

MUSLIM IDENTITY FORMATION WITHIN SECULAR EDUCATION: THE CASE OF WESTERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The phenomenon of secularism has created an educational space that is often detached from spiritual and religious values. For Muslim communities, particularly the younger generation growing up in Western educational systems, this has given rise to a complex identity crisis. This article aims to examine the influence of secularism on the formation of Muslim identity in Western educational environments. Employing qualitative, library-based research, this research engages critically academic literatures, seminal texts, and the works of modern Muslim thinkers. The results show that secularism not only impacts the marginalization of Islamic values in the curricula but also affects the identity formation experienced by Muslim students in their search for identity. Islamic education in the West is required not only to be a space for the transmission of religious knowledge but also to become a space for the formation of a strong religious identity. The



novelty of this research lies in its exploration of Muslim identity formation in the West within the prism of contemporary Islamic discourse, thereby offering new perspectives in understanding the dynamics of the Muslim identity crisis and contextual educational strategies amidst the currents of global secularism.

Keywords: *Curricula; Education; Educational Psychology; Religious Values*

Abstrak

Fenomena sekularisme di dunia Barat telah menciptakan ruang pendidikan yang seringkali terlepas dari nilai-nilai spiritual dan agama. Bagi komunitas Muslim, khususnya generasi muda yang tumbuh dalam sistem pendidikan Barat, ini memunculkan krisis identitas yang kompleks. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh sekularisme terhadap pembentukan identitas Muslim dalam lingkungan pendidikan Barat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka (library research), dengan menelaah literatur yang relevan dari jurnal akademik, buku, dan pemikiran para pemikir Muslim modern. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa sekularisme tidak hanya berdampak pada marginalisasi nilai-nilai keislaman dalam kurikulum, tetapi juga pada pembentukan identitas yang dialami peserta didik Muslim dalam proses pencarian jati diri. Pendidikan Islam di Barat dituntut untuk tidak hanya menjadi ruang transmisi ilmu agama, tetapi juga sebagai ruang pembentukan identitas religius yang kuat. Kebaruan dari penelitian ini terletak pada eksplorasi pembentukan identitas muslim di barat dalam prisma wacana Islam kontemporer, yang membuka perspektif baru dalam memahami dinamika krisis identitas Muslim dan strategi pendidikan yang kontekstual di tengah arus sekularisme global.

Kata Kunci: *Kurikulum; Pendidikan; Psikologi Pendidikan; Nilai Agama.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern education is generally rooted in secular values, placing religion as a private matter and tend to exclude it from public spaces, including educational institutions. This system prioritizes scientific rationality, ideological neutrality, and freedom of thought as the primary foundations of the learning process (Parhan et al., 2022; Sri Minarti, 2024). The secular education system that is characteristic of the West and is now widely adopted, inherently tends to exclude the spiritual dimension from the classroom (Maisarah, 2020; Parhan et al., 2022). Despite the advantages of this system, new tensions have emerged for the devout religious community, particularly in the context of shaping the religious identity of the younger generation. In the case of western Muslim students, they face the challenge of balancing religious identity with the demands of social integration within secular curriculum (Salminawati, 2024; Priyati & Firmansyah, 2023).

Muslim students often find themselves caught in significant identity dissonance. This phenomenon is often viewed as an epistemological crisis, where the sources of knowledge and worldviews taught in schools contradict the Islamic worldview (Kamaliah, 2022). Prominent thinkers such as Syed Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi have warned long ago that education separated from the transcendental dimension of Islam will produce individuals who lose direction and essential life goals, trapped in a dualism between personal Islamic identity and the demands of a secular educational environment (Fahyuni, 2020).

This phenomenon has become increasingly complex, exacerbated by what al-Attas calls the secularization of knowledge, a process that has removed not only God from the universe but also from the way humans understand reality itself. This is reflected in a curriculum that separates sciences from Islamic ethics and metaphysics, forcing Muslim students to negotiate two often contradictory value systems (Muthoifin & Mustofa, 2023). The

implications of this situation are not limited to the intellectual realm but also permeate the spiritual dimension, eroding the integrity of the Muslim personality, which should unite reason, heart, and soul. The lack of space for religious expression also has the potential to marginalize Islamic identity in the public sphere, raising crucial questions about the relevance of Islam amidst the currents of modernity. (Qodat, 2029; Fahyuni, 2020).

