

## Religious Secularism: Muslim Perception and the Effects of France and Belgium's Niqab and Burqa Prohibition

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### Suggested Citation:

Syah, Yoshy Hendra Hardiyan; Shamsu, Lilly Suzana binti Haji; Kuswana, Dadang. (2024). Religious Secularism: Muslim Perception and the Effects of France and Belgium's Niqab and Burqa Prohibition. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*, Volume 4, Nomor 1: 11–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15575/jis.v4i1.31669>

### Article's History:

Received December 2023; Revised February 2024; Accepted February 2024.  
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### Abstract:

This article examines how the Muslim community perceives religious secularism in France and Belgium. Second, to explore the negative and positive impacts of the niqab and burqa ban policy on the perception of the Muslim community in France and Belgium. This article uses a descriptive qualitative research method (*Field Research*) with a participatory approach. Namely, the researcher conducted direct observations in France (Cannes, Marseille, and Dunkerque) and Belgium (Saint-Nicolas and Bouge) on 19-26 February 2022. The data collection techniques in this article are primary data and secondary data. Preliminary data includes field observations, interviews, and documentation. Meanwhile, secondary data includes books, scientific articles, and popular articles still relevant to this research. Then, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with informants or sources, namely Muslim women in Belgium and France. Furthermore, the documentation technique uses a theoretical reference source referring to Stephen P. Robbins' version of perception theory. The findings in this article are the perceptions of the Muslim community, which has been known above. The views of the Muslim community in France and Belgium towards religious secularism in terms of the prohibition of wearing the Niqab and Burqa vary greatly. These very varied views or perceptions are influenced by the principles, experiences, knowledge, attitudes, social conditions, surrounding environment, and personalities of those (Muslim communities) who live in France and Belgium. The negative impacts are more dominant, and this may worsen the social and economic conditions of Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** epistemological reasons; European Muslims; public sphere; religious knowledge; social conditions.

### Abstrak:

Tujuan penulisan artikel ini adalah Pertama, untuk menelisik bagaimana persepsi masyarakat muslim terhadap sekularisme agama di Perancis dan Belgia. Kedua, untuk menelisik bagaimana dampak negatif dan positif atas

kebijakan larangan niqab dan burqa dalam persepsi masyarakat muslim di Perancis dan Belgia. Artikel ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif deskriptif, jenis penelitian ini adalah penelitian lapangan dengan pendekatan partisipatif yaitu peneliti melakukan observasi langsung di Perancis (kota Cannes, Marseille, dan Dunkerque) dan di Belgia (kota Saint-Nicolas dan Bouge) pada 19-26 Februari 2022. Teknik pengumpulan data dalam artikel ini yaitu data primer dan data sekunder. Data primer, meliputi observasi lapangan, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Sedangkan data sekunder, meliputi buku-buku, artikel ilmiah, dan artikel populer yang masih relevan dalam penelitian ini. Kemudian peneliti melakukan wawancara dengan teknik semi struktural kepada informan atau narasumber yaitu kepada masyarakat muslimah di Belgia dan Perancis. Selanjutnya teknik dokumentasi menggunakan sumber rujukan teoretis yaitu mengacu pada teori persepsi versi Stephen P. Robbins. Hasil temuan dalam artikel ini adalah persepsi masyarakat Muslim yang telah diketahui di atas bahwa, pandangan masyarakat Muslim di Perancis dan Belgia terhadap sekularisme agama dalam hal larangan penggunaan Niqab dan Burqa sangat bervariasi. Perbedaan pandangan atau persepsi yang sangat bervariasi tersebut dipengaruhi oleh prinsip, pengalaman, keilmuan, sikap, keadaan sosial, lingkungan sekitar, dan kepribadian yang dimiliki oleh mereka (masyarakat Muslim) yang tinggal di negara Perancis dan Belgia tersebut. Dampak negatif yang ditimbulkan lebih dominan dan hal ini mungkin dapat memperburuk kondisi sosial dan ekonomi masyarakat Muslim.

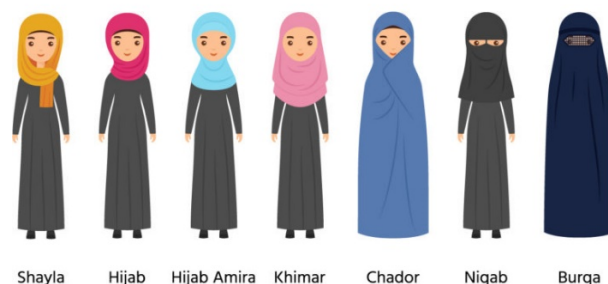
**Kata Kunci:** alasan epistemologis; pengetahuan keagamaan; kondisi sosial; wilayah publik; Muslim Eropa.

