

## ‘Positional Controversy’ in Islamic Religious Education

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**Abstract:** Islamic religious education in Austrian and German public schools is uniquely characterised by controversy and plurality, both in its content and among its participants, including teachers and learners. These stem from the differing cultural and religious traditions, teachings, and perspectives (controversies) that participants bring into the classroom. This controversy and plurality present both challenges and opportunities for Islamic religious education, particularly in fostering the ability to engage with controversy and pluralism. This paper introduces ‘positional controversy’ as a pedagogical principle and approach which incorporates differing Islamic traditions, teachings, and positions into Islamic religious education as a resource for deeper understanding and engagement. The paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding controversy, discusses its historical and theological underpinnings in Islamic discourses, and examines its implications for the contemporary Islamic religious education in Austria and Germany. By embracing controversy as a pedagogical and educational principle and approach, Islamic religious education can help students develop their own informed judgments, perspectives, and positions, enabling them to navigate controversy and plurality within and beyond their own religious traditions.

**Keywords:** controversy, plurality, positionality, differences, ikhtilāf, khilāf

**Zusammenfassung:** Der islamische Religionsunterricht an öffentlichen Schulen in Österreich und Deutschland ist in einzigartiger Weise durch Kontroversität und Pluralität geprägt, sowohl in Bezug auf seine Inhalte als auch unter seinen Teilnehmern, einschließlich der Lehrenden. Diese ergeben sich aus den unterschiedlichen kulturellen und religiösen Traditionen, Lehren und Perspektiven (Kontroversen), die die Beteiligten in den Unterricht einbringen. Diese stellen sowohl Herausforderungen als auch Chancen für den Islamischen Religionsunterricht dar, insbesondere wenn es darum geht, die Fähigkeit zu fördern, mit Kontroversen und Pluralismus umzugehen. In diesem Beitrag wird die ‚Positionelle Kontroversität‘ als pädagogisches Prinzip und Ansatz vorgestellt, der unterschiedliche islamische Traditionen, Lehren und Positionen in den islamischen Religionsunterricht als Ressource für ein tieferes Verständnis und Engagement einbezieht. Der Beitrag bietet einen konzeptionellen Rahmen für das Verständnis von Kontroversen, diskutiert ihre historischen und theologischen Grundlagen in islamischen Diskursen und untersucht ihre Auswirkungen auf den gegenwärtigen Islamischen Religionsunterricht in Österreich und Deutschland. Durch die Einbeziehung von Kontroversität als pädagogisches und erzieherisches Prinzip und Konzept kann der Islamische Religionsunterricht den Schülerinnen und Schülern helfen, ihre eigenen fundierten Urteile, Perspektiven und Positionen zu entwickeln und sie in die Lage versetzen, mit Kontroversen und Pluralität innerhalb ihrer eigenen religiösen Traditionen und darüber hinaus umzugehen.

**Schlagwörter:** Kontroversität, Kontroverse, Pluralität, Positionalität, Differenzen, ihtilāf, hilāf

## 1. The Plural Context of Islamic Religious Education in Austria and Germany

Islamic religious education in Austrian and German public schools, along with its contents, teachers and learners,—whether taught from the non-denominational perspective of Religious Studies, as in some German states, or from a denominational, faith-based perspective—is characterised and shaped by plurality and controversy like no other subject. Both teachers and learners participating in Islamic religious education typically have, with few exceptions, a migration background and, depending on their origins and (religious) socialisation, bring different cultural and religious traditions, teachings, and perspectives into the classroom and the subject (Spielhaus, 2018).

In this context, it is crucial to consider the opportunities and challenges presented by the cultural and religious plurality of the participating pupils in relation to the subject matter and the people involved, and to explore how this plurality can be made fruitful to enrich Islamic religious education. It is with this objective in mind that the 'positional controversy' approach presented in this paper can offer a pedagogical and didactic orientation that embraces controversy (or plurality of opinion) as a resource for deepening pupils' understanding of their own and their peers' beliefs and convictions.

To make this approach comprehensible and to situate it within the context of Islamic religious education, the following sections will first provide a conceptual clarification of the term 'controversy' and then establish a contextual foundation for the necessity of 'positional controversy' in Islamic religious education. Subsequently, the discussion will explore controversy and plurality within Islamic theology and teachings, and examine the potential challenges and opportunities that 'positional controversy' offers for Islamic religious education. The conclusion provides a brief summary and reflection on the implications of this approach for Islamic religious education.

## 2. Conceptual Definitions of Controversy in Educational Contexts

Various definitions of *controversy* can be found in the research literature, yet they share a common focus: the delineation of *legitimate controversies*, understood as opposing, mutually incompatible opinions and viewpoints. This raises the question of when and under what conditions one can speak of mutually incompatible opinions and perspectives or positions.

