Islamic Religious Education in Contemporary Austrian Society: Muslim Teachers Dealing with Controversial Contemporary Topics

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Abstract: Muslims in Austria have, since 1982/83, had the unique privilege of providing Islamic religious education in secular public schools, including primary, middle and secondary schools. As well as opportunities, this privilege brings responsibilities and challenges to the Muslim community. Since its beginnings, Islamic religious education in Austria has, among other things, been especially characterized by the heterogeneity and diversity of its participants, as well as the general diversity in society and the secular context of public schools. In this context, theoretical discussions about the orientation of and justification for Islamic religious education in secular public schools suggest that for both teachers and the subject itself, an awareness, appreciation and inclusion of diversity, dialogue, multi-perspectivity and reflexivity is required. The empirical study on the professionalization of Islamic religious education, drawn on in this article, is based on Muslim teachers' own perspectives and experiences. The research findings of that study show how Muslims become Islamic religious education teachers, how Muslim teachers see their roles in secular public schools, how they teach and approach Islam or Islamic topics, what the challenges of teaching Islamic education in public schools are, and other related topics. This article (re-)analyzes used and unused data from the study and focuses on how diversity and controversial topics can be approached in the context of Islamic religious education.

1. Introduction: Islamic Religious Education in Secular Public Schools

The State of Austria gives officially recognized religious communities the right and the opportunity to provide their own "denominational" religious education in public schools for their own community members.[1] Once a religious community meets the necessary conditions and is recognized by the state,[2] it is the respective community's responsibility to develop the curriculum and its content, such as school textbooks and teaching materials; it is also the community's responsibility to authorize (*ijazah*) and

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[1] The legal right to provide religious education in public schools is anchored in the Austrian constitution, Art. 17 (StGG. RGBL. Nr. 142 1867). The details of "denominational" religious education are regulated by the "religious education law" of 1949 (RelUG. BGBL. Nr. 190 1949). According to the law, denominational religious education is "provided, directed and directly supervised" by the respective religious community (§2 (1) RelUG. BGBL. Nr. 190 1949).

[2] The recognition requirements are basically regulated by the "law of 29 May 1874 regarding requirements of the recognition of religious communities" (RGBL. Nr. 68 1874). Current requirements include, for instance, the need to have existed as a religious community in Austria for a period of at least 20 years (including 10 years in an organized form and at least 5 years as a state-registered religious community). In addition, the religious community must have at least 2 members per million (0.2 per cent) of the Austrian population after the last census (oesterreich.gv.at (2019)).

employ qualified Muslims as teachers. In return, the state takes care of the implementation of the respective religious education in the public school system, and finances the costs (Rees 2018).

Although the religious community in question is responsible for the curriculum and the content of its own religious education, the education and teaching have to take the secular public school context and the broader social context into account. For instance, the current curriculum and school textbooks for Islamic religious education in Austria are the result of a revision process initiated by public discourses on the quality of Islamic religious education and the professionalism of Muslim teachers (Khorchide 2009a, pp. 34–9), which, in turn, were triggered by a published survey on the views and attitudes of Muslim teachers towards social issues such as diversity and democracy (Khorchide 2009b).

Therefore, it is clear that one specific characteristic of (Islamic) religious education in the context of secular public schools is that it is carried out in dialogue with the broader society and politics. In this regard, J. Habermas (2001, p. 13) speaks of the "translation" of religious convictions into a secular language and vice versa. (Islamic) religious education in public schools makes the translation and communication of (Muslim) religious convictions, beliefs and views possible by inter-religious cooperation and learning with other religious communities. This also allows Muslims and non-Muslims to learn about the diverse religious, cultural and ideological convictions, beliefs and views of their fellow human beings.

Although the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, and Islam more generally, are recognized by the Austrian state, and Islamic religious education is implemented in the public school system, Austrian (and also European) public opinion and discourses on Muslims tend to be negative, or characterized by controversy (Wiesinger and Thies 2018, 2020; Yıldız 2018). H. Schmid (2010, pp. 138–39) describes these processes as "steps toward normalcy." He takes up, for instance, the subject of the Catholic Church and Catholic religious education, which he argues have gone through a similar process of recognition and secularization, and points out that controversial discourses in particular challenge religions and societies to evolve and to negotiate good terms of living peacefully together in diversity.

Therefore, this paper, based on empirical findings, analyzes and discusses Muslim teachers' views on and experiences with diversity and controversial topics. To provide a better understanding of the findings presented, and to help to contextualize them, the paper will first examine the genesis of Islamic religious education in Austria. This will be followed by a brief review of related literature. Then, a description of the methodological approaches employed in the study will follow. Thereafter, the study's findings will be analyzed and presented, based on interviews with Muslim teachers. The paper will end with a brief discussion of the study findings about approaching diversity and controversy in the context of Islamic religious education.