## INTRODUCTION

Secularism is an indoctrinating notion of where the religious sphere should be separated from the political, legal, and social spheres (Reddig, 2011). Religious knowledge is considered subjective knowledge, which has no measurable and neutral epistemological basis (Casanova, 2023). Then secularism can affect the relationship between religion and state by separating religion from political life and government (Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2006). This can be seen in several countries declaring themselves as secular states and issuing laws requiring all people to remove religious symbols because they are considered triggers of societal conflict (Gunawan, 2017). However, the influence of secularism on the relationship between religion and state is only sometimes positive. France, Belgium, Turkey, India, Mexico, and other countries embrace secularism. While in this article, it focuses on the governments of France and Belgium. France and Belgium are two countries in Europe that adhere to strict secularism. However, the application of this principle in some ways poses problems, especially in the religious context of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* (Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016).

France is located in Western Europe and has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe. This is evidenced by data in 2023 that the number of Muslims in France is estimated at 5.7 million people, or if the percentage is around 5% based on the total population in France of 68 million people. France is a country with a Muslim minority and a majority of Catholics (Anonymous, 2023). While Belgium is a small country located in Western Europe, it has a Muslim population of about 7.6% or 879,377 people of the total population of Belgium, which is 11,686,140. France and Belgium have banned face coverings like the *Niqab* and *Burqa*. *Niqab* is a Muslim women's clothing where all body parts are covered, but only the eyes are visible. While the *burqa* is a garment almost similar to the *niqab*, there is a difference in that there are small holes in the face, and small holes such as nets serve as gaps for breathing. The form of *Niqab* and *Burqa* clothing is shown in the following picture:

Figure.1  
Types of clothing for Muslim women  
Types of Islamic Veils



Source: [istizada.com/muslim-veil-and-hijab-types-a-complete-guide/](http://istizada.com/muslim-veil-and-hijab-types-a-complete-guide/)  
(accessed September 16, 2023)

France introduced a policy banning the use of the Niqab and Burqa on April 12, 2011; a law prohibiting the use of the Niqab and Burqa in public spaces came into force. It will be subject to a fine of €150 for violation; if someone who is another woman uses the Niqab and Burqa in public spaces, there is a fine of €30,000, and if forced, a minor is subject to a fine of €60,000. While Belgium introduced a policy prohibiting the use of the Niqab and Burqa on July 12, 2011, Belgium re-introduced the Act after three months of France formalizing the offense and simultaneously passing the Law by stating that whoever is in public space then the *Niqab* and *Burqa* or anything like that, there will be a fine of €15 to €25. Thus 2011, the Belgian state was named the second country after France to ban anyone from wearing the *Niqab* and *Burqa*.

The emergence of these policies in 2011 and even now is still in effect, so these policies are still reaping and found a lot of responses or views from Muslim communities living in France and Belgium, especially for Muslim women. Because both countries consider the policy of using the Niqab and Burqa as incompatible or incompatible with Western culture and standards, it must be forced to change and be accepted to adapt to the original culture, namely Western culture. As for the researcher's research, this research related to religious secularism about the perception of Muslim communities and the impact of niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium has never been done. However, the author found several previous studies that were almost similar but did not specifically discuss the themes, research methods, and theoretical approaches used in the research when discussed by researchers. The author also uses some previous research as a reference source in this study. The sources include the following:

*First*, this research is in the form of a journal article entitled "*Dynamics of Niqab and Burqa Banning in Western Europe: A Case Study of France and Belgium*" by Nadza Indira Rafsitahandjani and Aos Y. Firdaus. The article discusses Niqab and Burqa's problem using the policy diffusion theory approach. Hence, the difference lies in the process of Stephen P. Robbins' theory of perception carried out by the author today. The result of the study is that France was the first country to implement a policy banning the use of the Niqab and Burqa in 2011. Belgium also implemented the same thing in 2011 but with a gap of three months. In the end, implementing the policy is considered to have violated human rights, especially women's rights.

*Second*, this research is in the form of a journal article entitled "*Secularism*" by Yuni Pangestutiani. The article discusses secularization, in general, using the political theory approach of "Desacralization of Politics." Hence, the difference point lies in Stephen P. Robbins' *perception* theory approach, which is carried out by the author today. The result of the study is that cultural secularization is a form of transformation of the process of desacralization with nationalization in mind.

*Third*, this research is in the form of a journal article entitled "*Secularism: Factors, Spread, and Steps to Overcome it from an Islamic Point of View*" by Moh. Yusri Bin Ibrahim. This article discusses the phenomenon of attacks on Western thought on Muslim thought, focuses on historical aspects, and re-understands the emergence of secularism in the West, the characteristics, and doctrines of secularism using an Islamic perspective approach so that the difference point lies in the process of Stephen P. Robbins' theory of perception carried out by the author today. The result of this study is that Muslims are a particular people, so do not allow Muslims to continue to be "*secularized*" by the West because the secular situation brought by the West is a state of pseudo and temporary happiness.

*Fourth*, this research is in the form of a journal article entitled "*Secularization and Secularism of Religion*" by Rd. Datoek A. Pachoer. This article discusses the differences between secularization and religious secularism using the approach of religious theory according to Cohn, so the difference point lies in the process of Stephen P. Robbins' theory of perception carried out by the author today. The result of this study is the positive impact of secularism as an ethical system, where humans are taught to continue to improve living conditions that produce benefits and look for the good in the world, while the negative impact is that secularism is seen as an understanding that rejects something sacred and no longer believes in something religious.