In exploring this question, distinct academic traditions offer valuable insights. In English-speaking contexts, the academic debate has been largely shaped by the influential works and approaches of Dearden (1981), Stradling (1984), and Hand (2007, 2008). In contrast, German-speaking discussions largely draw on the *Beutelsbach Consensus* of 1976, which has been particularly influential in the field of civic education. This consensus introduces controversy as a fundamental teaching principle, underscoring the importance of presenting and critically engaging with scientific and political controversies in the classroom (Wehling, 1977). Building on the foundations laid by the *Beutelsbach Consensus*, the *Schwerte Consent* was published in September 2022 as a result of the conference "New bottle, old wine? – Ein neuer Blick auf politische Themen in der religiösen Bildung mit Jugendlichen (A new look at political issues in religious education with young people)" from the perspective of Christian Religious Education (Schwerter Konsent, 2023). This was followed by the drafting and subsequent publication of the *Coblenz Consent* on Protestant and Catholic Religious Education in 2024 (akrk & rpi, 2024; Herbst & Zimmermann, 2024).

The *Schwerte Consent* presents six guiding principles (*3k3p*) for religious education, emphasizing *controversy* (addressing topics with differing positions in theology, the church, and society in a controversial manner, while respecting human rights and scientific standards), *critical reflection* (examining power structures and social inequalities), *constructiveness* (encouraging hopeful and justice-oriented perspectives), *positionality* (making teachers' positions transparent while allowing students to engage critically), *participation* (empowering students to take part in religious discourse and action), and

*practicality* (integrating religious practice into learning to foster societal change) (Schwerter Konsent, 2023).

The *Coblenz Consent*, in turn, defines four key principles of theological positionality of teachers, institutions, and subject matter: 1. *Transparency* – Catholic and Protestant religious education should be transparent about theological and religious positions, ensuring that teachers make their positions explicit, while fostering an open and reflective learning environment, 2. *Controversy* – Catholic and Protestant religious education should encourage critical engagement with diverse religious and ideological perspectives and positions, fostering the ability to take a stance, evaluate alternatives, and engage in reasoned discourse, 3. *Respect* – Catholic and Protestant religious education should promote respectful communication and open dialogue on differing positions between teachers, students, and religious perspectives, while preventing manipulation or coercion, and 4. *Orientation* – Catholic and Protestant religious education should foster students' critical judgment and action competence, supporting their development into religiously open and capable individuals (akrk & rpi, 2024).

In contrast to the briefly outlined German approaches—i. e., the *Schwerte* and *Coblenz Consent*—, which focus on how controversies should be addressed in the classroom, English discussions are more concerned with which issues should be treated as controversial. Dearden's epistemic approach (1981) e. g., offers a foundational perspective on the nature of controversy. He proposes that a topic should be considered *controversial* if it evokes opposing perspectives that are not inherently contradictory to reason. Dearden argues that *controversies* can only be defined in accordance with established criteria for critical knowledge and truth, supported by scientific standards and validation processes. In the absence of such criteria, the pursuit of truth becomes vulnerable to the challenges of ignorance and relativism. Concurrently, Dearden also emphasises that his reason-oriented epistemic approach is by no means absolute, ahistorical, or timeless. Furthermore, he acknowledges that the epistemic premises upon which epistemic insights and controversies are based, as well as the controversies themselves, are subject to change over time.

Based on this framework, Dearden identifies several forms of controversy, which he outlines in detail in his 1981 publication (1981, pp. 38–39):

- *Temporary form of controversy*: insufficient evidence gives rise to a multiplicity of opposing viewpoints, which represent a temporary form of controversy. It is probable that a change in the evidence base would resolve the controversy.
- *Priority based controversy*: In some cases, the parties involved may agree on the fundamental aspects of an issue but disagree on the relative weighting, value, or effectiveness of specific elements within the issue.
- *Criteria based controversy*: A more profound controversy arises when parties cannot even agree on the criteria to evaluate an issue.
- *Worldview based controversy*: Finally, some controversies reflect fundamental differences in perspective and understanding, often tied to divergent worldviews.

Hand (2007, 2008), on the other hand, addresses the question of whether and to what extent certain topics can be taught as controversial without pushing pupils toward a particular, 'correct' judgment. In order to address this, Hand proposes three criteria for determining when a topic should be treated as controversial:

- *Epistemic criterion*: opposing views are supported by (epistemic) evidence or convincing arguments (Dearden, 1981);
- *Behavioural criterion*: individuals can be identified who disagree with the statements and claims made about the topic (Bailey, 1975);
- *Political Criterion*: views are not grounded in the values of a democratic constitutional state (2007, 2008).

The approach proposed by Hand has been the subject of criticism on two fronts. Firstly, it has been argued that it fails to adequately take into account religious arguments. Secondly, it has been claimed that it does not sufficiently consider broader societal dynamics (Cooling, 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

An alternative perspective is presented by Stradling in his 1984 Article. He draws attention to the discrepancy between theoretical discussions of controversial issues and their practical implications in educational settings. According to Stradling, the challenge for subject-specific teaching and teachers does not lie in teaching about epistemically grounded controversies, understood as teaching topics that provoke opposing views supported by evidence. Instead, the challenge lies in teaching, addressing and reflecting on issues that, due to conflicting value systems and worldviews, lead to divergent interpretations and approaches, with the potential to deeply divide society and classroom (Stradling, 1984).