2. The Genesis of Islamic Religious Education in Austria

The history of contemporary Islamic religious education in Austrian public schools began with the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1908 and the resulting Islam law of 1912 (Heine 2005, p. 102). With this law, Austria recognized Islam in general as a religious community with equal rights. After World War I and Austria's resulting loss of land, and the loss of most of its Muslim citizens, the law, although not canceled, was forgotten. With the state-initiated labor migration of the 1960s, the Muslim community in Austria grew, and the Islam law of 1912 gained a new meaning. In the 1970s, Muslims in Austria started to organize themselves as a religious community and founded the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, which was established with the particular aim of providing Islamic religious education in public schools (Heine 2005, pp. 102–3). In 1982, three years after its legal recognition in 1979, the Community appointed the first Muslim teachers and started Islamic religious education in primary, middle and secondary schools (School Office of the IRCA n.d.). Nowadays, the Islamic Religious Community in Austria provides more than 70,000 Muslim students with Islamic religious education in primary, middle and secondary schools, and employs about 600 Muslim teachers as a result (ÖIF 2019, p. 4).

One early key issue, which was not addressed until recently, was the appointment of qualified Muslim teachers. Strategies like recruiting teachers from abroad, or appointing non-educators with theological qualifications or partial theological knowledge, were not successful, due to these teachers' lack of contextual knowledge, different socialization, or lack of language and pedagogical skills (Khorchide 2009b, p. 20). It became obvious to the Muslim community that Muslim teachers had to be trained and to qualify in Austria. It also became clear that Muslim teachers not only needed theological qualifications but also pedagogical ones, as well as socialization and experience within the Austrian school system.

The first stone for training and qualifying future Muslim teachers in Austria was laid in 1998, with the foundation of the Islamic Religious Education Academy in Vienna, which was in 2015 incorporated into the University College of Christian Churches for Teacher Education Vienna/Krems (KPH Wien/Krems 2015). This was followed by the Master's program at the University of Vienna in 2007 and the Bachelor's program at the University of Innsbruck in 2014. Both universities have recently expanded their programs and both now offer a Bachelor's as well as a Master's program for the training and qualification of future Muslim teachers of Islamic religious education in public schools (see Sejdini and Çakın 2018; Blum 2017). Expanding or establishing further programs with the aim of training not only teachers but also theologians, imams and ministers is also under consideration. With this and other intentions, the Islam law of 1912 was revised in 2015; among other regulations, this revision stipulated that the University of Vienna had to establish six Islamic professorships (BGBL. I Nr. 39 2015).

One other characteristic of Islamic religious education in Austria is that despite the generally denominational character of religious education in the country, it was and still is offered to Muslims of all creeds and denominations—covering, for instance, both Sunni and Shia schools.[3] To this day, students following any Muslim creed have the option to take the subject and to take part in Islamic religious education classes, or to opt out[4] at the beginning of the school year (see Tuna 2014). In 2013, the Alevi Community of Austria was recognized as the second Islamic community of Austria, with the privilege to provide its own Alevite religious education in public schools (ALEVI n.d.).[5] Such separations influence the diverse composition of the Islamic religious education classes through reducing the numbers of the respective Muslim creed and denomination—in this instance, the Alevite students—and therefore have an impact on the teaching. The study findings discussed in this paper suggest that religious diversity in general can result in disagreement (or controversy), which in turn challenges pupils to re-think and reflect on their own religion and religious tradition. Although there are a few other denominations of Islamic origin with tendencies to establish their own denominational communities, the Islamic Religious Community in Austria is still a diverse Muslim community, including different Muslim creeds and denominations such as Shia, Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbeli, Maliki, Ahmadiyya and others. As a consequence, Islamic religious education has diverse participants from various Muslim creeds and traditions.

This situation can be challenging for Muslim teachers and students, but it also brings several benefits with it: for instance, it promotes inter-Muslim dialogue between different creeds and traditions, and it is primarily thanks to this practice that Islamic religious education takes place in public schools. Further differentiation and splintering of the Muslim Community in Austria would reduce the number of participants in the subject to an amount which would make Islamic religious education legally and practically impossible to provide, because providing it depends on the numbers of participating students as well as on state recognition. The number of participants influences the amount and the

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[3]   The coverage of Islamic Sunni and Shia schools was also added to the constitution of IRCA in 1988 (Heine 2005, p. 103).
[4]   While religious education is a mandatory school subject, the regulating religious education law allows students to opt out within the first five days of each school year, based on freedom of religion and conscience (§1 (2) RelUG. BGBL. Nr. 190 1949).
[5]   The Alevi community in Austria is divided over the question whether they are an "Islamic" denomination or not (see religion.orf.at (2016)). However, they strove for independency and state recognition and became recognized in 2013.

constitution of (Islamic) religious education. To provide the subject in the first place, there have to be at least three participants in a class. In some cases, cross-class groups of different ages can be formed. If the subject has fewer than 10 participants and they make up less than half of the respective class, then the subject is taught for 1 h per week, and otherwise 2 h per week (RelUG. BGBL. Nr. 190 1949).

　　After the above examination of the history and framework of Islamic religious education in Austria, this paper continues with a brief review of related literature.