On the other hand, what is happening today is that they often experience confusion in navigating the religious values inherited from their families and the secular norms that dominate their social and academic environments. This tension can trigger what Erikson (1968) called "identity confusion," the failure to form a complete sense of self, especially when individuals are under the pressure of conflicting values (Qodat, 2029; Pohan, 2023). This identity fragmentation not only impacts emotional and psychosocial stability but also hinders the learning process and the formation of religious character. A contemporary Islamic approach provides a reflective space to strategically address this challenge, emphasizing that Islamic education in the West is not merely informative but must be spiritually transformative (Parhan et al., 2022).

In this context, it concerns not only cognitive adaptation but also how they internalize values, manage value conflicts, and build resilience in environments that do not always support spirituality. In other words, Islamic education in the West must be designed not only from the perspective of institutional structures but also from the perspective of the students' inner experiences (Kamaliah, 2022; Pohan, 2023).

Therefore, this article seeks to present a critical analysis of the challenges of secularism and the identity crisis facing Muslims in the West, using an educational psychology approach using theories of contemporary Islamic studies. This research is not only theoretically important but also strategic for developing a contextual, inclusive, and relevant model of Islamic education amidst the plurality of cultures and global values (Trisnani, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of two rarely juxtaposed approaches, namely educational psychology and contemporary Islamic studies, to reformulate the paradigm of Islamic education for Muslim communities in the West (Khairiyah, 2022).

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach using library research. The focus of the study is to examine in-depth the dynamics of the challenges of secularism and the phenomenon of the Muslim identity crisis in the West. The analysis is conducted through the lens of a contemporary Islamic theories (Parhan et al., 2022). The main data sources used include academic publications, journal articles, and other relevant literature selected based on thematic relevance.

This research began with a careful formulation of the topic, followed by a purposive literature selection process to ensure the relevance of the data sources to the study's focus. After the primary literature was collected, an in-depth exploration was conducted to identify and categorize the information into specific themes. These themes include the complexity of the identity crisis faced by Muslim students, the value pressures arising from the clash between the secular education system and Islamic teachings, and various efforts to integrate contemporary Islamic approaches and educational psychology within the context of secular Western society (Rijal, 2024). This categorization process becomes an important foundation for mapping the landscape of the problems being studied.

In the data analysis stage, a content analysis guide was used as the primary instrument to help guide the interpretation process. Next, interpretive content analysis was applied as a core technique to interpret the meaning of the text contextually and comprehensively, uncovering the nuances and implications of each finding (Sarinah & Juanda, 2022). All stages of data collection and

processing are always based on the principle of academic validity. This principle is achieved through cross-source comparisons to verify information, critique of diverse perspectives to ensure objectivity, and constructing a coherent, synthesized argument to build a comprehensive understanding. Through a rigorous methodological approach, this study is expected to contribute solid conceptual thinking, particularly in designing an Islamic education model that is responsive to contemporary social realities and universal values, reviewed in terms of educational narratives and contemporary Islamic studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that contemporary Islam views secularism as an epistemological challenge that requires an adaptive response, encouraging reform of Islamic understanding and practice so that Muslims can actively participate in non-Muslim societies without sacrificing their religious principles (Surya, 2024; Rijal, 2024). This has implications for the reconstruction of a holistic Muslim identity and citizenship that contributes with fundamental values to the global environment, representing a novelty in the harmonious coexistence of religious and civic identities. Therefore, the development of an adaptive and inclusive model of Islamic education in the West is vital. The focus should not only be on teaching religious dogma, but also on equipping Muslim students to build a strong and positive self-identity, capable of integrating harmoniously into Western society without sacrificing their religious values (Maisarah, 2020, Husniyah, 2019). The implementation of secularism in the West through policies and practices creates a significant complexity of challenges for the formation of the identity of Muslim students, underscoring the urgency of integrative and contextual Islamic education, in accordance with the concept of the Islamization of knowledge ala Syed Naquib al-Attas. (Muthoifin & Mustofa, 2023).

It highlights how religious discrimination erodes Muslim students' self-identity and national identification, while exposure to liberal ideologies can trigger identity confusion, potentially leading to alienation, stress, and anxiety. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the specific impacts of the clash between secularism and Muslim identity that contribute to social polarization, thus demanding an educational approach that requires holistic integration and inclusive nuances (Fitrah & Hajmi, 2023).