Stradling's perspective is relevant for subject-specific teaching, particularly in the context of Islamic religious education. Especially as research has demonstrated that teachers and educators tend to avoid potentially controversial topics in their classrooms (Anker & Lippe, 2018; Pollak, Segal, Lefstein & Meshulam, 2018; Tuna, 2020; Herbst, 2022; Badawia, Topalović & Tuhčić, 2023; Stein et al., 2024) and that Islamic religious education teachers do not agree much with making their own position explicit (mean: 3.41 standard deviation: 1.542 on a scale of 1 to 6), according to the study by Kamcili-Yildiz (2021). Moreover, studies from Germany show that (prospective) Islamic religious education teachers can hold attitudes such as conveying religious teachings and knowledge without questioning them (Zimmer & Stein, 2024), along with “only a minimally developed reflection on their own religious beliefs” (Ulfat, Engelhardt & Yavuz, 2020, pp. 4–5). Such attitudes and tendencies are difficult to reconcile with the spirit of the principle of controversy, as it presupposes the reflection and evaluation of one's own positions and beliefs as well as alternatives and requires the absence of indoctrination. Building on these considerations, this contribution defines controversy as epistemically, socially, politically, or subjectively grounded differing and opposing positions and perspectives.

### 3. Approaching Controversy in Islamic Discourses

“The difference of opinion within my community is a mercy.”  
(*ikhṭilāfu ummatī raḥmatun*)<sup>1</sup>

Controversies, particularly differences of opinion and positions among religious authorities, have been identified, analysed, and discussed by Muslim scholars under the term *ikhṭilāf*, primarily within the framework of Islamic legal discourse.<sup>2</sup> *Ikhṭilāf* has been both justified and legitimised in this context by Hadiths<sup>3</sup>, including the widely cited yet controversial Hadith: ‘The difference of opinion within my community is a mercy/blessing.’

Even though the authenticity of this Hadith is disputed, both Muslim scholars and orientalist scholars agree that, whether it was fabricated or not, the widespread citation and recognition of this ‘Hadith’ indicate the acceptance of controversy understood in terms of plurality of opinion and as a principle of Islamic law (Bauer, 2021; Dziri, 2012; Paret, 1979).

However, there are also hadiths that are seen as contrary to the aforementioned Hadith, including the one that speaks of a division of the community of Muslims (*umma*) into 72 or 73 groups, among which

<sup>1</sup> Imaam Muhammad Naasir- ud- Deen al- Albaanee, *Silsilah al-Ahaadeeth ad-Da'eefah wa'l-Mawdoo'ah*, (58–62), as cited in [islamicboard.com](http://islamicboard.com) (2007) and [wikiislam.net](http://wikiislam.net) (2023).

<sup>2</sup> For detailed and linguistic definition of the term *ikhṭilāf*, see Dziri (2012, pp. 62–63).

<sup>3</sup> Hadith is defined as “Tradition, being an account of what the Prophet said or did, or of his tacit approval of something said or done in his presence” Robson (2012).

only one group is rightly guided (Sunan Ibn Majah 3992, 3993)<sup>4</sup> or the Hadith: “My nation will not unite on misguidance, so if you see them differing, follow the great majority” (Sunan Ibn Majah 3950). In order to regulate and handle the rising controversies within, these hadiths were drawn upon, particularly the last one, to establish consensus (*iğmāʿ*) as the most important source after Quran and Sunnah (Dziri, 2012; Hasan, 1971).

In this context, various factors, including regional and methodological differences, gave rise to numerous controversies on different topics. These controversies contributed to diversity and plurality within the Muslim community<sup>5</sup> and were, at times perceived as problematic and challenging. For instance, it is reported that the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (d. 158/775) sought to address the lack of uniformity in judicial practices, as Qadis often issued conflicting and controversial judgments. His secretary, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, identified this as a critical issue. During a pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Mansur proposed to Imam Malik that al-Muwattaʿ, a compendium of the Sunnah of the Prophet as practiced in Medina, be adopted as the unified legal code for the caliphate.

Imam Malik, however, disagreed and persuaded the Caliph against enforcing such uniformity. He argued that different communities had developed their practices based on the reports and knowledge available to them, and imposing a singular legal framework would cause undue hardship. Instead, he advocated for allowing people to retain their localized practices. Al-Mansur ultimately respected Imam Malik's advice, although he admitted he would have enforced it had Imam Malik complied with his wishes (Bauer, 2021; Masud, 2009).

According to Bauer this tradition “says nothing less than that Mālik b. Anas, the leading figure of the Medinan legal scholars (and from whom the legal school named after him would emerge), consciously turns down the opportunity to make his legal doctrine the basis of a law that would be authoritative for the whole empire”, highlighting that controversy (*ikhtilāf*) or plurality of opinions was indeed desired and valued in Muslim tradition (Bauer, 2021, p. 124).

Subsequently, a considerable corpus of *ikhtilāf* works has been produced since the 3rd/9th century. According to Kurnaz (2024), these works have served a variety of purposes, including the establishment of authority, the development of a framework for acceptable opinions, and the defence of one's own position against other legal schools. An additional possible explanation for the rise of *ikhtilāf* works is that the compilation of legal opinions and judgments concurrently limits the emergence of further opinions and judgments, as individuals can rely on the existing corpus of material.