3. Review of Related Literature

　　A large number of studies deal with the issue of controversy in the course of political studies (Hess 2004; Hess and McAvoy 2015) and social studies or citizenship education (Brown et al. 2012; Oulton et al. 2004). Related studies, in general, discuss and analyze—theoretically or empirically—the following three themes regarding controversy:

1.　**Defining controversial topics and issues:** The literature provides various definitions. For instance, Stradling (1984) considers matters that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems, and that deeply divide society, as controversial. Then again, according to Dearden (1981), "a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason" (p. 38). A more differentiated definition is provided by Crook and Truscott (2007), drawing on Dearden (1981): controversy arises from "insufficient facts to settle the issue, or disagreement on the relative value of known facts" (p. 130). Crook and Truscott's definition also takes into account that human views, valuations and interpretations of facts can cause controversy. Further definitions and characterizations can be found, for instance, in the works of Bailey (1975), Gardner (1984) and Nicholls and Nelson (1992).

2.　**Openly teaching a subject or a topic as controversial:** Some scholars focus on the question of whether a subject or a topic should be taught "as controversial" or taught "normatively". In this context, Hand (2008), drawing on Dearden (1981), defines "teaching a subject or topic as controversial" as the open teaching of differing views. Subsequently, Hand suggests that the decision regarding whether a subject is taught as controversial or normative should depend on epistemic (Dearden 1981), behavioral (Bailey 1975) and political (Hand 2007) criteria. That is to say, an issue should be taught openly as controversial when "two or more conflicting views on a matter enjoy the support of corroborating evidence or credible arguments", or when "numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the issue" (Darden, quoted in Hand 2008, p. 217), or when "no answer to it is entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state" (Hand 2007, p. 71; Hand 2008, pp. 214, 221). Hand's approach has been criticized, among other reasons, for not recognizing religious arguments (Cooling 2012) and for being too narrow and not enough considering public-social dynamics sufficiently (Cooling 2012; Hess and McAvoy 2015).

3.　**Teaching controversy:** Then again, other scholars emphasize teaching "controversy", understood as the training and development of civic tolerance towards contrary, competing points of view (Kohlberg 1971; Barton and McCully 2007). In this regard, Goldenson (1978) indicates that discussing controversial topics and issues would promote such controversy.

　　A limited review of further related literature with a particular focus on religious education shows that, although teaching controversial topics is required in religious education, (Anker and Lippe 2018; Quartermaine 2016), there have been only a few academic debates regarding controversial topics in religious education (Von der Lippe 2019; Cooling 2012). Nevertheless, the issue of controversy instead enters into academic discourses on religious education indirectly in the course of discussions on whether religious education should be "denominational" or "non-denominational" (see Thompson 2004; Berglund 2015). Proponents of non-denominational approaches raise: (a) the educational argument that teaching a particular religion or a denomination is "illegitimate from an educational point of view, since (it was held) it restricted the spirit of academic enquiry"; and (b) the political argument that "in a secular,

pluralistic society, no one religion or religious view of life should dominate" (Thompson 2004, pp. 61–2). Following these arguments, some stakeholders in society and politics demand that religious education should be non-denominational and taught as controversial. Recent academic discourses in Germany and Austria—both offering denominational religious education, but extensively discussing the future of denominational religious education—have, for instance, examined the possibility of interreligious cooperation and pluralistic religious education in the course of denominational religious education (Burrichter et al. 2015; Langenhorst 2016; Leimgruber 2007; Lindner et al. 2017; Sejdini et al. 2020). The proponents of these approaches broadly argue that religious diversity and general diversity (or controversy) in society create a need for a pluralistic religious education. In these approaches, the abovementioned three themes concerning controversy play a significant role.

The analysis in this paper primarily refers to the definition of Crook and Truscott (2007), and takes human views, valuations and interpretations as well as the (social) context into account. The paper now turns to a description of the methodological approach employed in the study of the professionalization of Islamic religious education teachers in Austria (Tuna 2019), which forms the basis for the present discussion.

4. Methodological Framework

The empirical data and research findings to be analyzed and discussed in this paper are drawn from the aforementioned study on the professionalization of Islamic religious education teachers in Austria. This paper (re-)analyzes used and unused data from the study and focuses on the question of how diversity and controversial topics can be approached in the context of Islamic religious education.

The study was carried out between 2015 and 2018 (Tuna 2019) and the research data was collected in the form of 12 narrative problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000; Witzel and Reiter 2012) with male and female Muslim teachers. The problem-centered interview offers a great deal of openness and flexibility. At the same time, it centers the communication process on the object under investigation. Problem-centered interviews, starting with an animating introductory question followed by additional guiding key questions, conversation signals and ad-hoc questions, encourage narration from the beginning of the conversation and simultaneously help to keep the focus on the research subject (Mayring 1999, pp. 50–3; Witzel 2000; Witzel and Reiter 2012). The interviews conducted, started with the following introductory question: "How did you become an Islamic religious education teacher?", and concluded, for instance, with questions regarding one's self-definition of being a (professional) Islamic religious education teacher, description of one's own views and conceptions of teaching and learning Islam, its challenges, and similar (Tuna 2019, p. 67).

