

SUNNI-SHIA ECUMENISM IN AUSTRIA: A MODEL FOR WESTERN EUROPE?

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Abstract

The dynamics of encounter between Shiism and Sunnism have been investigated by some scholars, nevertheless the detailed study on the ventures of Sunni-Shia convergence which takes place in Austria is still underdeveloped. Such a picture is significance in revealing the features of Sunni-Shia ecumenism and its relationship with 'European Islam'. This paper investigates the problems and the prospects for Sunni-Shia rapprochement in Austria, as well as the extent to which ecumenism in this country could serve as a model for Western Europe. The conflicts between Sunnites and Shiites are in some ways grounded in the misunderstandings between these two main sects of Islam. The recognition of faith community plays a part in figuring the fate of rapprochement between Sunnites and Shiites in the country. The prospects for Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria lie in the hands of authoritative personages and organisations, and in the ability of various elements of the society to enter into a dialogue to eradicate misunderstandings and prejudices. The authentic elaboration of 'European Islam' will also mould the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria. There are possibilities and limits of applying Austrian model of

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Sunni-Shia ecumenism to other countries in Western Europe.

[Dinamika perjumpaan antara Sunni dengan Syiah telah diteliti oleh banyak ahli, meskipun demikian kajian khusus tentang hubungan Sunni – Shiah dengan studi kasus di Austria masih belum banyak diteliti. Gambarnya terletak pada arti penting pemahaman prinsipil antara Sunni – Syiah dan keterhubungan mereka dengan Islam Eropa. Tulisan ini menjelaskan berbagai persoalan dan prospek dalam membangun kedekatan keduanya di Austria sebagaimana kelanjutan perihal keyakinan di Negara tersebut sebagai model untuk Eropa Barat. Konflik antar pengikut Sunni - Syiah diantaranya mengakar karena ketidaksepahaman antar dua kelompok ini. Pengakuan komunitas agama berperan dalam penentuan pemulihan hubungan antara Sunni dan Syiah di negara ini. Prospek ekumenisme Sunni-Syiah di Austria ada di tangan tokoh dan organisasi kompeten, dan kemampuan beberapa pihak masyarakat untuk berdialog sehingga dapat menghilangkan kesalahpahaman dan prasangka. Elaborasi otentik 'Islam Eropa' juga akan membentuk masa depan ekumenisme Sunni-Syiah di Austria. Termasuk adanya kemungkinan dan batasan penerapan model ekumenisme Sunni-Syiah Austria ke negara-negara lain di Eropa Barat.]

Keywords: Sunni-Shia ecumenism, problem, prospect, model, European Islam.

A. Introduction

Shiism and Sunnism are considered to be two of the main sects of Islam, which emerged most particularly due to different political standpoints regarding the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The history of Islam has witnessed the tensions and the rapprochement between these two denominations.

It is interesting to highlight the problems and the prospects for Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria, since this will render a fascinating picture of Sunni-Shia ecumenism outside the Muslim heartlands. The convergence between Sunnism and Shiism in Austria will be also more interesting when we locate it within and relate with the discourse of 'European Islam'. The Austrian state policy regarding religious diversity will be also dealt since this will help us unravel the roots of the current-state of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country. Grounding the analysis of

socio-political and socio-religious landscape of Austria, this paper will reflect the prospects for Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country.

B. The context and discourse of Sunni-Shia reconciliation

Shiism is conceived as a group of people who specifically support ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (601/607-661) and attribute the leadership to him based on the testament (*wasīyya*) of the Prophet Muhammad. They argue that the leadership of the community is not a public interest (*maslaha*) which is left in the hands of people, but rather a principal matter, a pillar of religion, accordingly the messengers of God are not allowed to neglect it and to hand over to the people.²

Shiism comprises of many sub-divisions, most notably the Zaydiyya (Fiver), the Isma‘īliyya (Sevener) and the Ithna ‘ashariyya (Twelver). Madelung³ points out that the Twelver makes up the larger sub-division within Shiism. The theological and juridical teachings of the Twelver are considered by many specialists to be moderate. Interestingly, the Twelver is frequently identified with Shiism as such.

Shiism is frequently considered by Sunnism as a heterodox sect which moves away from the proper teaching of Islam either with respect to jurisprudence or theology. Shiism is classified as minority sect of Islam since the adherents of this denomination makes up only approximately ten percent of the world’s Muslim population. Whilst Shiites make up a majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, they live as a minority group in the rest of Muslim countries, including Indonesia.⁴

Throughout Islamic history, we notice tension between Sunnites and Shiites. We could not negate, however, the efforts of ecumenism and rapprochement between these two major streams of Islam. In the 20th century, the efforts of ecumenical dialogue between Sunnism and Shiism were promoted most notably by Al-Azhar University.

² Abu al-Fath Muhammad ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyah, 1994), pp. 146–147.

³ Wilferd Madelung, “Shiism: An Overview”, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. XIII, ed. by Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 242–278.

⁴ Zulkifli, “The Struggle of the Shi’is in Indonesia”, Ph.D. Dissertation (Leiden: Leiden University, 2009), pp. 2–5.

Rainer Brunner, in his book entitled *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint*,⁵ employs the term ‘Islamic ecumenism’ to signify the tendency and efforts within Muslim community towards unity, rapprochement and cooperation, most particularly between two major streams of Islam: Sunnism and Shiism.

The Iraqi Shiite scholar Muhammad al-Husayn Kasif al-Gita (1877-1953) is considered to be one of the pioneers of Islamic ecumenism in modern sense. He called for Islamic ecumenism during his speech at the World Islamic Congress on December 1931. Pertaining to the notion of *taqrib* (Sunni-Shia reconciliation), al-Gita said the following: “It should be clearly underlined that the *taqrib* is not aimed at eliminating the difference, but its maximum objective is the elimination of circumstances that this difference turns out to be the reason for enmity and hatred. The objective of *taqrib* is the exchange of mutual distance and conflict with brotherhood and rapprochement”.⁶

The institutionalisation of *taqrib* materialised in 1948. In Egypt emerged the ‘Committee of the Reconciliation of Islamic Sects’ (*lajnat al-taqrib bayna al-madhabib*), led by the rector of Al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut (1893-1963).⁷ It published a magazine named *Risalat al-Islam* (the Message of Islam), from 1958 until 1964. In 1989, in Teheran emerged ‘World Assembly for the Rapprochement of Islamic Sects’ (*al-majma’ al-‘alami li al-taqrib bayna al-madhabib*). In 2007 it held a meeting in Qatar. It has published some books on Sunni-Shia ecumenism. This is considered as a concrete Shiite effort from the side of Islamic Republic of Iran in the realms of inter-confessional ecumenism. This forum is still active up to nowadays, most particularly in organising conferences on Islamic ecumenism.⁸

Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (*ISESCO*)

⁵ Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 1–5.