This brief overview of the development and understanding of *ikhtilāf* within Islamic discourses illustrates that, although it was fundamentally regarded as a divine mercy or blessing, it was also viewed as problematic in relation to society, particularly due to its divisive potential. This explains why Muslim efforts were primarily focused on the regulation of controversies through the establishment of consensus (*iğmāʿ*) and the numerous *ikhtilāf* works, while the potential of controversy as an educational resource for deepening pupils' understanding of their own faith and those of their peers was largely neglected. Not only has the educational potential of *ikhtilāf* been overlooked, but the establishment of *iğmāʿ*, as it was frequently established ex post as a hegemonic interpretation—such as the *iğmāʿ* of the Prophet's companions, which was considered infallible and non-abrogable—has led to the

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<sup>4</sup> All hadith in this work are taken from sunnah.com (accessed 17.03.25).

<sup>5</sup> In the context of Islamic Jurisprudence Al Alwani (2011, pp. 65–66) notes that various schools of thought (*madhāhib*) emerged between the Hijrah and the middle of the third century within Ahl al-sunnah. Among these, nine scholars or *madhāhib* were recorded, but only the schools of Abū Hanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal lasted.

marginalization of alternative positions and perspectives, as well as the potential disregard of changes in the evidence base.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Accepting Controversy as Plurality of Opinions and Avoiding Discord

When reviewing the history of Islam, one finds numerous reports and traditions that clearly demonstrate the Prophet, his community, and their successors tended to accept or tolerate controversies as differences or plurality of opinion, while particularly striving to avoid discord and division.

For instance, recorded in al-Bukhari and Muslim, it is reported that during the Battle of the Confederates, the Prophet instructed his Companions not to perform the mid-afternoon ('Aṣr) prayer until they reached *Banū Qurayzah*. On the way, when the time for the prayer came, some Companions delayed the prayer as instructed, while others prayed immediately, interpreting the Prophet's words differently. When the matter was later presented to the Prophet, he did not disapprove of either group (Sahih al Bukhari 4119).

Another similar incident is reported in Sahih al Bukhari (2410): 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd narrates: I heard a man reciting a verse (of the Holy Qur'an) but I had heard the Prophet reciting it differently. So, I caught hold of the man by the hand and took him to Allah's Messenger who said, "*Both of you are right.*" Shu'ba, the sub-narrator said, I think he said to them, "*Don't differ, for the nations before you differed and perished (because of their differences)*".

These and other Hadith demonstrate that during the time of the Prophet, his community regularly sought his guidance and verdict. When faced with controversies, the Prophet would sometimes agree with both sides or would disagree with neither, allowing both positions to stand. He would then admonish those involved not to engage in discord and division over differences of opinion.

After the Prophet's passing, there were incidents such as the question of who should succeed him and the controversy over the payment of Zakah—"obligatory payment [...] for the benefit of the poor ..." (Zysow, 2012). Although the companions endeavoured to resolve these controversies based on the Sunnah and the Quran, differing interpretations and understandings sometimes led to controversy, discord and divisions within the community. Despite these challenges, reports indicate that leading figures treated their opponents with respect and brotherhood, and did not hesitate to acknowledge their correctness in various matters.

For instance, it is reported that 'Alī was once asked whether those who fought against him in the Battle of the Camel<sup>7</sup> were polytheists. He said: "From polytheism they fled." When asked whether they were hypocrites, he replied: "Hypocrites only rarely remember God." When asked what in fact they were, he replied: They are our brothers who committed an injustice against us" (Al-Alwani, 2011, p. 49).

Building on these historical cases presented above and additional reports on how the Prophet, his companions, Muslim scholars and leaders addressed controversies, Al-Alwani<sup>8</sup> (1935–2016) —one of

<sup>6</sup> In order to maintain the focus on controversies (*iḥtilāf*) and avoid exceeding the scope of this paper, consensus (*iğmā'*) will not be discussed in detail. For an in-depth and critical examination on the authoritative function of consensus (*iğmā'*) see Hallaq (2009, pp. 24–56), for a brief critical analysis Hourani (1964) and Jokisch (2016).

<sup>7</sup> "The Battle of the Camel", or "The Battle of Jamal" (656 CE), was a battle between the forces of Caliph 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and an opposing faction led by 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr (widow of the Prophet), Ṭalḥa ibn 'Ubayd Allāh and Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām. It was named after the camel from which 'Ā'isha cheered on the fighters. For further details, see Krämer (2007, p. 42).

<sup>8</sup> Taha Jabir al-Alwani (d. 2016) was one of the most important Muslim scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, known for his influential contributions to Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and intercultural dialogue, particularly his concept of Islamic minority rights (*fiqh al-aqalliyāt*). For a brief overview of his extraordinary achievements and contributions, see his

the most influential Muslim scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – proposes the cultivation of a distinctly Muslim “Ethics of Disagreement”, aiming to avoid discord (*khilāf*) and divisions within the Muslim community. He calls:

one of the most important obligations on Muslims in general and on those who work for Islam in particular – after belief in God – is to work for the unification of all Islamic groups and elements and to eradicate all factors causing discord among them. If this goal proves impossible to achieve, then let us keep our differences to the minimum and well within the ethics and norms of behavior set by our righteous forbears. Differences of opinion do not prevent a genuine meeting of hearts in order to bring about a renewal of the noble Islamic life. This can be achieved only when intentions are sincere and purely for the sake of God. When this becomes a reality, support and success from God will not be denied. (Al-Alwani, 2011, pp. 111–112).