The sampling was based on the principle of "theoretical sampling", which involves gradual choosing of participants for theoretical relevance (Glaser and Strauss 1998, pp. 148–65). The first interviews showed that, due to the genesis of Islamic religious education in Austria examined above, teachers of Islamic religious education were a very heterogenous, diverse group and each had their own highly individual professionalization story. Therefore, the participants' work experience, training and education as well as their (religious) socialization and background were of theoretical relevance. With this initial finding, trained teachers, as well as teaching staff without formal training with different backgrounds, based in different parts of Austria—in Tyrol, Vienna, Styria and Salzburg—were asked to tell their professionalization stories and to speak about the challenges of being an Islamic religious education teacher in a secular public school.

The interviews were transcribed and transferred into the analysis software MAXQDA, which helped to manage and analyze the transcribed research data (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). The analysis of the transcribed data was carried out according to the Situation Analysis approach detailed by A. Clarke (2005), which is a further development of Grounded Theory and builds, among other things, on:

- Clarke's finding that postmodern emphases such as "partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation—complexities" characterize knowledge and findings (Clarke 2005, p. xxiv), leaving positivistic social sciences behind and embracing the postmodern turn;
- the supplementation of Grounded Theory analyses by cartographic situation analysis—so-called "Mapping";
- the expansion of social action with an ecological guiding metaphor of social worlds, arenas, negotiations and discourses as an alternative conceptual infrastructure;
- taking the complexity of postmodern life into account and developing systematic and flexible research design (Clarke 2005, pp. 291–94).

As such, all theoretical knowledge and findings are socially and culturally constructed within the research context and situation.

Against this background, the first step of analysis included open-sequence analysis and interpretation (Froschauer and Lueger 2003, pp. 148–56; Mayring 1999, p. 98), which was carried out by a team of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers (Tuna 2019, pp. 72–3). The intention of this was to break down, analyze, conceptualize and categorize the data and to uncover implicit theoretical constructs and patterns (Breuer et al. 2017, p. 45; Mey and Mruck 2011, p. 34; Strauss and Corbin 1996, p. 43). The second step was axial coding, with the purpose of developing, networking and comparing categories in order to build theory (Strauss and Corbin 1996, p. 75). Thirdly, the situation map and its analysis categories were applied to the data and the thus-far developed categorical codings. The situation map with its analysis categories helped to sort, organize and further explore categorical codings (Clarke 2005, pp. 87–91). The concluding step was selective coding, with the aim of arriving at a final systematic overall theory, integrating all categorical concepts under a consistent logic (Strauss and Corbin 1996, p. 94), which could also serve as a narrative for the presentation and writing up of the findings.

5. Findings

Although the curriculum of Islamic religious education in Austria does not explicitly address diversity in terms of the salvation of other religions or common controversial topics such as evolution and homosexuality (BGBL. II Nr. 234 2011), and nor do the current textbooks in the schoolbook series "Islamstunde" (Shakir 2013), the survey participants themselves addressed such themes in the interviews as contemporary challenges for Islamic religious education (in secular public schools). The analysis of the interviews provides the following themes relating to this challenge: *Stakeholders' different expectations and perceptions: Islam, a controversial religion in a diverse society?; Common controversial topics in the context of diversity; Approaching controversial topics in Islamic religious education: avoid or make them suitable for everyone?*

5.1. Stakeholders' Different Expectations and Perceptions: Islam, a Controversial Religion in a Diverse Society?

Islamic religious education takes place in secular public schools, meaning that different stakeholders, who address expectations towards Muslim teachers and their subject, are involved. The curriculum is supported by the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, but it is open to interpretation. According to the curriculum itself, one of the teacher's tasks is to accentuate the content, to establish references to contemporary topics and to include the living world of the students (BGBL. II Nr. 234 2011). This in turn depends on the perceptions of the respective stakeholders. In the interviews, Muslim teachers described various expectations brought to their attention by different stakeholders, such as school administration, school principals, other subject teachers, Muslim and non-Muslim communities, parents, and, of course, the participating students. These expectations can vary and can even be diametrically opposed in many ways, leading—according to the interview

data—to controversial discourses on various topics, even those which would seem unproblematic at first glance.

Among other themes, fasting or Muslim clothing, especially the headscarf, can be difficult to approach and can come under questioning in secular public schools, because of the different perceptions and expectations of the stakeholders. An illustrative example is given in the following narrative from Naz (29 years old, female), in which she describes how her headscarf or clothing is sometimes addressed by her non-Muslim colleagues:

> *And there was a teacher, for example, who said about the headscarf or general covering: "Yes, don't you think this commandment [headscarf or covering] was only intended for that time? Because it was very hot there and it was a different climate and a different country. And you're in another country now, it's not that hot anymore and you are safer, you don't need to protect yourself from anyone." (Naz 107)[6]*