⁶ Behnam T. Said, *Islamische Ökumene als Mittel der Politik: aktuelle Tendenzen in der Annäherungsdebatte zwischen Sunna und Schia auf der Doha-Konferenz 2007* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2009), p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

⁸ Stephan Kokew, *Annäherung an Toleranz Ausgangspunkte, Kontexte und Zeitgenössische Interpretationen des Toleranzbegriffs aus dem Schiitischen Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verl., 2014), p. 34.

during the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) from 28 until 30 May 2003 brought forward a paper on Strategies of Reconciliation between Islamic Schools (*istratijiyyat al-taqrib bayn al-madhabib al-islamiyya*).⁹ This strategy paper underlines three principles regarding the reconciliation between Islamic schools: (a) despite the difference in the details of teachings, all groups acknowledge that their principles are the same; (b) there are many points of Islamic law which are agreed by the schools of Islamic law; (c) although the ideas in Islamic law are *ẓanni* (uncertain), they do not divert from the sources of Islamic law.¹⁰

The Amman Message which was issued by the Jordanian King Abdullah II ibn Al-Husayn on November 9, 2003 is worth specific mentioning. The Amman Message indicated that the King dissociated himself from violence in the name of religion, and emphasized the notion tolerance within Islam.¹¹

The next measure of Sunni-Shia ecumenism was the Doha conference which was held from 20 until 22 January 2007. This conference was mostly in response to the sectarian crisis in Iraq, in which people killed each other on the basis of their confessional identity.¹² It is worth remarking that ethnic conflicts have also existed in the Middle East, but the Sunni-Shia division intensified the conflicts in this region.¹³

The targets of the Doha conference were the following: (1) collecting different views and approaching between them; (2) dissemination of literature on ethic of difference between Islamic schools; (3) mutual mental support among Islamic thinkers and scholars to achieve the rapprochement; (4) focusing on positive attitudes among Islamic legal schools.¹⁴

There has been criticism pertaining to the ecumenical movements within Muslim society. One of these criticisms is brought forward by

⁹ Said, *Islamische Ökumene als Mittel der Politik*, pp. 68–69.

¹⁰ Moh Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah-Syiah bergandengan tangan! Mungkinkah? kajian atas konsep ajaran dan pemikiran* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2007), p. 263.

¹¹ Said, *Islamische Ökumene als Mittel der Politik*, pp. 68–69.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ Ahmad Naderi, *Shia Geopolitics and Political Islam in the Middle East* (Potsdam: WeltTrends, 2015), p. 98.

¹⁴ Said, *Islamische Ökumene als Mittel der Politik*, p. 72.

the Iranian American scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), which can be observed for instance from the subsequent citation: “Most often, however, people search in these ecumenical movements for a common denominator which, in a certain instances, sacrifices divinely ordained qualitative differences for the sake of a purely human and often quantitative egalitarianism”.¹⁵

Nasr goes on to criticise the ecumenical mentality, most particularly from the perspective of perennial philosophy.

From the point of view of this type of ecumenical mentality, to speak approvingly of the differences between religions, or of the different orthodox schools within a single tradition, is tantamount to betraying man and his hope for salvation and peace. A secular and humanistic ecumenism of this fails to see that real peace or salvation lies in the Unity through this divinely ordained diversity and not in its rejection. True ecumenism would be a search in depth after Unity, essential and Transcendent Unity, and not the quest after uniformity which would destroy all qualitative distinctions.¹⁶

In this train of thought, we could comprehend why Nasr felt the necessity of translating the work on Shiism by al-Tabataba’i into English, to provide the Western audience with the first hand information on least known stream of Islam, that is Shiism, so as to give an overview of its similarities and differences with the mainstream of Islam, namely Sunnism. Such a necessity is also felt by the Austrian Iranian scholar Hamid Kasiri (b. 1964), so that he published book series on Shiite Islam, which was written in German, since he notice that there are only limited publications on Shiism which are available in German.

C. Commonalities and differences between Sunnism and Shiism

The conflicts between Sunnites and Shiites are in some ways rooted in the misunderstandings between these two main sects of Islam. This is in line with the Arabic saying: *al-insan ‘aduwv ma yajbal* (human being becomes the enemy to that he/she does not know). Some Sunnites, for instance, consider that the Qur’an which is circulated among Shiites is

¹⁵ Sayyid Husayn Nasr, “Preface”, in *Shi’a*, trans. by Sayyid Husayn Nasr (Qum, Iran: Ansariyan Publication, 1981), p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

different from the Qur'an which is known to Sunnites. Nevertheless when they come to the mosques of Shiites they begin to realise that there is only one Qur'an. Some other misunderstandings include the contract marriage (*nikah al-mut'a*), the perception towards the companions of the Prophet (*sahaba*), the position towards the wives of the Prophet (*ummahat al-mu'minin*), and dissimulation (*taqiyya*).

Despite the apparent differences between Sunnism and Shiism one may also see their commonalities in mysticism. Both Sufis and Shiites believe that there are outer and inner meanings of the Quran and the prophetic traditions and revere those whom they believe can grasp the more inward meaning. We observe a parallel between Sufism and Shiism, in the sense that the Sufis, like the Shiites, venerate 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and regard him as an important source of spiritual knowledge. Accordingly most of Sufi orders trace their lineage to 'Ali. Sufism is believed to play a strong role in spreading tolerance to other groups including the Shiism.¹⁷

Sufism is believed to play a strong role in spreading tolerance to other groups including the Shiism. Vali Nasr reveals an interesting observation on this tendency: "The influence of Sufism on Muslim life and thought has generated tolerance for Shiism in many Shiite societies. Where Sufism defines Islamic piety, Shiites have found greater acceptance".¹⁸

D. The recognition of faith communities in Austria

Islam was recognised a religion by the Austro-Hungarian Empire¹⁹ in 1912. This state recognition of Islam was grounded in the historical events in 1908 and 1909. Some weeks before the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there had been a thinking on how to grant legal recognition to Islam. In February 1909 the working group under the leadership of Max v. Hussarex met the last education minister of Austro-Hungarian Empire. At that time, the policy makers prefer to designate the Muslims as 'Muhammadans', to