This call by him is accompanied by the assertion that “enemies of Islam” use “the strategy of ‘divide and rule’ [...] facilitated by the existence of rampant discord (*ikhtilāf*) in the Muslim Ummah” (Al-Alwani, 2011, p. 110). Moreover, he attributes the causes of contemporary controversy and discord to, inter alia, “adopting and following alien paradigms and aping others”, “ignorance of Islam or a deficient knowledge of Islam”, the colonialism and the European or Western orientation of some Muslims (Al-Alwani, 2011, pp. 109–114).

Such a view and form of blaming can be problematic and counterproductive in several respects:

- a) It is ambivalent in its aim of cultivating an ethics of disagreement and empowering Muslims to accept and peacefully address controversy. The use of categorical attributions such as ‘us and them’ in Al-Alwani’s case, “East and West,” or Muslims and the West can promote othering, prejudices, controversy, and discord within humankind, among religions, and worldviews.
- b) Blaming others can intentionally or unintentionally, serve as a strategy to deny and distract from one’s own issues and challenges—in this case, inner Muslim controversies.
- c) Blaming is also likely to hinder the goal that different opinions (controversy) should at least be tolerated or coexist, because they are essentially denied legitimacy.

If we look beyond this problematic perspective and consider the numerous cases in the history of Islam and Muslims as suggested by Al-Alwani,<sup>9</sup> one can indeed find numerous role models and traditions that demonstrate that controversy among Muslim scholars and leaders has always existed and that this should not prevent us from treating each other as human beings openly and honestly with respect and dignity—just as our forebears, the Prophet, his companions, Muslim scholars, and leaders did. Thus, Al-Alwani acknowledges the divisive potential of *ikhtilāf* and offers a comprehensive and constructive approach to engaging with controversies. Beyond, its divisive potential, he considers *ikhtilāf* not as a threat but as a natural aspect of Islamic discourse culture—one that should, however be conducted within an ethical framework. This approach is not only theoretically significant but also holds practical relevance for Islamic religious education. Given its broad applicability and potential to foster a more reflective and constructive engagement with controversial positions and topics, this paper has chosen to focus on Al-Alwani’s approach.

After this brief overview of approaches within the Islamic tradition and Al-Alwani’s contribution, the following section examines how controversy can be approached in the contemporary context of Islamic religious education.

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obituary in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, written and signed by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIT-Family, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Only a few examples could be discussed in the article. The numerous controversies and historical cases would go far beyond the scope of this article and would fill numerous books.

## 5. Approaching Controversy in the Current Context of Islamic Religious Education in Austria and Germany

Islamic religious education, like other subjects and disciplines, is currently facing challenges such as digitalisation and the pluralisation of society, which are transformative forces. Among other things, these forces are altering the way people communicate with one another and informally acquire knowledge, but also facilitating encounters across regional borders with individuals who have different opinions, religions or worldviews. At the same time, adolescents experience a varying degree of socialisation depending on the background and orientation of their parents or guardians, be it religious, cultural or secular. Some are intensively socialised in their parents or guardians' religion, culture and worldview, while others are socialised only minimally, or not at all. In addition, people can perceive, interpret, and evaluate the same situation or matter differently, based on their preconceptions, experiences, skills, and abilities, (Amin & Levrini, 2017) resulting in differing opinions (controversies). Furthermore, as highlighted in previous sections the content of Islamic religious education, Islam and Islamic tradition itself contains numerous controversies.

Even though teachers would tend to avoid controversies in the classroom, particularly those that have the potential to deeply divide society and the classroom, research shows that they can nevertheless be brought up by students themselves. Teachers experience and perceive issues such as the headscarf and modest fashion, love and sexuality, homosexuality, evolution, and creation, as particularly challenging and controversial (Tuna, 2019).

What makes these topics particularly challenging and controversial is that, even if certain tendencies exist within the Muslim community and society, there are diverse opinions and perspectives both within the Muslim community and across society. This raises the question for teachers as to which view or position they should teach—particularly as a review of the curricula (BMUKK, 2011) and schoolbooks (Shakir, 2013) in Austria reveals that these generally focus on Muslim or Islamic commonalities, while differences of opinion (controversies) and the resulting plurality of practices are largely omitted.<sup>10</sup> In addition, socially contentious topics such as the headscarf or homosexuality are entirely absent. Therefore, neither the curricula nor schoolbooks offer guidance to Islamic religious education teachers regarding controversial topics. The curriculum of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IRCA; ger. IGGÖ) only states, without going into further detail (IGGÖ, 2021, p. 8):

Religious education takes into account the internal plurality, whether in terms of affiliation to various Sunni and Shia orientations or in the differing degrees of religious socialisation. This results in a dialogical approach to teaching, which refers to the prior knowledge and experiences of the students. The goal is to develop pluralistic competence, fostering openness towards people in the plurality of their lifestyles and cultural-religious backgrounds. Reflecting on the relationship between religion and tradition is considered essential in this process.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Topalovic (2018, p. 83), Islamic religious education in Austria lacks a systematic analysis of textbooks. For this paper, the textbooks and the curricula were briefly reviewed in order to verify and build upon the findings from the study by Yağdı (2023, pp.197–199) regarding the habitus of Islamic religious education teachers in Austria. In Yağdı's study, teachers report that no appropriate materials or textbooks are available for controversial topics such as homosexuality. As a teacher in the study remarks regarding this issue: "The book is then useless" (197).