Islamic View on Secularism and Muslim Identity Crisis

Contemporary Islam does not view secularism as an absolute threat, but rather as an epistemological challenge that must be responded to with a critical and creative approach. Contemporary Islamic thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan, Abdullahi an-Na'im, and Amina Wadud highlight the importance of reform in how Muslims understand and apply Islam in non-Muslim environments (Parhan et al., 2022). They reject doctrinal exclusivism that discourages involvement in Western society, and encourage active participation while maintaining Islamic principles.

In the context of the identity crisis, contemporary Islamic studies encourage the reconstruction of Muslim identity as a dual identity: being a Muslim and a citizen at the same time (Sassi, 2020). This perspective stems from the understanding that being a Muslim in the West does not mean being uprooted from society, but rather being part of social change by bringing prophetic values: justice, compassion, and honesty (Salminawati, et.al., 2024).

This is more than mere adaptation; this approach represents a paradigm shift in contemporary Islamic thought, proactively seeking a convergence between spiritual commitment and social engagement. It is no longer a dichotomy or a choice between two poles, but rather a holistic integration of both to form a resilient, adaptive, and relevant identity amidst the dynamics of the modern world. (Dina, 2024). Thus, Muslim individuals are empowered to navigate a pluralistic social landscape, proving that Islamic values

are not only in line with the advancement of a democratic society, but can actually become fundamental pillars for the construction of a more just and ethical community (Pohan, 2023). This is a call to act as a bridge between civilizations, bridging the spiritual dimension with humanitarian responsibility.

This paradigm aligns fully with the principle of inclusivity in educational psychology, which fundamentally rejects the positioning of Muslim students as "othered." Instead, they should be positioned as active subjects and integral contributors to the broader society. In this context, contemporary Islamic studies offers a crucial framework for thinking (Dina, 2024). He called for contemporary Islamic educational strategies to adopt an open, dynamic approach based on universal values such as justice, compassion, and freedom without compromising the spiritual roots and authenticity of Islamic teachings. This is not merely an adjustment, but a fundamental transformation that will enable Muslim identity to develop holistically, integrating traditional wisdom with the demands of modernity, and actively shaping the future of civilization (Lubis et al., 2019).

Secularism and Muslim Student's Dilemma in The West

The principle of secularism, particularly as it is practiced in Western countries, continues to be a crucial arena shaping the experiences and identity formation of Muslim students. The various policies implemented in each country demonstrate the complexity of the challenges faced, from issues surrounding religious symbols to the practice of religious rituals in educational settings (Lubis et al., 2019). An integrative and contextual approach to Islamic education is crucial in facing the challenges of secularism. Ismail al-Faruqi put forward the concept of the Islamization of knowledge, which emphasizes the integration of Islamic values into various disciplines as an effort to maintain Muslim identity amidst the tide of secularism (Muthoifin & Mustofa, 2023).

Secularism in the West, particularly in France through the principle of *laïcité*, has removed religious symbols from public

spaces, including schools. This policy has impacted Muslim students, who feel marginalized and experience identity pressure. (Haryati & Syarnubi, 2024). The ban on the wearing of hijab and other religious clothing in public schools has created feelings of exclusion among Muslim students.

In the UK, the secular approach to education has also sparked controversy. Bans on prayer rituals in schools, such as those at Michaela Community School, have sparked debates about the balance between religious freedom and secular principles. Some see these bans as discrimination against Muslim students. In the Netherlands, non-Muslim teachers with positive attitudes toward Islam can act as bridges between Muslim students and the wider community, helping them develop a healthy and integrative identity. (Rijal, 2024).

For Muslim students, this policy often presents a profound dilemma. They are forced to choose between expressing their religious identity, which for many is an integral part of their being, or complying with school rules in order to receive an education (Sassi, 2020; Salminawati, et.al., 2024). Feelings of marginalization and identity strain are inevitable when their expression of faith is considered “foreign” or “inappropriate” in an environment that should be inclusive. (Lubis et al., 2019). This pressure is not only external from school rules, but also internal, raising questions about their place in society, their loyalty to the nation, and how they reconcile two seemingly conflicting identities. This can lead to an identity crisis or even withdrawal from full participation in society (Surya, 2024).

Such regulations have sparked heated debate over the extent to which schools, as public entities, can restrict individual religious practices. For many Muslim students, prayer is a fundamental pillar of faith and an integral part of their daily lives. When this ritual is restricted or prohibited in school settings, it can be interpreted as discrimination, potentially eroding their sense of belonging and hindering their spiritual development. (Pohan, 2023). The controversy also highlights differing interpretations of

secular "neutrality"; whether it means the absence of all forms of religion, or whether it means accommodating diverse beliefs without bias. Those in favor of a ban might argue that the goal is to maintain cohesion and equality for all students, while those opposed to it see it as a curtailment of fundamental religious rights and a disregard for the spiritual needs of minority groups.