¹⁷ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁹ This empire was a union of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austrian Empire which existed from 1867-1918.

distinguish them from the Turkish Muslims.²⁰

The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Empire created a challenge on how this large Muslim minority integrated themselves into non-Muslim majority state. The establishment of new organisation of Islamic community in 1882, of which its peaks is Reis-ul-Ulema can be regarded as the first step of the Bosnians' efforts to integrate themselves into Austrian society. This hierarchical Muslim organisation has been considered as one of distinctive features of Bosnian Muslims, and later it served as a model of the establishment of 'Islamic Faith Community in Austria' (*Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*, IGGiÖ) in 1979.²¹

The 'Islamic Law' (*Islamgesetz*) issued and entered into force on July 15, 1912. On May 30, 1924, the federal government of Austria issued a regulation pertaining to the continued validity of Islamic law, most specifically for the citizens of Burgerland state.²² It was mentioning that 'Islamic Law 1912' is not concerned with the implementation of *shari'a* such as 'Islamic penal law' (*budud*) for the Austrian Muslims, but rather concerned with the state regulations pertaining to the rights of Muslims in Austrian public sphere.²³

The position of Islam in Austria is noticeable when we compare it with that in other European countries, as can be observed from the following sentences:

The Muslims in Germany, for instance, are still struggling to get the formal recognition from the government. They lack the sense of structure comparable to a catholic church. They lack of profile as religious community. The structure should be confessional not organisational, otherwise there would be many religious communities within the same religion. The Sunnites in Germany are highly plural, which are different from the Sunnites in Austria. Austrian Muslims in 1912 were much more singular, even in the 'old Islamic law' (*Islamgesetz* 1912) it was

²⁰ Susanne Heine, Rüdiger Lohlker, and Richard Potz, *Muslimen in Österreich: Geschichte, Lebenswelt, Religion: Grundlagen für den Dialog* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2012), p. 49.

²¹ Rüdiger Lohlker, "Entwicklung eines österreichischen Islam", in *Ostarrichislam: Fragmente achthundertjähriger gemeinsamer Geschichte*, ed. by Amena Shakir, Gernot Galib Stanfel, and Martin M. Weinberger (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2012), p. 12.

²² Heine, Lohlker, and Potz, *Muslimen in Österreich*, p. 52.

²³ Discussion with Carla Amina Baghajati, 25 October 2015.

stated that this was concerned with the Hanafite. The Ahmadiyya in Germany fortunately has been recognised as religious community. It is worth mentioning that there are two steps of recognition: recognition as religious community (Glaubengemeinschaft) and recognition as public institution (körperliche Öffentlichkeit).²⁴

In Europe, including Austria, church structure and profile serve as a model of recognising other faith communities. Church structure shows a limited degree of plurality. This will create a problem if this structure is applied to Muslim community, since their diversity is high. Rights in public are also comparable with church: pastoral care and the like.

Up to now there are three Muslim communities in Austria: (a) Islamic Faith Community (*Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich* (IGGiÖ) which comprises of Sunnites and Iranian Shiites), (b) Alevi Faith Community (*Alewitische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*),²⁵ (c) Shiite Denomination Community (*Schitische Bekenntnisgemeinschaft*, which comprises of Iraq Shiites).

Nowadays the 'Islamic Faith Community in Austria' (*Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*, IGGiÖ) enjoys the position of public corporation as legally recognised faith community. This community belongs to the fourteen faith communities which are recognised by the Federal Government of Austria.²⁶

E. The activism of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria

The Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria can be observed to some extent from the existence of the 'Muslim Teachers Training College' (*Islamische Religionspädagogische Akademie*, IRPA). The curriculum in this institution also concerns with Shiism, although the courses on Shiism is fewer than those of Sunnism. He maintains that in Austria, it is necessary to teach Shiite *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) since the Austrian Muslims are

²⁴ Discussion with Patrick Franke, 30 November 2015.

²⁵ Alevi is a denomination within Islam, whose doctrine is characterized by its own understanding of the Qur'an and the special connection to the Prophet's family (ahl al-bayt). The veneration of the twelve imams and the respect of their teachings constitute the foundations of faith. The practices of this denomination are based on the mystical teachings of Haji Bektash Veli (1209-1271) ("Alevitentum", http://www.aleviten.at/de/?page_id=57, accessed 19 November 2015).

²⁶ Heine, Lohlker, and Potz, *Muslimen in Österreich*, p. 55.

composed of many groups, Sunnite and Shiites and the like. Shiite *fiqh* is taught only once, whilst Sunnite *fiqh* is taught twice.²⁷ The Shiite *fiqh* is taught by Mr. Waldman, who serves as the leader of Imam Ali Cultural Centre (*Imam Ali Kulturzentrum*) in Vienna.²⁸

Many Austrian Muslims are convinced that there is no significant problem between Sunnism and Iranian Shiites who both organise themselves under the Islamic Faith Community in Austria (IGGiÖ). Both Sunnites and Shiites are in the board of IGGiÖ.

Some Muslim scholars in Austria have ventured the Sunni-Shia ecumenism, which is for them important for the future of peace within the Muslim community. This study focuses on Muslim scholars in Vienna, the capital city of Austria, due to the consideration that this city is the home of many important Muslim figures. There are some Muslim personages in Vienna who undertake the ventures of Islamic ecumenism, most notably Adnan Ibrahim (b. 1966), Hamid Kasiri (b. 1964) and Tarafa Baghajati (b. 1961). These three figures are chosen since they represent Austrian Muslim scholars who are actively engaged in the ventures of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austrian public space. Hamid Kasiri is a Shiite scholar, who benefitted from the traditional Shiite training in Iran and the modern education in Austria. He represents the Shiite scholar who actively enlightens the people through his intellectual writings pertaining to the teachings of Shiism so as to eradicate the people's misunderstandings on Shiism. Tarafa Baghajati represents the Austrian Sunnite Muslim activist who established some organisations such as 'Austrian Muslim Initiative'. His activism in these organisations allows him to play a strong role in inter-religious dialogue as well as inner-Islamic dialogue (including between Sunnism and Shiism). Adnan Ibrahim represents the Sunnite Muslim scholar who is respected among Shiites and who is present in Youtube and Middle Eastern channels. He actively disseminates his ideas on Sunni-Shia ecumenism through his sermons and speeches and at times criticises Sunnite reason.