Analyses of German textbooks reveal a similar situation in Germany. For instance, Kiefer (2012), in his analysis of the textbooks *Saphir 5/6* and *EinBlick in den Islam 5/6*, finds that they "portray an image of a unified Islam with a Sunni orientation and omit internal differentiations" while also "avoiding problematic or contentious topics" (pp. 110–111). Similar tendencies emphasizing commonalities while ignoring internal differences, are also noted by Spenlen (2012), Kröhnert-Othman (2012), and Akdemir, Kobeissi, Macgilchrist & Spielhaus (2023) in their analysis of German Islamic religious education textbooks.

It is therefore not surprising that, according to research, Islamic religious education teachers tend to avoid such topics altogether if possible. If they cannot avoid them, then they try to present as many positions as possible to avoid rejection from students and parents. There is no further discussion or critical examination of differing opinions and positions; they are merely labelled (Tuna, 2020, 2021).

The situation of the Islamic religious education discussed here and, in particular, the tendency and fear of the Islamic religious education teachers that they could be rejected due to differing opinions (controversies), highlight the need for positionally controversial Islamic religious education. Simply presenting plurality and diversity as a God-given potential and resource is insufficient. This corresponds to learning 'about' the issue, rather than learning 'from' and 'within' the issue and situation. The following section examines the positional controversy approach in detail.

## 6. Positional Controversy in Islamic Religious Education: a Proposal

“Ours is no more than an opinion.  
We do not oblige or coerce anyone into accepting it.  
Whoever has a better judgement, let him advance it.”<sup>11</sup>

Denominational (Islamic) Religious Education, as taught in Austria and some German states, is defined as *positional* in that the classes are taught from the respective denominational religious tradition and “that speakers have located themselves within a religious tradition, discursivise it, make their discursive standpoint transparent to all, and provide first-person statements” (Schambeck, 2020, p. 36). This is particularly desired and expected of teachers. They are expected to “present identifiable religious and theological positions and to make their origins and possible areas of applicability transparent” (1<sup>st</sup> principle of Coblenz Consent, akrk & rpi (2024)).

Traditionally, following the concept of the denominational triad,<sup>12</sup> it is assumed and expected, that teachers represent the denominational position of the respective religion—more precisely, the perspective and position of the religious community responsible for the subject. For example, a teacher in Catholic Religious Education is in theory expected to present the positions and teachings of the Catholic Church. This expectation is reflected in the publication of the German Bishops' Conference, which states that “Religious education teachers teach with denominational awareness and sensitivity to diversity and are recognizable as Catholic or Protestant educators” (DBK, 2016, p. 33).

However, the extent to which religious education teachers actually align with this assumption in practice is more complex and nuanced. According to Fabricius “[t]he outwardly visible denominational and church affiliation of religious education teachers, as representatives and witnesses of the Church and the message of Jesus Christ, is often misinterpreted as a defining characteristic. However, these are primarily formal framework conditions, and not all religious educators fully identify with them in their personal religious beliefs, with some only doing so partially” (Fabricius, 2022, p. 5). She supports this claim with survey data on Protestant religious education teachers in Schleswig-Holstein (Pohl-Patalong, Woyke, Boll, Dittrich & Lüdtke, 2016), which for example shows that only 25% of the respondents see themselves as representatives of the Protestant Church, while only 35% consider themselves authentic examples of their lived faith. Additionally, only about 42% state that they explicitly teach the Protestant faith in their lessons.

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<sup>11</sup> Imam Abū Hanīfah as cited in Al-Alwani (2011, p.58).

<sup>12</sup> In Germany and Austria, the concept of the trias has become firmly established in relation to the denominational nature of religious education. This concept refers to the original idea that the content, the teachers, and the students of a particular religious education class should belong to the corresponding religion or denomination (DBK, 2009, pp.50–56).

In this context, Fabricius distinguishes between *denominational positionality* and *individual-religious positionality*. The former “includes, the externally attributed confessional affiliation with the church and congregation based on formal church membership” and an “internally directed denominational positionality that emerges from personal experiences with denomination and denominational identity”. However, the externally assigned positionality does not necessarily align with the actual experienced and perceived denominational positionality of religious education teachers. In contrast, *individual-religious positionality* is shaped “on the one hand, by non-denomination, personal (internal directed) experiences of faith, such as belief in and experiences with God, as well as by experiences of non-belief, doubt, and encounters with other religions and faith communities.” The *individual-religious positionality* also possess an “externally influencing dimension on the internal perspective, for example, through social, societal, and familial experiences.” (Fabricius, 2022, p. 5).