*Fifth*, this is a journal article entitled "*Secularization in Harvey Cox's Perspective*" by Fauzan. This article discusses secularization according to Harvey Cox, namely "*The Secular City*" and God in the view of secular society. The result of this research is that secularization, according to Cox, is a historical inevitability. Through "*The Secular City*," Cox created a theological paradigm relevant to modern society's conditions. God is a name whose existence is sometimes empty and seems ambiguous; since He is bound by "God," he is no longer holy if the naming has been inherent in the socio-cultural sphere (Rahman, 2014). When God has been rigidly interpreted in a different scope, there will be a clash of divinity concepts, requiring the sacrifice of souls.

Therefore, based on the presentation of previous research does not explicitly discuss religious secularism in the perception of Muslim communities and the impact of the ban on the niqab and burqa in France and Belgium, using Stephen P. Robbins' perception theory approach conducted by the current author. However, the search for some of the previous research is relevant to the research the author is doing. Therefore, this study was conducted as an

additional study or to complement the discussion that has not been discussed and found the latest research findings from previous studies on the perception of Muslim communities and the impact of the niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium, using Stephen P. Robbins' *perception* theory approach (Rafsitahandjani & Firdaus, 2017).

## METHOD

This article's formulation of the problem is *how* Muslim Communities perceive religious Secularism in France and Belgium. *Second*, How the Negative and Positive Impact of the Niqab and Burqa Ban Policy on the Perception of Muslim Communities in France and Belgium. With the implementation of research, this research is socially expected to transfer knowledge about religious secularism. Then, this research is likely to add to the contribution of literature studies and sources of knowledge in the treasures of the sociology of religion. Then, this research is expected to be a reference for conducting further research with a more comprehensive discussion.

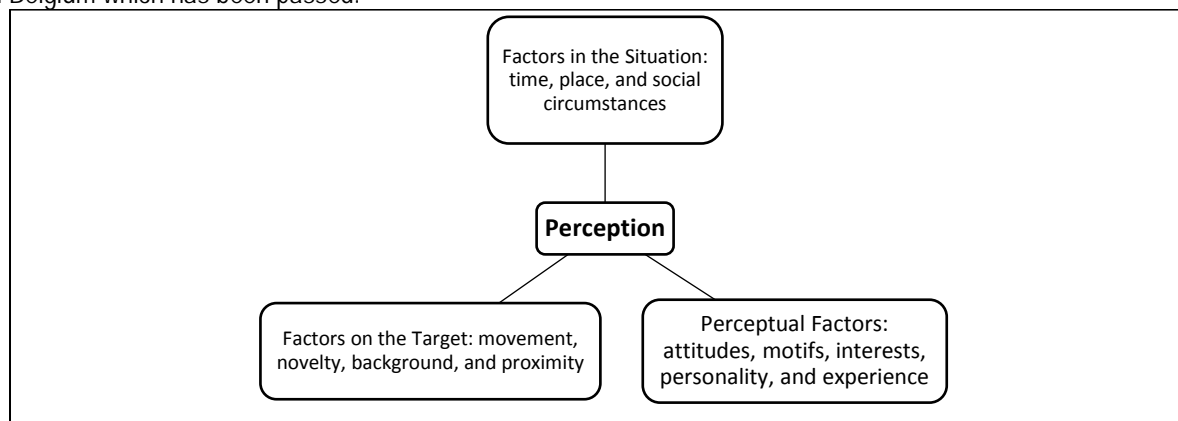
This article uses qualitative descriptive research methods. The approach used is Stephen P. Robbins' version of perception theory to explain descriptively in discussing religious secularism about the perception of Muslim communities and the impact of niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium. The data collection techniques presented in this article are primary and secondary data. Preliminary data, including field observations, interviews, and documentation. While secondary data, including books, scientific articles, and popular articles, are still relevant in this study. This type of research is field research (*Field Research*) because a series of research activities are carried out by participant observation, namely researchers making direct observations in France (the cities of Cannes, Marseille, and Dunkerque) and Belgium (Saint-Nicolas and Bouge) on February 19-26, 2022. Then, regarding interviews, researchers conduct interviews with semi-structural techniques to provide an adequate answer and provide separate freedom to informants or sources, namely Muslim communities in Belgium and France. Furthermore, the documentation technique used is that researchers use theoretical reference sources, namely referring to Stephen P. Robbins' version of perception theory to explain descriptively in discussing religious secularism about the perception of Muslim communities and the impact of niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Before continuing the discussion, this article uses the theoretical basis in Stephen P. Robbins' version of perception theory. The purpose of using perception theory in the article is to find out and describe how Muslim communities perceive religious secularism and what the negative and positive effects of the niqab and burqa ban on the perception of Muslim communities in France and Belgium through field interviews, which will be described below.