Hamid Kasiri is an independent scholar. He was trained in Philosophy and Theology at the seminary in Qum. In addition he pursues his university education at the University of Teheran with a major on

²⁷ Discussion with Dennis Turkovic, 15 November 2015.

²⁸ Discussion with Eva Kieplinger, 21 November 2015.

Clinical Psychology. What is worth specific remarking is his further education at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute with a major on religious studies, which he began in 1991. In this Institute he also served as a research assistant, which gave him an opportunity to investigate and edit the philosophical, theological and mystical works of Imam Khomeini (1902-1989). Besides, he benefitted from European education and training. He completed his doctorate at the faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Innsbruck with a thesis entitled *Zur Entwicklung des Umgangs mit der heiligen Schrift im Katholizismus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (On the Development of the Dealings with the Holy Scripture in the Catholicism in the Twentieth Century).²⁹ He belongs to the few Muslim scholars who underwent training in the Faculty of Catholic Theology. He asserts that the understanding of other religions necessitates the training on that particular religion.³⁰

Kasiri wrote interesting series *Lernweg zum Schia-Islam: Wiener Schia-Islam Vorlesungen* (Learning Path to Shiite Islam: Vienna Lectures on Shiite Islam). The first volume of these series is entitled *Himmlischer Lernweg: monotheistische Anschauung* (Heavenly Learning Path: Monotheistic Outlook). He reveals the background of writing the series of *Lernweg zum Schia-Islam*, namely: (a) misunderstanding against Islam and Shiism; (b) the lack of literature on Shiism in German. He points out that the existing book on Shiism in German speaking countries was written four centuries ago, namely Tabataba'i's *Shia dar Islam* (The Shiite Islam). This work was translated into English, then into German.³¹

Kasiri asserted that these series serve as a description of Shiite Islam. Description in this sense also entails comparison and challenge. He admitted that there are dissimilarities between Sunnism and Shiism, and accordingly we need *taqrib* (reconciliation). He was also aware that there are differences between Islamic legal schools within Sunnism.

The efforts of ecumenism between Sunnism and Shiism is

²⁹ "Muslim-Markt interviewt Prof. Dr. Hamid Kasiri - Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät, Institut für Praktische Theologie der Universität Wien", *Interview mit Prof. Kasiri* (23 Mar 2011), <http://www.muslim-markt.de/interview/2011/kasiri.htm>, accessed 28 Oct 2015.

³⁰ Interview with Hamid Kasiri, 18 November 2015.

³¹ Interview with Hamid Kasiri, 18 November 2015.

observable for instance in the first volume of the series. This can be discerned for instance from the following quotation: “We let aside the disputed points and concentrate on the most important topics. This book contains citations from Shiite as well as from Sunnite sources. It will be made clear that the Shiites are not inclined to stir up emotions and to speak in riddles, but argue with facts.”³²

Another quotation is worth mentioning: “This is concerned not only with the subject itself but also with the discovering of similarities and convergences. Accordingly, it will not attempt to make a Shiite propaganda, or to reveal a bad image of Sunnite Islam. As a basic course of Shiite thought, this study will facilitate the readers into a compact learning process”.³³

Kasiri said further that there are differences between Shiism and Sunnism in the way they perform prayers. He stressed that these differences are in the domains of *furu'* (branches of religion), not in the domains of *usul* (fundamentals of religion). Some people however are distracted their attention to these tiny differences instead of major similarities. Pertaining to prayer, one also observes the differences between Islamic legal schools within Sunnism.

Kasiri revealed five fundamentals of faith and ten branches of faith according to Shiism. Five fundamentals of faith include: oneness of God (*tawhid*), justice (*'adala*), prophethood (*nubuwwa*), spiritual and temporal leadership (*imama*), hereafter (*ma'ad*). Ten branches of faith include: prayer, fasting, one-fifth duty (*khumus*), alms-giving (*zaka*), pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), struggle (*jihad*), doing good, denying bad, demonstrating love to the rightly guided and pure leaders, and dissociating oneself from their enemies.³⁴

Kasiri's description of fundamentals and branches of faith is of importance to minimise prejudices and misunderstanding against Shiism, most particularly among Muslims in German speaking countries. Some Muslim teachers in Austria, for instance, do not know these fundamentals and branches of faith according to Shiism. They have the impression that

³² Hamid Kasiri, *Himmelscher Lernweg: Monotheistische Anschauung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the articles of faith (*arkan al-iman*) and the articles of Islam (*arkan al-Islam*) which develop in Shiism are totally different from those of Sunnism.

Tarafa Baghajati was born in 1961 in Syria to the former minister of education Adnan Baghajati. He completed his higher education in 1986 at the Polytechnic University Timisoara, Rumania. He is one of the founders of Austrian Muslim Initiative (*Initiative muslimischer ÖsterreicherInnen*, IMÖ). In addition, since 2008 he serves as an advisory member of the European Network against Racism (ENAR).³⁵

In one Saudi live broadcast, Baghajati discussed about the relation between Sunnism and Shiism. The Saudi Moderator was astonished when Baghajati told the moderator that he in IGGiÖ in Austria served to represent both Sunnism and Shiism in socio-political matters. The moderator responded immediately by saying, “we, as an Islamic country, could learn something from you”.³⁶

Baghajati also reveals his opinion pertaining to the conflicts in Middle East. For him the problem is not with Shiism and Sunnism as Islamic schools, but rather with the political aspects surrounding the Muslim community. He specifically mentions the political translation of the principle *wilayat al-faqih* within Shiism, namely in imposing this notion to all Shiites inside and outside Iran. He sees the prospects of reconciliation between Sunnism and Shiism if move away from the school of *wilayat al-faqih* within Shiism as well as from the school of hate and *takfir* within Sunnism (such as al-Qaida and the Jihadi Salafism).³⁷

Adnan Ibrahim is an Austrian Muslim scholar with Palestinian background. His doctoral thesis is entitled *Hurriyat al-i'tiqad fi al-Islam wa mu'taridatuba* (The Freedom of Religion and its Obstacles). Ibrahim is a progressive Muslim thinker. His doctoral thesis clearly shows his progressive Islamic thoughts, which reveals the roots of freedom of religion in Islamic tradition. It is worth mentioning that in this doctoral

³⁵ Islaminitiative - “Dipl. Ing Tarafa Baghajati”, http://www.islaminitiative.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=1, accessed 20 Oct 2015.