Subsequently she states, that “[p]ositionality dynamically revolves around the relationship between internal and external aspects, as well as between denominational and individual-religious dimensions. It is not a fixed, static concept, but rather a resonating and processual one, in which its construction is continuously shaped and reshaped based on personal experiences over the course of life.” (Fabricius, 2022, p. 6)

Building on Fabricius’ differentiation between denominational and individual-religious positionality, it becomes evident that the traditional denominational framework does not seamlessly apply to Islamic religious education. While Fabricius illustrates how denominational affiliation and personal religious beliefs and identity may diverge among religious education teachers, Islamic religious education faces an even more fundamental structural challenge: it lacks a single denominational framework altogether. Islamic education in Germany and Austria—whether in Islamic theological studies at universities and colleges or in Islamic religious education at schools—does not follow this logic, nor is it able to do so.<sup>13</sup> This is primarily due to the fact that the Muslim community in Austria and Germany (and Europe more broadly) is highly pluralistic.

This also brings with it a significant opportunity. It offers Muslims the chance to engage more deeply with their own traditions, teachings, and positions in the context of other Muslim traditions, teachings, and positions. Such an engagement can foster the development of their own judgements, positions, and perspectives. However, this presupposes that Islamic religious education teachers transparently represent the position of (their own and) the plural, multicultural and multid denominational perspectives and teachings of the respective religion responsible for their subject—in this case the position of the responsible Muslim community (e. g. in Austria, the teachings of IGGOE)—and enable and support students in locating themselves within a Muslim tradition and to develop their own positions.

For this approach to be effective, controversy—in the sense of incorporating differing Islamic opinions, traditions, and teachings on relevant topics—must be embedded within Islamic religious education,

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Kamcili-Yildiz (2021) notes in her work that “Islamic religious education in North Rhine-Westphalia is organized intra-confessionally, as it does not differentiate between Sunni and Shia students.” (p. 189) She cites the curriculum as follows: “Muslim students participate in Islamic Religious Education regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or confessional background.” (KLP SEK I NRW – Islamischer Religionsunterricht, 2014, p. 9, as cited in Kamcili-Yildiz (2021, p. 198)). At present, various Islamic religious education school projects exist in Germany. For example, Hessen offers Islamic religious education based on the curriculum of the Ahmadiyya, Islamic religious education following the curriculum of DITIB, as well as a state-administered Islamic studies. To avoid exceeding the scope of this paper, it is not possible to go into detail about the various initiatives at this point. For a brief overview of the genesis, as well as the intra-denominational and pluralistic character of Islamic religious education in Austria and Germany, see Tuna (2024, pp. 2–6) and for a detailed overview of the German context see Ulfat et al. (2020, pp. 10–33).

since Islam encompasses epistemic controversies as well as those rooted in differing criteria and worldview (Hand, 2007, 2008; Dearden, 1981). For instance, epistemic controversies arise from differing hadiths or from hadiths in which the Prophet endorsed or tolerated various practices—for example, the aforementioned hadith regarding Qur'an recitation. Furthermore, controversies exist due to differing evaluations of the authenticity of certain hadiths or as a result of different worldviews, such as the debates on evolution and creation or the debates on the createdness of the Qur'an (*khalq al-Qur'an*) between the *Ash'arites*, who insisted that the Qur'an is uncreated and eternal, and the *Mu'tazilites*, who argued that religious truths must align with logical principles and rejected the notion that anything besides God could be uncreated and eternal. Furthermore, behavioural differences and varying perspectives have led to differing interpretations of Qur'anic verses and hadiths, resulting in diverse opinions and practices.

The acknowledgment and exploration of such differences in Islamic religious education are essential for several reasons. First, the plurality of Islamic traditions and beliefs, coupled with the diverse identities of Muslims in Europe, require an approach that reflects this reality. Second, the diversity of learners and teachers in Islamic religious education demands an environment where differing opinions and views are acknowledged, respected, and critically engaged. Finally, core educational goals of Islamic religious education, such as fostering religious maturity, cultivating informed judgment, and equipping students to engage peacefully and constructively with plurality, necessitate controversy in Islamic religious education.

Addressing a topic controversially in the classroom does not merely mean 'teaching or learning about' the subject. On the contrary, in Islamic religious education, the topic can and should be positionally addressed, taught and explored from an in-perspective. However, this should not be limited to a single position. Instead, it should incorporate both the perspective and position of the religious community responsible for Islamic religious education and alternative perspectives and positions.

In this context, in his foundational article on "Controversial Topics in Religious Education", Herbst (2022) raises, among other things, the question: Which topics should be taught controversially in religious education? Consequently, he argues that "religious-fundamentalist positions should not be [...] discussed in a controversial manner in religious education and thus be ennobled (equal treatment of extremism)" even if some teachers mistakenly consider this to be appropriate in light of principle of controversy. Furthermore, he asserts that "chosen positions should be as publicly, theologically and ecclesiastically plausible as possible" (Herbst 2022, pp. 356).