This example shows that the stakeholders tended to favor their own perspectives and confront Muslim teachers with the request that they take a stand. Naz, for instance, was asked to take a stand on the perspective of her non-Muslim colleague. The issue of the headscarf or other clothing was brought up in other school contexts, such as gymnastics or swimming lessons. For instance, Hud (32 years old, male) reported that some schools asked for his help to solve the issue of swimming and Muslim clothing:

> *We had a problem with swimming lessons, where the school brought me on board, and then we found a common solution. The student is covered and does not want to take swimming lessons. The problem is that the school rules stipulate that she has to take part. […] Currently there is no real solution. They say: "There is this Islamic clothing or swimsuit." That is the solution that we offered and the school even ordered one for her […]. And another solution, that was an internal solution, one I don't want to reveal. (Hud 178)*

In this narrative, Hud suggests that the solutions mentioned are not real solutions. Similar thoughts were also found in the narratives of other interviewees, where teachers complained about the lack of "real" solutions, or of permanent and commonly accepted ones. Although Islamic religious education has been offered since 1982/83, and Muslims have a long history in the country, the teachers' reports suggest that there are no permanent, regulative common solutions in sight. Ela (43 years old, female) described this repetitive situation, where the same topics kept coming up again and, if solved, were only solved in the individual case for the time being, as follows:

> *It keeps coming and going again. But the main thing is that we take it seriously, accept it and sometimes not remain tacit, but instead have the courage to talk about it. It was already there, it will come up again, but I don't take it personally.(Ela 102)*

Based on the situation examined, some of the interviewed teachers, such as Ela or Nuh, indicated that one of Muslim teachers' tasks is to balance and bring Muslim traditions in line with non-Muslim traditions and the resulting expectations. Nuh (45 years old, male) described this balance, referring to the example of swimming and Muslim clothing, in the following narrative:

> *Often the problem is, for example, that the principals come to me and want from me for example, yes, the girls should be allowed to go swimming. But on the other hand, there is indeed a dress code, and balancing that is of course not so easy. It was also clear to me that we as Muslims, as convinced, practicing Muslims, have a worldview, and this worldview should also be feasible in Austria. In theory and practice it is, but it's not always like that. I should also suggest solutions which serve both sides. (Nuh 22)*

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[6]   All quoted places and names are pseudonyms. Quotes are labeled at the end of the quote as follows: (pseudonym, paragraph number of the narrative).

Further analysis of this theme brings the following issue to the surface: sometimes, requests from stakeholders like those above can be very taxing and demanding. In these cases, stakeholders asked not just for the assistance of Muslim teachers, but demanded and expected that Muslim teachers take the position of the stakeholder themselves. For instance, Naz related such an experience, where her principal demanded that she take his position regarding Muslim fasting during Ramadan, and write a letter to parents covering the principal's position on the topic in her name:

For example, the principal wanted me to write a letter to parents, where it says: "Children in primary school are not obliged to fast. That's why they shouldn't fast." I as a religion teacher should formulate it and then give it to the parents to sign. (Naz 95)

Naz certainly agreed with the principal's statement that "children in primary school are not obliged to fast", but nevertheless, she turned down her principal's demand, because in her view this demand represents a prohibition of individual freedom of religion and conscience, and, at the same time, is a dictation to her. She set out her position as follows:

I said, "I certainly won't do that. Because I can't decide whether someone should fast now or not. That's right, from an Islamic point of view children in primary school are not obliged, but if they want to then nobody can prohibit them from doing that." (Naz 95)

Such expectations and demands from non-Muslim stakeholders often appeared as unwelcome in the teachers' narratives. Teachers often perceived such demands as a form of interference in Muslim internal affairs and a prohibition of legal rights, even if they are well intentioned and even if the teachers agreed with the core message of the expectation or demand.

These examples show that certain topics are interpreted from personal points of view when discussed in public schools. Non-Muslims viewed and interpreted these themes via their own contexts and traditions, and Muslims did likewise. This one-sidedness could lead to external and foreign ascriptions or projections of one's own views and positions onto others. Several participants reported that Muslim students and teachers were often confronted with such external projections, which can be very challenging and straining. Participants indicated that Muslim students in particular could easily be overburdened by such projections from non-Muslim teachers:

Yes, if we take IS as an example, IS or terror, Al Qaeda, whatever. There are many teachers who speak to the students. Yes, consciously or subconsciously, I don't want to judge either. And the students are then in a corner. Yes, they want to answer, they cannot answer. Yes, and then they come to us and ask us. (Hud 146)

Teachers, for instance Ela, saw such cases as a forced defensive position in which Muslims, especially Muslim teachers, had to justify and defend themselves and their religious traditions and beliefs. This perception is described by Ela as follows:

I don't know why, but we're always on trial, where we are constantly questioned. About things around the world, especially what's going on in Europe. And we try again to tell them of our innocence or to tell them of the true Islam. (Ela 106)

Ela continued her story and also spoke about her feelings in connection with external projections on Muslims and being forced into a position of self-justification, which seemed to be unavoidable:

It always annoys me. That we have such a position, have always been answering questions about things [such as men and women in Arabic culture and various incidents where Muslims were involved] where we are not directly addressed and are not directly involved. But nevertheless, somehow, we have to take over and process and have to justify. (Ela 106)

Even though these projections were not welcomed by Muslim teachers, and were sometimes overly taxing, they forced Muslims to process, examine and reflect on their own religious beliefs,

views and traditions. They also drove people to rethink, process, discuss and reflect on the situation of Muslims all over the world.