³⁶ Discussion with Tarafa Baghajati, 20 November 2015. See also Tarafa Baghajati, “Tarafa Baghajati: tahadiyyat al-shabab al-muslim fi uruba, al-thaqafa al-sa’udiyya”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRI03V02Reg>, accessed 3 Apr 2015.

³⁷ Tarafa Baghajati, “Al-sunna wa al-shi’a wa al-tahadiyyat al-rahina”, <http://www.aldiyarlondon.com/2012-08-09-12-38-36/12465-2014-04-10-20-37-50>, accessed 10 Nov 2015.

thesis he cited the article of Abdurrahman Wahid, namely “Extremism isn’t Islamic law” (The Washington Post, May 23, 2006).³⁸

Ibrahim graduated from the Imam al-Awza’i Institute in Beirut, Lebanon.³⁹ His authority rests in part on the knowledge and capacity he brings back from the training in traditionally acknowledged Islamic institution. This institute is named after Abu Amr Abd al-Rahman ibn Amr al-Awzai (707–774), the founder of al-Awza’i Islamic legal school. This institute is reputed for the study of Islamic jurisprudence, accordingly Ibrahim’s standing as a *faqih* (expert of Islamic jurisprudence) can be traced from his training at this faculty.

Ibrahim’s further education in Islamic studies which he completed at the University of Vienna gives an added value to his standing as a Muslim scholar. His proficiency in modern scholarship which he gained from the University of Vienna along with his proficiency in classical Islamic scholarship which he gained at the Imam al-Awza’i Institute has contributed in shaping the distinct nature of his thought. He is appreciative to both modern and classical scholarship, and accordingly one may consider him as ‘neo-modern’ if one employs the terminology of the American Pakistan scholar Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988).

Ibrahim is noticeable from the greater part of his audience by the fact that he is thoroughly proficient in classical Arabic. This proficiency facilitates an understanding in the major texts of Islam, including the Koran, hadith, Islamic law and Islamic mysticism. The proficiency in classical Arabic and subsequent mastering of classical Islamic texts thus constitute important credentials of Ibrahim’s authority.

Ibrahim is appreciated among Austrian Shiites. The president of Austrian Islamic Shiite Community (*Islamische-Schiitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*) Salem Hassan showed his appreciation towards Ibrahim, and specifically pointed Ibrahim’s moderation and openness to Inner-Islamic pluralism.

Ibrahim’s viewpoints of violence which is committed by a group of

³⁸ See Adnan Ibrahim, “Huriyat al-itiqad fi l-Islam wa-Mutaradatuha”, Ph.D. Dissertation (Vienna: University of Vienna, 2014).

³⁹ “Man huwa Adnan Ibrahim”, *Dr Adnan Ibrahim*, <http://www.adnanibrahim.net/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%87%d9%88-%d8%b9%d8%af%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%87%d9%8a%d9%85/>, accessed 10 Aug 2015.

Sunnites and Shiites most particularly in Syria are worth remarking. For him, these people becoming ‘monsters’ and Muslims at the same time, without realising that these two qualities are contradictory.

It is impossible for a person whose heart has been touched by God, a person whose knowledge of God and love of God touched his heart, not to be merciful, compassionate, humane, peaceful, pure and transparent. He cannot become monstrous. But how did a thousand of them in this Muslim village become monsters in a moment, become bloodthirsty, thirsty for human sacrifice in such cruelty, how? It is similar to monsters in Syria who dismembered Hamza al-Khatib from Bashar’s men. It is the same thing.⁴⁰

Ibrahim calls for love and empathy to human beings regardless their religions and their sects. He specifically calls for love between Sunnites and Shiites.

For God’s sake, did this Shiite child that you slaughtered the way you are slaughtered, slaughter your children? For God’s sake did this Shiite child you slaughtered the way you slaughter a chicken, slaughter your women? For us, Allah suffices and He is the best disposer of affairs. What religion is this? What mind? What humanity is this? By the way, people were cheering and firing bullets saying he speaks the truth, he is a scholar, a sheikh, a university professor? We slaughtered him and his son with him, the story goes that the child was frightfully asking for water before being slaughtered, he was not given water and was slaughtered because he is an impure Shiite, what logic is this? When a Sunni is slaughtered he is only lamented by a Sunni, and when a Shiite is slaughtered he is only lamented by a Shiite. I tell you this, all humanity disavow your actions.⁴¹

Ibrahim’s viewpoint pertaining to Mu’awiyya ibn Abu Sufyan (602-680) is interesting since it touches the perception of the Companions of the Prophet (*sababa*) according to Sunnites and Shiites.⁴² He maintains that his opinion on Mu’awiyya is fair, even more fair than the standpoints of the Imami Shiites and the Sunnism. For him, the position of the Sunnites regarding the *sababa* falls into the category of *tafrit* (exaggerating their

⁴⁰ Dr Adnan Ibrahim Eng, “Dr. Adnan Ibrahim Screams, I Despise Shiite and Sunni Monsters” (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IYS3Z0pD3w>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “Al-‘aql al-sunni akhtar min al-aql al-shii”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inWgYD6qUI0>, accessed 17 Dec 2015.

positive aspects), whilst the position of the Imami Shiites falls into the category of *ifrat* (exaggerating their negative qualities). The Sunnites are convinced that all the *sahaba* are credible (*'adl*). The Imami Shiites are convinced that the imams of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) are infallible (*ma'sum*).

Ibrahim goes on to say that the viewpoints of the Imami Shiites in this sense are less harmful to the soul and reason, whether from the perspective of education (*tarbawi*) or way of thinking (*manhaji*). This is due to the fact that some *sahabas* committed violence to women and children. Ibrahim specifically mentions Mu'awiyya, one of the *sahabas*, who destroyed the Muslims, most notably the descendants and the sympathisers of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Emirbayer and Mische's features of agency – iterative, projective and practical-evaluative – are of significance in revealing Ibrahim's agency, particularly in exercising his role of nurturing Sunni-Shia ecumenism. The *practical-evaluative* aspect of Ibrahim's agency lies in his strategy and preference for undertaking some practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of actions. Ibrahim is determined to serve as an imam in an Austrian mosque. This position is strategic so he is able to disseminate his ideas on Islam and modernity so as to enlighten the Muslim community. He felt the growing significance of internet accordingly he actively disseminates his ideas through Twitter and Youtube. His presence in some televisions can be also regarded as an aspect of his agency.