Identity Crisis and Psychological Pressure for Muslim Students

The issue of identity crisis and psychological stress is a significant challenge faced by Muslim students in Western countries (Salminawati, 2024). This phenomenon is often the result of a complex interaction between perceived discrimination, exposure to contradictory ideologies, and the crucial role of the educational environment and authority figures.

Research conducted in the Netherlands highlights how religious discrimination experienced by Muslim students, even within the Islamic school environment itself, can have serious negative impacts (Nurjaman, 2022). This type of discrimination, which can manifest as stereotyping, unfair treatment, or a lack of understanding of religious practices, can erode two crucial pillars of individual development: self-esteem and national identification. When a student perceives their religion as a source of discrimination, this can lead to the internalization of stigma, resulting in a negative self-image and doubts about their place as equal citizens. (Nurjaman, 2022). On the other hand, the situation in Australia highlights a different dimension of the challenge: concerns about the influence of liberal ideology on young Muslims. In pluralistic Western societies, Muslim students are exposed to diverse values and outlooks on life that may fundamentally conflict with Islamic teachings and values (Maisarah, 2020). Liberal ideology, with its emphasis on individualism, absolute freedom, and moral relativism, can create confusion and uncertainty for Muslim students who are in the process of forming their identities (Minarti, 2024).

The identity crisis and psychological stress experienced by Muslim students in the West radiates waves of far-reaching implications, not only for individuals, but also for the social fabric and health of communities (Rijal, 2024). Fundamentally, this condition can manifest as social dysfunction, where Muslim students may feel alienated and struggle to fully participate in society (Masayu, 2020). This sense of not having a clear place can hinder social interactions, reduce involvement in communal activities, and ultimately, limit their potential contribution (Fikri, 2024).

Furthermore, the internal stress of prolonged identity conflict significantly increases the risk of mental health problems. Depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem often lurk, weighing on the minds and emotions of students who constantly grapple with questions about who they are and how they can integrate without compromising their beliefs (Khairiyah, 2022). In extreme cases, this identity confusion and sense of alienation can even become a catalyst for radicalization. Individuals who feel they have no clear place or purpose can become vulnerable to extremist narratives that offer seemingly definitive "identities" and "solutions," even if those paths deviate from core religious teachings or human values (Fitrah & Hajmi, 2023.; Sarinah & Juanda, 2022).

At the community level, individual identity conflicts can also trigger divisions within the Muslim community itself. This is often seen in the polarization between those who tend to choose complete assimilation into the majority culture, even at the expense of some religious practices, and those who strive to strictly maintain traditions (Lubis et al., 2019). Such internal tensions can hinder social cohesion and collective efforts to empower communities.

Therefore, addressing this identity crisis and psychological distress requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach. In addition to the crucial role of teachers in providing support and understanding, Islamic education must innovate to become more relevant amidst contemporary challenges (Haryati & Syarnubi, 2024). This means not only teaching dogma, but also equipping

students with critical thinking and facilitating constructive dialogue about values and identity in the context of modern society (Qodat, 2029). Moreover, this effort also requires the wider community to actively create a more inclusive environment that values diversity. Only then can Muslim students grow and develop with a strong sense of identity, pride in their heritage, and become citizens who contribute fully to the advancement of society (Nurjaman, 2022).

Psychosocial Implication and The Need for Holistic Integration

The impact of secular policies in Western educational institutions goes far beyond mere adherence to rules; it touches the very core of Muslim students' psychosocial development, creating a complex set of risks (Sarinah & Juanda, 2022). Psychosocially, Muslim students can potentially experience a sense of alienation, where they feel unwelcome or separated from the school environment, which should be a safe and supportive place. This often triggers significant stress and anxiety, due to the constant pressure to adapt or hide aspects of their religious identity to conform to prevailing norms (Yucel, 2023). This internal conflict can disrupt concentration, lead to decreased academic performance, and hinder the development of their identity. They may struggle to integrate their strong religious identity with their everyday national or cultural identity. This, in turn, can fuel increased polarization, reinforcing the "us" versus "them" perception between the Muslim community and the secular majority, thus eroding social cohesion (Surya, 2024). Addressing this complexity demands a nuanced and inclusive approach to secularism in education, where solutions focus not only on policy, but also on building understanding, empathy, and space for the expression of diverse identities.