### Stephen P. Robbins's version of Perception Theory

Etymologically, perception comes from the English word "*Perception*," which means a view, response, or response to everything that happens in the surrounding environment. This means that a person who is aware of all events through the sensing process can obtain an interpretation of data on the surrounding environment. Then perception, according to Stephen P. Robbins, is a process taken by an individual in interpreting sensory impressions that have been obtained to be able to give meaning and respond wisely to events in the surrounding environment, especially the perception of the Muslim community towards the ban on the use of the Niqab and Burqa in France and Belgium which has been passed.



### 1. Receptive Factor (*Perceiver*)

If a person witnesses a target, their interpretations are influenced by personal characteristics, such as attitudes, motives, interests, personality, and experiences. For example, if someone wants to hear about everything they want to hear or see something they want to know, it is not because of the truth but our perception. Likewise, in this article, Muslim communities in France and Belgium are perpetrators of perceptions that give birth to various perceptions, both negative and positive. As in this case, Muslim communities living in Belgium and France against the introduction of the ban on the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in public spaces are considered a threat. This attitude of superiority, thus, makes the people of France and Belgium accept differences, especially since the people in these two countries have solid principles of "*laicite*" and firmly held commitments. With the *Niqab* and *Burqa* banned from Muslims living in France and Belgium, it became a new habit and had to be accepted, even if it was utterly contrary to the identity of the country. Muslim communities in France and Belgium also have their concept or way of becoming an ideal Muslim according to their version.

### 2. Factors on Target

The phenomenon of the passing of the ban on the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in public places has given birth to various perceptions of Muslim communities in France and Belgium. In both countries, Muslims who use the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are new, uncivilized, and irrational. It is considered something new because the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are not derived from French and Belgian cultures and are incompatible with the *laicite* culture of the two countries. Then it is considered as something uncivilized because it can interfere with social contact in everyday life and can cause uncomfortable feelings such as being easily suspicious, easily alarmed, and being viewed as a spy (intruder) of the state, so that his daily life does not run well, especially in terms of connected communication with people around him. Furthermore, it is considered irrational because Muslim communities that use the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are considered terrorists and have no benefit to the state over the use of *the Niqab* and *Burqa* in France and Belgium.

### 3. Factors in Situations

A person will see and judge an object or event in this factor. The judgment of events will affect a person's perception, both good perception and wrong perception, both agreeing and disagreeing. Factors that can affect situations and conditions include time, surrounding environment, state of the country, and social circumstances.

## Definition of Secularism

As for the definition of secularism, etymologically, "secularism" comes from the Latin "speculum," which has two meanings that depend on location and time. At the time, it indicates the sense of "now" or "current," while at the location, it shows the definition of "world or worldliness" (Muhammad al Naquib al Attas, 1981). Secularism also means "*Fashluddin anil haya*," which means an effort to separate the role of religion from the world, meaning that religion only focuses on human affairs and God (An-Nabhani, 2001). Then, in terminology, secularism is an understanding that seeks to separate religion and state because the state is an institution whose scope of experiences is related to the order of life, is worldly and is not associated with things that are hereafter. Conversely, religion only regulates man's relationship with God, which is metaphysical and spiritual. So, in that case, experts or secular figures put the position of religion and state to occupy their respective roles that have their path (Yusuf, 1989).

The emergence of secularism was first pioneered by a British agnostic named George Jacob Holyoake in 1846. Secularization began globally when Harvey Cox wrote "*The Secular City*" in 1965. Therefore, according to Cox, secularization is a form of breaking human freedom from religious and metaphysical deadlocks confined from another world to the present world; Christians should accept secularization because secularization is the fruit of authentic consequences of biblical beliefs. So with this, the duty of Christians as supporters and maintainers of secularization (Fauzan, 2010). So, the gap between secularization and secularism needs to be emphasized again. The term "secularism" is different from "*secularization*," in which *secularization* is a process leading to changes in the role of religion as a normative, institutional, and cognitive system of people's perceptions. Secularism is an understanding that wants to separate the scope of religion from everyday life. For example, it divides the measure of faith with the state and religion with politics (Pachoe, 2016).

Understanding the discourse of secularism has now given a tremendous appeal to several contemporary Islamic thinkers, such as Mohammed Arkoun. Arkoun said that secularism is synonymous with an idea that tends to destroy divine capacities and guidance (Arkoun, 2001). This means that, in the modern sense, "secularism" is an indoctrinating notion of where the realm of religion must be separated from the political, legal, and social spheres. Because religious knowledge is considered subjective knowledge, which has no measurable and neutral epistemological basis. For example, science itself departs from the base of empiricism that can be accepted and

experienced by all humans regardless of religious background. Therefore, religion cannot be used as the primary foundation in public life but can only be positioned in the private sphere (Hudaeri, 2016). Thus, secularism is a school of understanding that tries to separate the relationship of world life from the relationship of the afterlife in all aspects, such as religion, economics, politics, society, and education. On the other hand, secularism also vigorously fights for the rights of freedom from various rules derived from religious teachings, providing unlimited nature, and so on. In other words, secularism refers to the belief that all activities and statutes exist and are made by man, so religion should not interfere.