Having discussed how topics—such as the headscarf, Muslim clothing in general, and fasting—which seem to be clear at first glance can give rise to controversy in secular public schools in diverse societies, the next section of the paper deals with more common controversial topics, and the difficulty of approaching them.

5.2. Common Controversial Topics in the Context of Diversity

In the data, several teachers suggested that there are topics which were generally controversial and difficult to teach. For instance, complex topics, topics with significant room for interpretation, or topics which can be controversial in other traditions, such as evolution, homosexuality or sexuality in general, could be very challenging for Muslim teachers, according to the interview data. The common denominator of most of these topics was their normative and action-guiding character. In Nuh's words, the question was whether, and to what extent, "the topic is haram or halal". In this context, complex topics, as well as topics with significant room for interpretation, in the view of the interviewed teachers carry the risk that students could arrive at misunderstood and misinterpreted conclusions, as Nuh explained:

> *In my experience, the students take it the way they want it, often not how I played it or said it to them, and therefore, we have to be careful. (Nuh 22)*

From the analysis of the interview data, this seems to be very problematic in terms of religious and inter-Muslim diversity, especially when students develop prejudices and attitudes that exclude other creeds and worldviews. This can lead to controversial discourses, to tensions and to the suppression of freedom of speech and of any kind of diversity. In the experience of several interviewees, students' approaches to these topics and their conclusions depended, among other factors, on their social environment and contacts. Cem (42, male) explained this issue with the example of one of his students, who tended to reject inter-Islamic diversity and disagreement (*ikhtilaf*), as follows:

> *Well, if he can't tolerate disagreement within Islam, if he says: "Only my opinion is the right opinion", or: "I know, and I don't care about anybody else, and they are not legitimate Muslims." Then there is a risk that such a student is quickly radicalized. (Cem 182)*

In Cem's and other teachers' experience, such tendencies towards strong and radical prejudices, attitudes and behavior cannot be undone with one or two lessons, especially when students are influenced by external sources:

> *I try to address that in class, but sometimes we or I have no success with it. That is, when the students go outside of Islamic religious education to somewhere where they get this information, then we have no way to convince them in an hour or two hours. (Cem 186)*

In the teachers' experience, students can get information and instructions from doubtful online sources (for instance, social media or various platforms and web pages) or from their personal environment, which can influence a student's worldview and lead to radical tendencies and creeds. According to the interview data, this becomes visible in Islamic religious education as well as in other school subjects, especially when students take part in discussions or take a stand on controversial topics. In some cases, like the following case related by Naz, other subject teachers can approach Muslim teachers and share their concerns about the worrying attitudes of Muslim students:

> *The Catholic religion teacher comes, sees me as the responsible person and asks: "Did you hear, he did this and that. It's a big problem, that will not do, we have to discuss that." [. . .] Back then, they were ISIS problems. When students had made statements in this regard. (Naz 28–30)*

In addition to the problem of rejecting diversity and tending towards radicalism, there are common topics which can, according to the interviewed teachers, be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted because they are controversial in many ways and because there is no such thing as "one" Islamic position or view on them. For instance, Hud took the example of evolution and questioned current Muslim approaches to this topic:

> *Issues like evolution, of course, are issues that I find a bit problematic to consider. Because we have no unity here. We have an answer from the Koran, of course, but we are faced with many issues. Yes, the multiplication of humans or humanity. Then there are now also scholars, so-called scholars or real scholars, who support evolution now. (Hud 140)*

Interviewed teachers traced the difficulty of controversial topics back to this lack of unity or to the current diversity of approaches, and lamented that there is no commonly accepted approach or solution, whether in wider society or within the Muslim community. In this context, teachers pointed out that theological Muslim approaches should not just include the Koran, but should also consider the reality of human experience. For instance, this point is illustrated in the following narrative from Hud regarding homosexuality:

> *Homosexuality, for example. Of course, you can look at it from the perspective of Islam and say, "Okay, that's the way according to the Koran." But we can no longer suppress it and say, "Okay, there's no such thing." Yes, it does exist. You also have to be able to explain it to the students. Yes, such problems, not problem-related issues but problem-generating issues, also need answers. (Hud 140)*

Here, Hud addressed many issues about homosexuality and controversial topics in general. Firstly, he suggested that there was a (Muslim) tendency to suppress and deny homosexuality, which in his eyes was not a feasible strategy. Secondly, he posed the question of what exactly the problem in this matter was. He suggested that homosexuality itself was not the problem, but that it generated problems. The analysis of the data, on the contrary, showed not that the topics generated problems, but that humans generate problems.

This section has examined and discussed Muslim teachers' views on dealing with controversial topics in the context of Islamic religious education in secular public schools. The analysis and discussion of Muslim teachers' approaches and strategies will now follow.