The *iterational measurement* of Ibrahim's agency refers to his selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action, particularly the tolerant milieu which during his studies at the Imam al-Awza'i Institute. His education at the University of Vienna had also opened his horizon pertaining to the diversity of Muslims as well as to the encounters between Islam and European key concepts.

The *projective feature* of Ibrahim's agency refers to his imaginative generation and reconfiguration concerning the possible future trajectories of action in conformity to his hopes, fears and desires for the future. This can be discerned from Ibrahim's deep concern for the future of plural Austria, particularly the coexistence of between varied faith communities as well as between varied schools within Islam, most notably Sunnism

and Shiism. He is aware to both Islamophobia (which widespread among some Europeans) and civil-sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, and accordingly call for Islamic ecumenism and devise the arguments of the roots of religious peace in Islamic tradition.

F. The intricacies of Sunni-Shia relationship in Austria

The tension between Sunnites and Shiites in Austria is among other concerned with the emergence of Austrian Islamic Shiite Community (*Islamische-Schiitische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*). This name misleads the people so that they think that all Shiites in Austria wish to separate themselves from the greater Muslim community. The people do not aware that the *Islamische-Schiitische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich* is essentially the organisation of Iraq Shiites.

One Austrian Muslim personage showed his disagreement with the establishment of Austrian Islamic Shiite Community (*Islamische-Schiitische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*). He argued, “The Iranians Shiites have twelve mosques, and the Iraq Shiites have only one mosque. But interestingly the Iraq Shiites wish to establish their own community in Austria”.⁴³

This Muslim personage went on to say:

To get the position of ‘faith community’ the Iraq Shiites have to show that their members are more than 16,000 but now their members are only 400. Iraq Shiites are from a certain political party. The reason for establishing Iraq Shiite community in Austria is political. To become ‘faith community’ (*Glaubengemeinschaft*) the Iraq Shiites need at the least ten years. The IGGiÖ also needed thirty two years until it became officially recognised by the government. To become a ‘religious community’, the Iraq Shiites need the recommendation from various institutions: Universities, IGGiÖ and the like.

Some people maintain that Sunni-Shia relation in Austria become worse especially after the Iraq-Syrian civil war in 2011. One may also detect the impact of this conflict during the training session for teachers of Islamic religion in Austrian public schools which was held on December 7, 2015. One teacher asked, “I would like to know whether the ISIS is Salafism”. Another responded to it by saying: “If you want

⁴³ Interview with SR, 26 November 2015.

to know that answer please ask Iran”.

Some of these teachers revealed their experiences of their encounters with the Shiism. One teacher once came to a mosque, and the people at that mosque asked him to lead the prayer. He was shocked when the people behind him clasped their hands as he had noticed before that they were Shiites. He was questioning whether such acts as clasping hands are allowed within Islam. It seems to me that he only recognises Sunnite version of Islam.

Another teacher told her experiences pertaining to Shiism. Once she joined a Shiite congregation and she was troubled when she noticed that the audience recite *'la'natullab 'ala 'Umar, wa 'ala 'Abi Bakr, wa 'ala 'Abi Hurayra* (God's curse for 'Umar, Abu Bakr and Abu Hurayra). It is worth mentioning that 'Umar, Abu Bakr and Abu Hurayra are the Prophet's companions and accordingly this teacher was shocked when he heard the curse on these companions.

Some teachers maintain that the *salawat* of Shiites is different from that of Sunnism. They maintain that the Shiites say, *'allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala 'aliyy* (peace be upon Muhammad and 'Ali). My observation in three Shiite mosques in Vienna was different. I observed that the Shiites recite this form of *salawat* during and after the prayer: *'allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala ali Muhammad* (peace be upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad).

It is worth mentioning that some Sunnis assign extremism to Shiism, without realizing that there is a plurality within Shiism. There is extreme tendency within Shiism, namely *Ghulat* but this does constitute a small number within Shiism.

The term *Ghulat*, in its strict sense, refers to a group of Shiite adherents “who exaggerate their veneration of the Imams, from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661) to Muhammad the Mahdi (believed to have miraculously disappeared in 874), by attributing to the qualities belonging to God. Thus, the sapotheosis of Ali becomes the cornerstone of the Ghulat's religious system”.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. xiii.

G. The prospects for Sunni-Shia ecumenism Austria

The prospects of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria lie in the hands of authoritative personages and organisations, and in the ability of various elements in the society to enter into a dialogue. This dialogue will be of significance in eradicating misunderstandings and prejudices between Sunnites and Shiites.

The Sunni-Shia relationship in Austria is highly affected by the geopolitical and religious tensions in the Middle East and North Africa. This is due to two reasons: (a) many Muslims in Austria are hailing from the Middle East and North Africa, and (b) many Austrian Muslims consider that Islam in the Middle East and North Africa is in the axis of Islamic world.

Some Austrian Muslims consider that the conflict in Syria and Iraq is primarily a sectarian conflict between Sunnites and Shiites, without realising that there are other factors, such as geopolitical tensions as well as clan competitions. Some of them are trapped into the so-called ‘over-theologisation’⁴⁵ in perceiving the civil war in Syria and Iraq.

The diversity of the origins of Austrian Muslims contributes to the complexity of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country. The Austrian Muslims who are hailing from countries in which the relation between Sunnites and Shiites is not in harmony usually encounter problems in dealing with the Muslim groups which are differ from them. This can be observed for instance from the case of Iraq, in which Shiites and Sunnites are confronting each other. The Iraq Shiites in Austria are accordingly lack of trust towards Sunnites, and the other way around. Pakistan is also known as the country which witness the sectarian tensions between Sunnites and Shiites. Hence, the Pakistan Shiites in Austria are lack of trust towards their fellow Sunnites. Grounding on this condition, the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria lies in the hands of authoritative personages and organisations which are able to enlighten the people pertaining to the necessity of coexistence between

⁴⁵ Pertaining to the over-theologisation of socio-political problems within the Muslim society, please see Heydar Shadi, “Some Methodological Remarks on Islamic Peace Ethics”, in *Islamic Peace Ethics: Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. by Heydar Shadi (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co.- KG, 2017).