### History of the Appearance of Secularism

Secularism was first proposed by George Jacob Holyoake in 1846. Holyoake defines secularism as an ethical system based on natural moral principles independent of religion, revelation, or supernaturalism (Holyoake, 1896; Ihsan, 2019). From this thought, secularism became understood and developed until now (Jensen, 2021). Even several countries, such as France and Belgium, dare to declare themselves as secular states. In the government system, a law was drafted requiring all people to remove religious symbols because they were considered triggers of social conflict. Secularism became a robust system of government in Europe because its people feared that if religion (the Church) retook control of their lives, there would be decline and oppression like in the previous century (Montero, 2020). So, it can be called secularism, which is a form of European trauma to the tyranny of Church power at that time (Suryajaya, 2022). Secularism also entered the Islamic world through clashes with the West. In the 19th century, most Islamic territories were colonized by the West. This influenced the emergence of the ideology of secularism in the Islamic world. However, Islamic society itself does not recognize the term secularism because Islam regulates all aspects of life, both individual and social (Ruslan, 2018).

Then secularism can affect the relationship between religion and state by separating religion from political life and government. This can be seen in several countries that declare themselves as secular states and pass laws that require all people to remove religious symbols because they are considered triggers of conflict in society (Gunawan, 2017). However, the influence of secularism on the relationship between religion and state is not always positive. Some critics argue that secularism can exacerbate conflicts due to majority-minority inequality and put religious minorities in a difficult position. In addition, secularism can also jeopardize the openness and freedom produced by secularization. From the perspective of Islamic thought, the relationship between religion and state cannot be separated because Islam governs all aspects of life, individual and social. However, in the Islamic world, the West influences the emergence of the ideology of secularism (Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016; Perdana, 2020).

The long history of Christianity and the West can influence the emergence of secularism by reviewing several factors, including the following: *First*, historical trauma. Europeans were disillusioned with Christianity because of the history of Christian domination, which was considered a form of tyranny. This is one of the factors behind the emergence of secularism (Mudzakkir, 2013). *Second* is the problem of the biblical text. There are different interpretations of the text of the Bible, which is the source of Christian teaching, causing issues with the text of the Bible. This is one of the factors behind the emergence of secularism (Kristian, 2021). *Third*, the Christian theological problem. There are differences in theological views among Christians, causing Christian theological issues. This is one of the factors behind the emergence of secularism (Jamaluddin, 2013). From the perspective of Christianity, secularism is defined as an ideology that states that an institution or state body must stand apart from religion or belief. Secularism also assumes that human activity and determination, especially political ones, must be based on concrete evidence and facts, not religious influences. However, in the Islamic world, Islamic society itself does not recognize the term secularism because Islam regulates all aspects of life, both individual and social. Nevertheless, the influence of secularism on the Islamic world can be found through clashes with the West (Mudzakkir, 2013).

### Doctrine and the Characteristics of Secularism

As already known above, secularism is a school or understanding that seeks to improve the order of life based on material or worldly things, meaning that life in the world must be free from religious bondage based on revelation, accessible from a relationship with God, and happiness in life in the world does not depend on religion. This secularism sides with and supports the theory once brought by Martin Luther that "*if it asks that the task of administration be handed over to the "Emperor" and let religious duties be controlled by the priests in the church. The exclusion of religion from aspects of life can be seen in today's world society, which considers religion only part of the discipline or equivalent aspects of history, economics, politics, and so on.*" (Ibrahim, 2019).

The doctrine brought by secularism is that matters that smell of the hereafter are secondary affairs, which prioritize world affairs. Hence, this secularism brings its followers or adherents into the ideology of prioritizing world affairs by subordinating religious matters. While the characteristics possessed by secularism include the following: *First*, it prioritizes freedom, happiness, and enjoyment from religious influences. *Second*, always ground the principles of pragmatism and utilitarianism. *Third*, spiritual values are very different from the values of world life and all its aspects. *Fourth*, Secularism also displays its dynamic and non-absolute characteristics. For example, legislation and government certainly need a fixed and absolute footing; they tend to change according to interests and times without definitive guidelines (Noor & Fadzil, 2009).

### The Problem of Religious Secularism in France and Belgium

France and Belgium are two countries in Europe that adhere to strict secularism. However, applying this principle in some ways raises some problems, especially in the context of religion (Rafsitahandjani & Firdaus, 2017).

#### 1. In France:

*First*, the prohibition of the use of face coverings either partially or wholly in public spaces, such as in the case of *headscarves*, *niqabs*, and *burqas* in public places, including in schools and government offices, which is considered to violate the principle of secularism. *Second* is the controversy over using religious symbols in public areas, such as the cross and the star of David. *Third*, critics from religious groups feel that the principle of secularism in France is too strict and hinders religious freedom.

#### 2. In Belgium:

*First*, the ban on wearing headscarves in government schools violates the principle of secularism. *Second*, there is controversy over using religious symbols in public places, such as the cross and the Star of David. *Third*, critics from religious groups feel that the principle of secularism in Belgium is too strict and hinders religious freedom. Thus, based on the explanation above, in these two countries, the principle of secularism is often considered a form of discrimination against certain religious groups. However, on the other hand, applying this principle is also considered an effort to maintain religious freedom and prevent discrimination against other religious groups.