5.3. Approaching Controversial Topics in Islamic Religious Education: Avoid or Make Them Suitable for Everyone?

The interview data also contained narratives about the participants' individual experiences, approaches and strategies in dealing with controversial topics. The analysis of the data indicates two strategies that were seemingly often practiced: First, teachers tended to avoid controversial topics, if possible. For instance, Hud suggested: "Therefore, one should preferably skip these topics" (192), and continued: "I renounce these topics" (Hud 196). Ece also reported her tendency to avoid and skip controversial and difficult topics, but doing so seemed not always possible:

> *Sometimes, I don't want to address topics that are difficult for me. If they [students] ask, I'll go through it. But if I don't completely know how to pass it on, then I skip it. (Ece 149)*

At first glance, one might think that the interviewed teachers just preferred to be comfortable and did not like challenges, but the data supplies a more comprehensible explanation, namely that they were being self-protective and self-preserving. As there is no commonly accepted solution to the controversial topics and no supporting material, whether in the curriculum or in the school textbooks for Islamic religious education, teachers would have to prepare such topics completely by themselves and would have to take full responsibility for the self-prepared topic and the statements made. Several teachers reported that, in the case of controversial topics, self-prepared approaches, especially approaches based on traditional religious views (and language), could be very problematic.

For instance, Hud gave a concrete example of a seemingly controversial and problematic statement made by another Muslim teacher:

> *There was a teacher recently who made a statement about women, where he rated women as weak, weaker than men. Yes, such topics should preferably be avoided. (Hud 192)*

Hud continued and connected this statement about women to accepting constitutional ideas and rules. He described these as a basic expectation of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, as follows:

> *The faith community expects from me this basic idea, basic rules, yes, that you recognize the Austrian constitution. (Hud 192)*

The analysis of the data indicates that the difficulty here was not crossing the line between being critical or controversial from a Muslim or theological perspective and making statements that are legally and professionally questionable in terms of their objectivity or their distance from the private sphere of the student. Hud illustrated this difficulty with the following statement:

> *I've already given a few examples. I mean homosexuality, yes there is an Islamic perspective; nowadays there is a position there, but if I start to evaluate it, then I'm in another area again. I can even make myself punishable because I am making judgments about others, not about that but about people. Yes, and there you can easily slip into the wrong level. You can do that with any topic. I mean, we said the position of the woman, the witnesses. The moment I say: "The woman is weak", according to someone. Then either I have to explain it in such a way that it fits everyone or I forgo it. (Hud 196)*

Here, Hud took as an example the status of women in Islamic jurisprudence as witnesses, and subsequently the topic of gender equality. In his eyes, some Muslim statements and views regarding women's rights could be easily misunderstood and seen as judgmental and contrary to Austrian and European constitutional law. In summary, the issue was not falling into haram/halal judgments.

Although participants preferred to avoid and skip such topics, and recommended this practice, there were also situations where students or stakeholders asked questions or brought these topics up in the classroom. In such instances, the interviewed teachers suggested that one should avoid and prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations by explaining the topic that has been brought up "in such a way that it fits everyone" (Hud 196). Further analysis of the data in this regard showed that in these cases, "denominational" religious education was carried out in a way more similar to Islamic Studies, where faith and religious creeds do not play a crucial role, because the teacher reports and teaches "about" (Grimmit 1981; Berglund 2015, p. 5; Roebben 2015, p. 153) religious traditions. This kind of teaching would also correspond to the basic idea of "teaching as controversial" (Hand 2008). In the experience of the participants, this practice not only helped to prevent misunderstandings, it also did justice to inter-Muslim disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) and Muslim diversity in the classroom. For instance, this is practiced by Ece:

> *I say at least the opinions, but also say who represents what. Because some are from Atib,[7] then they say: "It is not the case with us." Then I say: "Yes, you should choose and not take what is given to you." (Ece 72)*

Ece also suggested in her narrative here that this practice could promote maturity by allowing the students to choose, to make up their own minds and make their own decisions in matters of religion. If this is true, it could not be examined with the available research data, but previous studies could give helpful indications. For instance, the research on Muslim students' motivations for opting out of Islamic religious education (Tuna 2014) indicates that some parents and students could reject

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[7]   Atib stands for "Turkish Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation in Austria" (atib.at (2020)).

this kind of approach, because they understood Islamic religious education as "religious nurture" (Grimmit 1981, p. 42) or an education "*into*religion" (Berglund 2015, p. 5), teaching and training an "Islamic" or "Muslim" faith, creed and tradition, which they assume to be monolithic.

