 2026; Susetyo et al., 2026). These sources should not be treated as interchangeable evidence of what all PAI syllabi contain. They support the importance of the educational problem; document-specific evidence is still needed to establish the prevalence or form of proof-text reduction.

Arifin and colleagues' study of humanist fiqh in interfaith relations further illustrates that ethical commitments may be examined through lived social arrangements (Arifin et al., 2026). Abu-Nimer's work on interreligious peacebuilding offers a comparative account of learning across religious differences (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Neither establishes the outcome of the lesson proposed here. Their contribution is to show why interpersonal practice deserves attention alongside verbal commitment. A student may memorize an affirmation of tolerance while still needing structured opportunities to listen, distinguish disagreement from disrespect, and offer reasons for an ethical judgment.

The proposed translation framework has four linked elements: exegetical reasoning, a stated educational purpose, aligned learning activities, and assessment of demonstrated understanding. Figure 1 shows these relationships and the evaluative feedback needed to revise a lesson. Rahman's thematic engagement with the Qur'an and Saeed's discussion of the transmission of religious knowledge help frame this movement as an interpretive process rather than mechanical transfer (Rahman, 1980; Saeed, 2026). Educational simplification is unavoidable, but it need not erase the reasons that support a conclusion. The curriculum can make selected reasons explicit without reproducing an entire commentary.

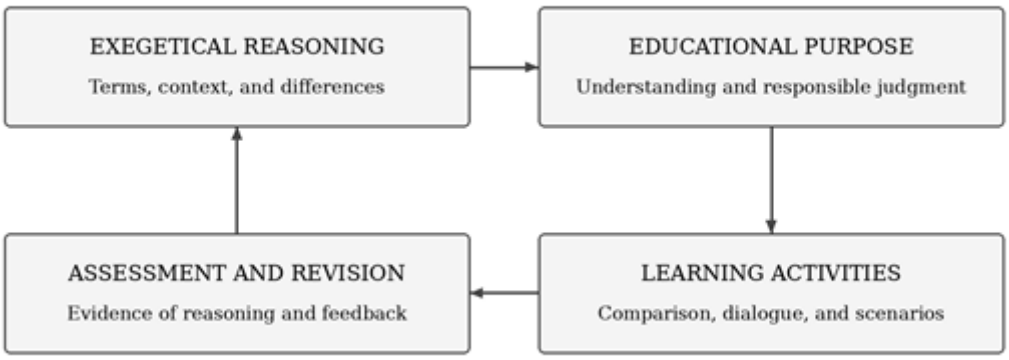


Figure 1. From exegetical reasoning to educational design and reflective revision.

A future curricular study can use the framework as an audit matrix. Each document would need an identifier, institutional level, publication date or version, accessible location, and the passage analyzed. Coding could distinguish the presence of the verse, explanation of key terms, acknowledgment of interpretive differences, stated ethical purposes, and the relationship of activities to assessment. Following Bowen's account, a document's evidential role should be evaluated in relation to its production and use (Bowen, 2009). A syllabus can support a claim about planned teaching; it cannot by itself establish how a teacher or student actually understood the lesson.

The theoretical contribution is therefore the distinction among semantic continuity, interpretive diversity, and curricular translation. The focal expression can remain stable while explanatory emphases and institutional uses vary. Saeed's contextualist work and Rahman's analysis of intellectual renewal support treating this relationship as a problem that demands explicit reasoning (Saeed, 2014; Rahman, 1982). The present framework does not prove that every later reading is more inclusive or that every curriculum simplifies in the same way. It identifies where an educational claim moves beyond source description and what additional evidence would be needed to sustain it.

Several limitations remain. The purposive set of commentaries cannot represent all Islamic interpretive traditions, and the availability of online texts does not replace critical edition work. The analysis does not establish a causal relationship between exegetical change and curriculum design. No documented sample of syllabi or classroom data is available to support prevalence claims or claims about student outcomes. Future work should combine traceable document analysis with teacher interviews, classroom observation, and a carefully piloted learning design. Comparative investigation could examine how different institutional settings interpret the relationship between non-compulsion, guidance, and assessment.

CONCLUSION

The educational significance of lā ikrāha fī al-dīn depends on how its interpretive reasoning is translated into teaching. Selected commentaries reveal overlapping historical, juristic, and rational-theological emphases rather than a simple progression from a uniformly restrictive past to a uniformly expansive present. Maqāṣid-oriented reasoning provides a basis for developing educational implications, but those implications must be distinguished from claims made directly by a commentary. This distinction preserves the article's central concern: tolerance should be taught with an intelligible ethical and interpretive foundation rather than reduced to an unexplained citation.

The proposed framework connects textual explanation, educational purposes, classroom activities, and assessment of understanding. It offers a basis for designing lessons and for auditing identifiable curricular documents, while leaving empirical questions open. It does not establish that particular schools have already adopted the framework or that an intervention improves tolerance. Further document-based and classroom research is required to test these possibilities. The practical recommendation is to preserve selected interpretive reasons within age-appropriate learning, encourage respectful questioning, and evaluate the quality of students' reasoning through transparent criteria.

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