### Historical Traces of Niqab and Burqa Prohibition in France and Belgium

#### 1. In France:

France is located in Western Europe and has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe. This is evidenced by data in 2023 that the number of Muslims in France is estimated at 5.7 million people, or if the percentage is around 5% based on the total population in France of 68 million people. France is a country with a Muslim minority and a majority of Catholics (Anonymous, 2023). Despite this, France is a rigorous country, and many policies regarding religious affairs are based on principles of secularism. The existence of secular ideology in France is difficult and comes out of nowhere, but there is a long (historical) lunge. As in the decision of the French government to make the country secular, which at that time was related to the events of the religious war, namely Catholicism with Protestantism in Europe. Thus, war was the background of the emergence of mixing religious affairs with state affairs, known as "secular." The French state adheres to secularism, thus asserting no religious sphere in the government system (state). Because each individual has the right to decide and believe what religion to embrace. In France, there are no rules for a country to regulate all forms of worship activities for its citizens (Mudzakir, 2013).

As stated in a declaration stating that "*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et de ses citoyens*" (Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen), the order was issued by the French government as a manifestation of the country's commitment to religious freedom. Regarding freedom of religion, as stated in article 10 of the French constitution that, "*Chaque Les individus ont le droit d'avoir une opinion, même en matière de religion, à condition qu'elle ne soit pas troubler l'ordre public établi par la loi*" which means that every citizen has the right to freedom, both freedom of opinion and religion. Based on Article 10 of the French constitution, the French state declares a state that upholds religious freedom. The French state has a long and strict history, so it has become secular. As for the French naming of secularism, namely the term "*laïcité*," the time became a root in the tradition of separation of religion and state during the French Revolution. It means a secular state like France that, it (the state) does not have the authority to regulate all forms of worship activities for its citizens. Still, it holds that the realm of religion with the state government system must not be united because both have their territories.

In 1989, the issue of discrimination against three students wearing headscarves first surfaced at France's Creil public high school (Wing & Smith, 2006). Then, in 2004, based on reports from the French police, there were 131

cases of racism, and in 2005, with the same cases with a record number of 65 points (Winkler, 2006). Based on numerous complaints to the government against various motives for religious discrimination and the security of the French government, the "*laïcité*" Law was passed in 2004. The law prohibits wearing symbols or clothing of members of certain religious groups. But with a note, it is okay to use attributes of religious symbols that are not too conspicuous. The sacred symbols or attributes are the hijab, a large cross, a Jewish Kippah, and a Sikh turban. Jacques Chirac was the one who applied for the bill in 2003, and the law was passed in 2004. Initially, the 2004 "*laïcité*" law focused only on banning religious symbols or attributes in public schools, but over time, it developed into a public service platform in 2007 (Ambafrance, 2016).

Then, in 2009, the law developed gradually with the prohibition of wearing face or head coverings either partially or entirely in public spaces or public places, such as transportation, supermarkets, highways, hospitals, areas of education, government offices, and others. Therefore, in 2009, France was known as the first country to establish a ban on the *Niqab* and *Burqa* among other European countries, and it began to be implemented. Then, the law was applied to all regions in France and all people residing there, regardless of age, gender, and national origin. On 12 April 2011, the Law prohibiting the wearing of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in public spaces came into effect. It will be subject to a fine of €150 for violation if a person who is another woman uses the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in public spaces is subject to a fine of €30,000, and if forcing a minor to be liable to a fine of €60,000.

## 2. In Belgium:

Belgium is a small country located in Western Europe; Belgium has a Muslim population of about 7.6% or 879,377 people of the entire population of Belgium, which is 11,686,140. In 2004, Belgium discussed the issue of banning the wearing of the *Niqab* and *Burqa*, which the Vlaams Bloc party proposed at the time. Still, there was yet to be a follow-up response during parliamentary discussions. Then, in 2007-2010, options began to emerge for various bills to introduce the issue of the ban. In the end, the ban plan was accepted in the plenary session. The entire session resulted in Belgium being ready to be crowned as the country that first formalized the ban on wearing the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in public places. Then, in 2011, Belgium re-introduced the Act after three months of France formalizing the offense and simultaneously passing the Law by stating that whoever is in a public space then uses the *Niqab* and *Burqa* or anything like that will receive A fine of €15 25 (Haspeslagh, 2012). Thus 2011, the Belgian state was crowned the second country after France to ban anyone from wearing the *Niqab* and *Burqa*.

## Reasons for the *Niqab* and *Burqa* Ban in France and Belgium

### 1. In France:

After going through a long process, in 2009, the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, in front of parliament, made a speech on the new policy prohibiting face coverings on both parts of the face and all faces in public spaces. Basically, regarding the guideline published by the French state in 2010, if scrutinized, the policy is not solely focused on the context of the "*Niqab* and *Burqa*." Still, the procedure is aimed at someone who wears the "attributes" of the face covering either wholly or partially. As Nicolas Sarkozy said in his speech, "*The burka is not a sign of religion, it is a sign of subservience. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French Republic*" or "*Burka is not a sign of religion, but a sign of obedience. It will not be accepted on the territory of the French Republic*". In the speech, it was clearly understood that the issue of the *Burqa* is not a form of symbol in religion. Still, the *Burqa* is a form of religious observance that is not well accepted in the French state. The prohibition is not merely to offend or be directed at other religions because the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are incompatible with the culture of the French state, which is very secular and inconsistent with "*laïcité*."