6. Discussion of Findings

Reflecting on the three themes of the articulated study findings—Stakeholders' different expectations and perceptions: Islam, a controversial religion in a diverse society?; Common controversial topics in the context of diversity; Approaching controversial topics in Islamic religious education: avoid or make them suitable for everyone?—offers the following indications concerning how controversial topics and diversity can be approached in Islamic religious education:

- **Open communication as equals:** Stakeholders' and pupils' approaches towards religion and religious topics—such as the headscarf, Muslim clothing, fasting, etc.—depend on their individual perceptions and views. This concludes in unsettled controversy, which in turn forces people to communicate. Therefore, Habermas's disputed and criticized (see Hennig 2015; Bergdahl 2009) idea of "translation" could be a basically valid approach, as stakeholders and students are challenged but also encouraged to communicate their views on (controversial) issues; however, there is a need for an educational concept addressing the one-sided, demanding, bias-limited, offensive/defensive and informal character of the communication. Open communication as equals would be more fruitful, especially in matters of controversy and dialogue within society.

- **Teaching controversy:** An additional key finding of the study is that controversial topics that are a result of diversity, which in turn is a part of human nature, cannot be solved in the way that the interviewed teachers *expect*. They want commonly accepted, permanent and normative (so-called "real") solutions, which appear to be impossible. The analysis indicates that the only workable solution may be to teach and train controversy understood as a peaceful acceptance of human differences and disagreement (or diversity). In this context, the task of the Muslim teacher regarding diversity and controversy is not to solve the controversy, nor to create unity, but to promote an understanding of diversity, disagreement and controversy as being a part of (Godly-formed) human nature. This approach would also prevent teachers and students from being judgmental of others. Such a concept follows Zekirija Sejdini and Martina Kraml in their joint education research project "Interreligious Education". To them, living peacefully in diversity, and the controversy that can result from this, requires, first of all, an anthropological approach and an awareness of contingency, understood as an openness to possibility (Sejdini et al. 2020)

- **Islamic religious education and controversy as part of a holistic education:** The teachers' reports support the conclusion that students could reject disagreement, diversity or controversy and become radicalized, when they receive one-sided, narrow information and views from doubtful sources. In this regard, the findings show that against the trend in Austrian and European political and social discourses, which holds Islamic religious education and Islamic religion teachers responsible for integration (or a lack thereof) and for the prevention of radicalization (Berglund 2015), Islamic religious education alone, whether in terms of teaching time or as a general concept, is not enough to prevent radicalization in any form. Rising radical tendencies in Austrian and European society, such as nationalism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia, indicate that a controversy and pluralism capable of tolerant worldviews, attitudes and behavior cannot simply be taught and trained in one or two lessons or in one subject, but requires a holistic approach in all fields of education.

- **Teaching controversy in Islamic religious education depends on the support and recognition of the Muslim community and broader society:** In the analysis, it became clear that Muslim teachers prefer to avoid controversy in Islamic religious education in order to prevent risky misunderstandings and conflicts with the secular society (but also within the Muslim community). Teachers are led to this behavior by the following factors:

○　　the curriculum does not approach controversial issues (such as homosexuality or evolution), and there is a lack of teaching materials in general, and especially with regard to controversial topics (BGBL. II Nr. 234 2011; Shakir 2013). This means that teachers have to prepare controversial topics on their own and therefore have to take all the responsibility;

○　　the perception of Islam in society and the media, generally speaking, tends to be negative. Discourses on religious education more broadly, and especially when it comes to Islamic religious education, tend to be very controversial (Berglund 2015), and;

○　　there are hardly any clear statements or concepts from the Islamic religious community in Austria which could help teachers to plan, and to put these topics into a wider picture.

- **Denominational but controversial?** The study findings indicate that there is a deep issue regarding the different understanding and conceptualization of (Islamic) religious education within the Muslim community and, in general, society, which goes beyond the scope of this work—therefore, the contribution here can only scratch the surface of it. Teachers interviewed in the study reported and suggested that some topics, if not avoidable, should be taught in a way that suits everyone. This approach could match the concept of "teaching about" (Grimmit 1981; Berglund 2015), which in turn, corresponds to an open teaching "as controversial" (Hand 2008). At the same time, teachers in the study (such as Hud) tended to question and reject some of the Muslim approaches towards controversial issues such as homosexuality or evolution, and, in addition, they reported students' rejection of inter-Muslim diversity. This kind of rejection, as well as former studies such as the study on the motivations of Muslim students opting out of Islamic religious education (Tuna 2014), indicate that teaching Islamic religious education openly as controversial is itself not undisputed in the Muslim community. In general, there is an ongoing academic (as well as a non-academic) dispute regarding what (Islamic) religious education is today, what its aim and purpose should be, and what the role of an (Islamic) religious education teacher is (Berglund 2015; Behr 2009; Niyozov and Memon 2011; Sahin 2013).

In summary, the findings of this study showed that addressing diversity and controversial topics, and especially the cultivation and training of an attitude that is accepting of diversity, disagreement and controversy, calls for a holistic approach that includes all fields of education. Diversity and controversy involve all members of society, including religious and non-religious communities; therefore, a feasible approach depends on the involvement of all stakeholders. The contribution of Islamic religious education and its teachers to diversity and controversy furthermore depends on the professional training of the teachers, the development of the curriculum, and the teaching materials and textbooks provided. Muslim teachers need to be prepared and trained to approach controversial topics in general, and to teach controversy in particular, as an acknowledgment and peaceful acceptance of differences and disagreement (or diversity).

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