Sunnism and Shiism.

The prospects for Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria also lie in the ongoing elaboration of ‘European Islam’, how the European Muslims (including Austrian Muslims) could respond authentically to European key concepts, without necessarily breaking their Islamic values and tradition, and without feeling compelled by the non-Muslim majority to undertake such effort. This is in response to some Austrian Muslims who feel that the notion of ‘European Islam’ or ‘Euro-Islam’ is compelled from the outside. Muslims have to comply with European key concepts. They are restricted in expressing their own identity. In this regard, it seems that the notion of European Islam is in some ways different from that of ‘Indonesian Islam’,⁴⁶ in the sense that the latter notion comes from within the Indonesian Muslim community.

The notion of ‘European Islam’ can be regarded a way of reconciliation between Islamic values and European key concepts, which have been initiated most particularly by Bassam Tibi (b. 1944) and Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962). Such a reconciliation may embody the form of “adopting an idealised version of Islam that is ‘unobtrusive’ and ‘in harmony’ with the secular characteristics of Europe”. In making Islam in line with social realities in Europe, Both Tibi and Ramadan felt the inevitability of adjustments pertaining to theology and law.⁴⁷

Tibi brought forward the term of ‘Euro-Islam’ in 1992 during the discussion on Islamic migration. He maintains that concept of ‘Euro-Islam’ serves as an alternative to the ‘clash of civilizations’ and to the ‘envisioned Islamisation of Europe’. Tibi argues that this notion is grounded on “the values of civil society, to be shared by all who want to

⁴⁶ For further discussion on the notion of ‘Indonesian Islam’ please see Asfa Widiyanto, “The Reception of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s Ideas within the Indonesian Intellectual Landscape”, *Studia Islamika*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2016), pp. 193–236; Azyumardi Azra, “Distinguishing Indonesian Islam: Some Lessons to Learn”, in *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations*, ed. by Jajat Burhanudin and Kees van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Mohamad Azmi Bin Haji Mohamad, “European Islam and Reform: A Comparative Study of the Theologies of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan”, Ph.D. Dissertation (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2015), pp. 40–41.

live in Europe as citizens of an open society”.⁴⁸ He explains that ‘Euro-Islam’ refers to a model of Islam with a particular ‘European normative base’. This notion delegitimises any model of Islam which moves away from an enlightened European value system.⁴⁹ Tibi goes on to conceive ‘Euro-Islam’ or ‘European Islam’ in the following words:

European Islam is revolving around five principles: acceptance of democracy, acceptance of separation between religion and politics, also *laicity*, acceptance of individual human rights (in Islam we know the existence of collective human rights) including freedom of religion, tolerance in modern sense, not in Islamic sense, the acknowledgement of pluralism of civil society.⁵⁰

Tariq Ramadan does his best in providing the legitimacy of European Islam. He argues that European Islam is a kind of reinterpretation and contextualisation of Islamic teachings in the milieu of European culture and society. He goes on to argue that this is not a modification of the sources themselves but a transformation of the mind and eyes that read them, which are naturally influenced by the new social, political, and scientific environment in which they live.⁵¹ For Ramadan, European Muslims need to develop a ‘minority Islamic jurisprudence’ (*fiqh al-aqalliyat*) so as to protect and maintain their religious praxis without trapping into isolationism. He goes on to argue that “to promote and to advocate such involvement in Western society is not only new, and thus difficult but also necessitates that some sensitive legal questions and ethical issues receive, as essential prerequisites, clear answers and solutions”.⁵²

⁴⁸ Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam Versus Global Jihad* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 19.

⁴⁹ Peter Mandaville, “Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse”, in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, ed. by Stefano Allievi and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 52.

⁵⁰ Ralph Ghadban, *Tariq Ramadan und die Islamisierung Europas* (Berlin: Verlag H. Schiler, 2006), p. 7.

⁵¹ Haji Mohamad, “European Islam and Reform”, pp. 41–42.

⁵² Mandaville, “Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse”, p. 140.

Ramadan shows his disagreement to his fellow Muslims who hold the opinion that “Islam has nothing in common with the West”, since the Muslims who adhere to this bipolar vision isolate themselves from the development outside the Muslim world.⁵³ In line with this, Shabbir Akhtar (b. 1960) is convinced that “one’s life in the West is therefore not to be lamented, but rather embraced, offering as it does the opportunity to reread, reassess and reassert the validity of Qur’anic teachings in new contexts”.⁵⁴

Ramadan’s attempts to justify the integration of Muslims into European culture and society can be discerned from his book *To be a European Islam* (2015). In addition, it is also observable from his conception that Europe is *dar al-shabada* (abode of testimony). This notion goes beyond the classical categorisation of *dar al-Islam* (the domain of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (the domain of war). For him, *dar al-shabada* indicates a space “within which Muslims are sent back to the essential teachings of Islam so that they can contribute to promoting good and equity within and through human brotherhood by bringing the strengths of the Islamic message to their mostly non-Muslim societies”.⁵⁵

There are also scholars who perceive Europe as *dar al-‘ahd* (abode of treaty or unity), and this suggests “a form of community based on the coexistence of multiple faith systems, mutual respect and socio-political responsibility”. Such a designation can be regarded as kind of ‘upgrading Europe’ and it indicates the changing relationship between Islam and Europe.⁵⁶ This notion also implies that there should be collaboration between “the cultures of Europe and Islam”.⁵⁷ Some other scholars

⁵³ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 18.

⁵⁴ Mandaville, “Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse”, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Daniel Pipes, “Review of *To Be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context*”, *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2000), p. 273.

⁵⁶ Mandaville, “Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse”, pp. 127–128.