Based on the information that developed in French society, among others, the use of face coverings either partially or entirely in public spaces, such as in the case of *headscarves*, *niqabs*, and *burqas* in public places, including in schools and government offices, which is considered to threaten the security and integration process of the majority of women who do not use these attributes (Gohir, 2015). This is in line with the statement from the French government that the use of face coverings either partially or entirely in public spaces, such as in the case of *headscarves*, *niqabs*, and *burqas* in public places, including in schools and government offices, is considered incompatible with the values that exist in France and can give birth to a language in the French state itself. As President Nicolas Sarkozy said, "*We are an old nation united around a specific idea of human dignity, and in particular of woman's dignity, around a clear picture of how to live together. The full veil that hides the face completely harms those values that are fundamental to us and essential to the republican compact*" (Hindu, 2021).



## 2. In Belgium:

The historical emergence of the decision to ban the use of the Niqab and Burqa in Belgium was motivated by the problem of the growth of Muslim society and the existence of various other cultures brought in by immigrants in Belgium. Then, the Belgian government revealed several reasons for the decision to ban the use of the Niqab and Burqa in Belgium; this has been conveyed by Denis Ducarme, one of the parliamentarians in Belgium. Then Denis Ducarme said that "the use of the Niqab and Burqa in Belgium is considered a form of a slave (shackles) to the doctrine of religion because the *Belgian state wants to free the shackles of the use of the Niqab and Burqa in public spaces because it is a barrier to them and this is a strong signal of submissions from Islamic community groups.*"

Then Daniel Bacquelaine responded to the statement that had been delivered by Denis Ducarme that "It's *not a problem of the number of people who wear a Burqa. It's a symbol to say clearly if we want to live together in a free society, we need to recognize each other.*" Based on Daniel Bacquelaine's statement, it is understood that the problem with the Belgian government's decision against the ban on the *Niqab* and *Burqa* does not lie in how many people use them. However, the Belgian state wants to live in a society free from religious observances, such as the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in Belgium, to recognize each other when communicating with other people directly face to face because one of the ethics of sharing in Western culture is to show and pay attention to the front of someone who is the interlocutor. At the same time, the use of religious attributes such as the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in Belgium is very incompatible with the flow (path) of Western culture, with immigrants giving birth to a peaceful and safe life together jointly.

The following reason is that the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in Belgium can interfere with social contact in daily life and can cause uncomfortable feelings such as being easily suspicious, easily alarmed, and being considered spies (intruders) so that everyday life does not run well, especially in terms of communication. Based on the explanation of the reasons for the ban on the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* in Belgium, *First*, the attributes of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are a form of means of enslavement of women, so that it is considered a violation of women's rights, a violation of women's dignity, and a form of discrimination in gender. *Second*, the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* is ascribed to "*Islamic fundamentalism.*" *Third*, to create a peaceful and secure situation and conditions for the state system in Belgium.

## Muslim Perceptions of Religious Secularism in France and Belgium

Regarding the discussion of the views of the Muslim community on religious secularism in France and Belgium, here are some pictures of the Muslim community obtained from the results of the researcher's interview related to the problem of holy secularism in France and Belgium:

### 1. In France:

*First*, the Muslim community living in France sees the state of religious secularism in terms of the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* as a form of threat to freedom of religion, especially the Muslim community, because the *Niqab* and *Burqa* are incompatible with the culture of the French state which is very secular and inconsistent with the system of "*laicite.*" Regarding this first point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with AW, he is a 31-year-old shop employee, a Cannes City resident; he said, "I used to wear a niqab, and I no longer wear a niqab, but I still consistently wear a headscarf. I know very well that President Sarkozy made this decision now, led by President Emmanuel Macron; I'm afraid I have to disagree with the ban because I feel threatened (not being able to express freedom and justice in religion, especially in terms of wearing the niqab). After all, for me, the niqab is an obligation to cover the private parts, and something that is considered to cover the private parts is not only the niqab but also includes the veil. Therefore, as a Muslim, I can still cover my aura in another way, namely by wearing a headscarf. On the other hand, I am also aware of the incompatibility of secular French culture with the niqab, where Muslims here are only a minority, to create a peaceful and safe atmosphere for each other". Based on this explanation, it can be understood that, although feeling threatened by freedom and justice in religion, there is still another way not to open the veil, namely by veiling. Indeed, the culture in France that is secular is not compatible with the *Niqab* because this is to create a peaceful and safe atmosphere among people of other religions.