This position is to be affirmed insofar as the principle of controversy in religious education—as formulated in the *Schwerte* and *Coblenz Consent*—is fundamentally based, among others, on following concerns and objectives:<sup>14</sup>

1. Addressing topics in a controversial manner, understood as the inclusion of diverse and (conflicting) perspectives and positions, aims to cultivate in students an appreciation for pluralism

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<sup>14</sup> To be particularly recognized in the following two principles of the *Schwerte Consent*: *controversy*, which entails addressing topics with differing positions in theology, the church, and society in a controversial manner, while respecting human rights and scientific standards, and *constructiveness*, which promotes hopeful and justice-oriented perspectives (Schwerter Konsent, 2023). Similarly, these principles are reflected in the principle of *Coblenz Consent* particularly in the principle of *controversy*, which emphasizes that CPRE should foster critical engagement with diverse religious and ideological perspectives and positions, enabling students to take a stance, evaluate alternatives, and engage in reasoned discourse, and in principle of *respect*, which underscores the importance of promoting respectful communication and open dialogue on differing positions between teachers, students, and religious perspectives while preventing manipulation or coercion (akrk & rpi, 2024). In her paper on "The Transformation of the Beutelsbach Consensus from an Islamic Religious Pedagogical Perspective", Ulfat (2023, p. 137) identifies similar objectives for Islamic religious education as well.

and the ability to tolerate differing viewpoints and positions, a goal that also aligns with the concerns and objectives of Al-Alwanis previously presented approach to controversy (ikhtilāf).

2. Addressing topics in a controversial manner should foster students' capacity for critical reflection and independent judgment, ensuring that they are neither indoctrinated nor overwhelmed.

In light of these objectives, Herbst's assertion that fundamentalist positions should not be accorded equal treatment is valid. Granting such positions equivalence in the classroom would entail the risk that students might adopt them uncritically. This, in turn, would undermine the aforementioned concerns and objectives of the principle of controversy, as well as the broader socio-political mandate of education, which seeks to empower students for active participation in a pluralistic society. Given that fundamentalist positions often reject, devalue and categorically exclude alternative perspectives and positions, their equal and unqualified inclusion in the classroom would contradict the very foundations of democratic and pluralistic education.<sup>15</sup>

This means that if the principle of controversy—which states that controversial topics must be presented as controversial—is applied indiscriminately to all perspectives and positions, particularly including fundamentalist-religious or radical positions, it may overwhelm students or push them in a direction that violates the prohibition of indoctrination. Conversely, if the principle of controversy is restricted, this could, in certain cases, lead to a breach of the prohibition on indoctrination, which is intended to ensure that students are not influenced or manipulated in their opinion formation, as the concealment of certain positions would itself amount to a form of influence.

However, Tuna's study (2019) shows that fundamentalist-religious and radical positions cannot always be kept out of the Islamic religious education classroom but can be brought in by students, even if teachers try to avoid controversy. Especially in such cases, both *denominational and individual-religious positionality* are necessary and indispensable, without overwhelming or indoctrinating students.

Following Fabricius (2022, p. 8), it is important that teachers are aware of "their personal, professional, and pedagogical-didactical competencies in order to create positional transparency—to avoid subtle overwhelming." Conversely, a lack of transparency or awareness regarding a teacher's *denominational and individual-religious positionality* can lead to unintended, subtle, and unconscious forms of overwhelming, making it crucial for teachers to communicate their positionality transparently. In this context, Fabricius further emphasises, drawing on the approach of Hüttenhoff (2001, pp. 154–273), who advocates a "reflected positionalism", which asserts that religious and ideological differences do not become apparent from an objective distance but only from a specific standpoint, the significance and necessity of a reflected positional awareness for teachers (Fabricius, 2022; Ulfat, 2023).

In this sense, 'positional controversy' refers to the pedagogical approach of addressing topics—where appropriate—in a way that makes controversial and divergent perspectives and positions visible, subject to critical examination, and open to discussion without prescribing or indoctrinating any particular position as normative. Thereby, one's own position—whether that of the teacher, the respective faith community, or the students—should be made transparent, given space, and critically reflected upon in light of differing positions.

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<sup>15</sup> In this context, Herbst states that the principle of controversy applied in religious education can promote "genuine goals of religious education", such as students' ability to make religion-related judgments and to adopt different perspectives. Moreover, drawing on Hess (2009) and Hess and McAvoy's (2015) work he states that "particularly, democratic education as a fundamental principle of religious education can be strengthened through engagement with controversial topics (Herbst, 2022, p. 355). Ulfat (2023, p. 137) holds a similar view, emphasising that the principle of controversy should serve to make diverse religious perspectives accessible and promote among others critical reflection and perspective shifts.

## 7. Conclusions

For controversy and plurality to become integrated and normalized in Islamic Religious Education, they must be visibly practiced and celebrated in everyday classroom, not merely acknowledged in theory. This involves actively incorporating differing Islamic traditions, teachings, and viewpoints into the curriculum and teaching practice. Only by addressing these differences transparently and fostering critical engagement can Islamic religious education fulfil its potential to cultivate the ability to engage peacefully with controversy and plurality. Embracing 'positional controversy' as a core pedagogical principle and approach ensures that students are empowered to locate themselves within a Muslim tradition while developing their own perspectives and judgments, preparing them for meaningful participation in pluralistic societies.

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