⁵⁷ Mark LeVine, “Human Nationalisms’ versus ‘Inhuman Globalisms’: Cultural Economies of Globalisation and the Re-imagining of Muslim Identities in Europe and Middle East”, in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, ed. by Stefano Allievi and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 94.

label Europe as *dar al-hijra* (abode of migration) and *dar al-da'wa* (abode of proselytisation of Islamic faith).⁵⁸

European Muslim scholar such as Tibi and Ramadan are concerned with the harmonisation between liberal democracy and dogmatic teachings of Islam. Both of them are engaged in the cooperation with the governments in Europe pertaining to Muslim integration. Tibi, for instance, worked together with the Dutch government to set up an initiative named 'Europe: A Beautiful Idea', which was specifically targeted at stimulating Muslim immigrants to integrate with European culture and society. In line with this, Ramadan founded a 'Muslim pillar' in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, which aimed at promoting Muslims in Europe to become 'Citizens of the Heart' by willingly accepting European identity and incorporating themselves into European culture and society.⁵⁹

Austrian Muslims need to firstly come to terms with the diversity within the Muslim community, most particularly between Sunnites and Shiites, so as to advance a kind of inner-Islamic pluralism. This capital is indispensable and will serve as a fruitful step towards the development of authentic European Islam. The Austrian Muslims are believed to bear a dual identity: being Europeans and being Muslims. Many European governments including Austria are taking the policy of integration, in the sense that the Muslims in Europe have to integrate to European culture. Some European state apparatus however are not of the complexity and diversity of Muslim countries, from which these Muslims who are now residing in Europe, are hailing.

The Austrian policy of recognition of faith community plays a role in leading to the destiny of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country. The recognition faith community (*Glaubengemeinschaft*) implies some benefits which include: (a) law-making (*Gesetzgebung*), (b) religious instruction (*Religionsunterricht*), (c) Islamic theology (*Islamische Theologie*), and (d) pastoral care and prison care (*Seelsorge und Gefängnis-sorge*).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Stefano Allievi, "Islam in the Public Space: Social Networks, Media and Neo-Communities", in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, ed. by Stefano Allievi and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 23.

⁵⁹ Robert Carle, "Tariq Ramadan and the Quest for a Moderate Islam", *Society*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2011), pp. 58–59.

⁶⁰ Discussion with Rüdiger Lohlker, 17 November 2015.

Due to these benefits, certain Muslim groups have been attracted to gain the state recognition. The Alevi Muslims have been successful to be recognised as ‘faith community’ (*Glaubensgemeinschaft*). The Iraq Shiites was recognised as ‘denominational community’ (*Bekennnisgemeinschaft*) and now is struggling to achieve the recognition as ‘faith community’, which is higher than the ‘denominational community’. Such struggles have an impact on the tensions within the Muslim community, most particularly between Sunnites and Shiites. If the existing Muslim groups Austria were able to deal with this problem and enter a fruitful dialogue, one might see a bright future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country.

H. Austrian Experience: a model for Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Western Europe?

In this part of the paper, I examine the extent to which the experience of Austria in overcoming with the schism between Sunnism and Shiism may serve as a model for Sunni-Shia rapprochement in other countries most particularly the countries in Western Europe. I bring to light the possibilities and limits of applying the Austrian model of Sunni-Shia ecumenism to other countries.

There are possibilities of exporting Austrian model of Sunni-Shia ecumenism to other countries, most notably the countries in Western Europe, which have the following features:

- the countries which allow the expression of religion in public sphere.
- the countries in which its citizens enjoy the freedom of opinion.
- the countries which are made up from varied ethnical and religious groups.
- the countries which possess strong social capital, most particularly moderate civil society organisations and activists, which could support the ventures Sunni-Shia ecumenism and defend these against corrosion.
- the nature “European Islam” is considered to be one important cultural capital in dealing with Sunni-Shia ecumenism. Nevertheless, this notion is in ongoing elaboration, and there have been Muslim personages who felt that this notion is forced from the outside.

I am conscious that there are also limitations in transferring

the Austrian model of Sunni-Shia ecumenism to other counties in Western Europe. We witness the long history of the presence of Islam in Austro-Hungarian Empire. Islam was recognised as a religion by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1912. The recognition of Islam in Austria is a clear indication that Islam is not considered by the government as a foreign element of the society but rather as a legitimate part of it. There are some benefits of recognition of Islam as 'faith community'. These benefits include: (a) lawmaking (Gesetzgebung), (b) religious instruction (Religionsunterricht), (c) Islamic theology (Islamische Theologie), and (d) pastoral care and prison care (Seelsorge und Gefängnis-sorge)

'Islamic Law' (Islamgesetz) is unique to Austria, and is regarded as a consequence of recognition of Islam in the country. The 'Islamic Law' issued and entered into force on July 15, 1912. It is worth mentioning that 'Islamic Law' in this sense is not concerned with the implementation of shari'a like Islamic penal law (hudud) for the Austrian Muslims, but rather concerned with the state regulations pertaining to the rights and obligations of Muslims in Austrian public sphere. The existence of 'Islamic Law' facilitates the Austrian Muslims to integrate to Austrian culture and politics. This 'Islamic Law' recognises varied streams within Islam, most notably Sunnism and Shiism, and accordingly contributes to the cooperation between these two streams.

I. Concluding remarks

The conflicts between Sunnites and Shiites are in some ways rooted in the misunderstandings between these two main sects of Islam. These misunderstandings include for instance the version of the Qur'an, the contract marriage (nikah al-mut'a), the perception towards the companions of the Prophet (sahaba), the position towards the wives of the Prophet (ummahat al-mu'minin), and dissimulation (taqiyya).

Despite the apparent differences between Sunnism and Shiism one may also find their commonalities most notably concerning mysticism. Both Sufis and Shiites believe that there are outer and inner meanings of the Quran and the prophetic traditions and revere those whom they believe can grasp the more inward meaning.

In Europe, including Austria, church structure and profile serve as a model of recognising other faith communities. Church structure shows

a limited degree of plurality. This will create a problem if this structure is applied to Muslim community, since their diversity is high. Rights in public are also comparable with church: pastoral care and the like.

The tension between Sunnites and Shiites in Austria is among other concerned with the emergence of 'Islamische-Schiitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich' (Austrian Islamic Shiite Community). Some Muslim scholars in Austria have ventured the Sunni-Shia ecumenism, which are for them important for the future of peace within the Muslim community. These personages include most notably Adnan Ibrahim, Hamid Kasiri and Tarafa Baghajati.

The prospects of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria lie in the hands of authoritative personages and organisations which are able to enlighten the people pertaining to the ecumenism between Sunnism and Shiism. The opportunities of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Austria also lie in the ongoing elaboration of 'European Islam', how the European Muslims (including Austrian Muslims) could respond authentically to European key concepts, without inevitably distorting their Islamic values and tradition, and without feeling compelled by the non-Muslim majority to carry out such undertaking. Austrian experience in dealing with tension between Sunnism and Shiism could serve an interesting model for some countries in Western Europe. There are however limits of applying the Austrian model to other West European countries, due to the historical-political distinction of the presence of Islam in Austria.

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