*Second*, Muslims living in France see the state of religious secularism in terms of banning the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa*, feeling discriminated against because of the passage of a law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public places. Regarding this second point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with NAH, he is 38 years old, a teacher by occupation, and a resident of Marseille City. He said, "With this prohibition, in me, I feel that passing this prohibition is a form of discrimination. Because it has taken away my right to freedom of expression as a person who wears the veil. Because I am comfortable in embracing my identity as a woman who wears a veil

*and I cover my face does not mean I have closed myself or closed my mind.*" (Interview with NAH, teacher, Marseille City, February 20, 2022).

*Third*, there is one Muslim community living in France that experiences and supports the state of religious secularism in terms of the ban on the use of the Niqab and Burqa. Regarding this third point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with CM, he is a 27-year-old student and a resident of Dunkerque City. He said, *"If the government sets a rule prohibiting the wearing of the niqab to the point of having to be fined, I (personally) have no problem with it and support removing the niqab when the situation is like that. But there is something else whose bodily rights need to be protected. If conditions in France make it impossible to wear the veil, it can be removed, or vice versa. However, you can find a person's identity wearing a veil from their eyes or voice"* (Interview with CM, student, Dunkerque City, February 21, 2022).

## 2. In Belgium:

*First*, Muslims living in Belgium see the state of religious secularism in terms of the use of the Niqab and Burqa as a threat to freedom of religion and as a form of discrimination, especially against Muslim communities. Regarding this first point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with YM, he is 30 years old, a shoe businessman; he said, *"I feel threatened because I feel discriminated against because I feel restrained by this unwise prohibition. I would rather sacrifice this world than have to sacrifice things in the afterlife (religion), meaning it would be better for me to pay a fine as a sanction than to have to take off my niqab. So the solution for me is that it is better not to leave the house than to have to leave the house while taking off the niqab"*. Based on this explanation, it can be understood that using the Niqab and Burqa is a principle owned by a woman and must be upheld. It is not daunted or affected by any situation and condition faced.

*Second*, Muslims living in Belgium see the state of religious secularism in terms of banning the use of the niqab and burqa feeling discriminated against because a ban on the use of the niqab and burqa can make the Muslim community in Belgium feel isolated from the general public and worsen their social and economic conditions. Regarding this second point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with RM, he is 33 years old, a teacher by occupation, and a resident of Saint-Nicolas City; he said, *"I am a strong person who maintains my principles in consistently wearing the Niqab. The state has formalized the ban, and while I am still firm in my stance when I leave the house and am willing to pay the fine, the people around me cannot communicate with me. Because, in the eyes of other people, I am considered a figure who is highly suspicious and is closely monitored as if I am considered a terrorist. And this is what becomes the gateway to worsening social conditions"* (Interview with RM, Saint-Nicolas City, February 25, 2022).

*Third*, there is one Muslim community living in Belgium that experiences and supports the state of religious secularism in terms of the ban on the use of the Niqab and Burqa to create peace and security in the country. Regarding this third point, as evidenced in the researcher's interview with TN, he is 35 years old, a lecturer job, and a resident of Bouge City, *"In my opinion, with the presence of a ban on the use of the Niqab and Burqa, I agree with the presence of the ban, this is intended to be able to recognize each other when communicating with other people face to face because one of the ethics of communicating in western culture is to show and pay attention to the face of the person you are talking to. Meanwhile, the use of religious attributes such as the Niqab and Burqa in Belgium is not by the flow (path) of Western culture with immigrants, so that they can create a peaceful and safe life together among people of other religions"*.

## The Negative and Positive Impacts of Niqab and Burqa Bans on Muslim Perceptions in France and Belgium

In this regard, the following is a description of the negative and positive impacts on Muslim communities of the niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium based on an analytical review of Muslim people's perceptions of religious secularism in France and Belgium.

### 1. Negative Impact:

*First*, the act of discrimination. Bans on the niqab and burqa in France and Belgium could fuel discrimination against Muslim communities who wear the garments. *Second*, acts of violence. Several cases of violence against Muslim communities in France and Belgium are linked to *niqab* and *burqa* bans, such as attacks on mosques and Muslim settlements and Social isolation. Prohibitions on the niqab and burqa can make Muslims feel isolated from the general public and worsen their social and economic conditions.

### 2. Positive Impact:

*First*, the promotion of gender equality. Some supporters of niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium argue that the garments symbolize gender inequality and perpetuate discrimination against women. *Second*,

Increase security. The niqab and burqa bans in France and Belgium are also intended to improve safety and prevent terrorism.

## CONCLUSION

As some glimpses of the views or perceptions of the Muslim community that have been known above, the views of Muslim communities in France and Belgium towards religious secularism in terms of banning the use of the *Niqab* and *Burqa* vary widely. The differences in opinions or perceptions that vary greatly are influenced by principles, experiences, science, attitudes, social conditions, the surrounding environment, and personalities owned by those (Muslim communities) living in France and Belgium. Overall, the *Niqab* and *Burqa* bans in France and Belgium have had a complex and controversial impact on Muslim societies. Although there are only a few positive impacts, the adverse effects are more dominant, and this may worsen the social and economic conditions of Muslim communities in both countries.

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