The impact of secular policies in Western educational institutions goes beyond mere adherence to rules (Khairiyah, 2022). Psychosocially, Muslim students are at risk of experiencing:

- 1 Alienation: Feeling unaccepted or separated from the school environment.
- 2 Stress and Anxiety: Pressure to conform or hide aspects of their religious identity.
- 3 Decreased Academic Performance: Concentration is disturbed due to internal and external conflicts.
- 4 Barriers to Identity Development: Difficulty integrating religious identity with national or cultural identity.
- 5 Increasing Polarization: Reinforcing the "us" versus "them" perception between the Muslim community and the secular majority (Khairiyah, 2022; Ramli, 2024).

To address this complexity, a more nuanced and inclusive approach to secularism in education is needed. These efforts could include:

- 1 Enhancing Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue: Encouraging mutual understanding and respect for diversity.
- 2 Developing an Inclusive Curriculum: Integrating diverse religious perspectives into humanities subjects.
- 3 Formulating Flexible Policies: Finding common ground between the principles of secularism and the needs of religious minorities, such as providing worship facilities or tolerance for non-disruptive religious symbols.
- 4 Education and Training for Educators: Equipping teachers and staff with a better understanding of students' religious backgrounds. (Fitrah & Hajmi, 2023; Haryati & Syarnubi, 2024).

Therefore, developing an adaptive and inclusive model of Islamic education in the West is vital. The focus should not only be on teaching religious dogma, but also on how to equip Muslim students to develop a strong and positive self-identity, enabling them to integrate harmoniously into Western society without sacrificing their religious values (Maisarah, 2020).

Table 1: Table of Analysis

No	Issues	Findings	Analysis
1	Western Muslim Dual Identities	The need to construct an identity that combines religious and civic values.	Muslim identity does not have to be at odds with being an active citizen; the two can go hand in hand in the context of pluralism (Ramli, 2024).
2	The Impact of Secular Policies in Schools	The ban on religious symbols and practices causes psychological stress.	Policies such as the ban on hijabs and prayer in schools create feelings of exclusion and undermine the expression of Muslim students' faith. (Yahdi, 2024).
3	The Muslim Woman's Dilemma in a Secular Environment	Religious expression is limited by institutional rules.	Muslim women are often forced to choose between practicing their faith or following school rules, leading to identity stress (Surya, 2024)
4	Discrimination in Islamic Schools (Netherland)	Discrimination still occurs even in Islamic-based institutions.	Internal discrimination weakens self-esteem and worsens the integration of Muslim students with their surroundings (Qadat, 2020).
5	Liberal Ideology Exposure	Liberal values give rise to identity confusion.	Principles such as moral relativism and individualism challenge the understanding of Islamic values among Muslim youth (Fitriani et al., 2022).

6	Psychosocial Impact of Secularism	Increased anxiety, isolation, and academic decline.	The mismatch between religious identity and the school environment creates emotional burdens and hinders achievement (Khairiyah, 2022).
7	Polarization in the Muslim Community	Internal tensions arose between conservative and assimilative groups	Differences in strategies for dealing with secularism can weaken solidarity and create conflict within the Muslim community itself (Fahyuni, 2020).
8	The Urgency of Contextual Islamic Education	Islamic education must be adapted to Western social realities.	The curriculum needs to equip students with critical insights and a strong yet flexible religious identity. (Walidaini & Harahap, 2024).
9	Psychological Approach to Education	Identity formation requires a holistic and supportive approach.	Main focus: internalization of values, resilience, identity integration, emotional support, and representation of teachers as role models (Rakhmawati, 2022).
10	Strategic Steps	There is a need for an inclusive and empowering transformation	Education must be a medium of empowerment, not just the teaching of dogma, so that Muslims can actively contribute to Western

of Islamic education.	society. (Farah, 2022; Maisarah, 2020).
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CONCLUSION

This study confirms that secularism in the West is not simply an obstacle for Muslim students, but rather a conceptual challenge that requires adjustments to Islamic educational perspectives and strategies. Contemporary Islam does not view secularism as an ideological enemy, but rather as a social reality that must be confronted with open, reflective, and adaptive thinking.

The main issue raised in this study, namely how Muslim students construct their religious identity in a secular environment, is addressed through findings that indicate that social pressure, discrimination, and exposure to ideologies that conflict with Islamic teachings directly impact their identity formation and psychological well-being. Muslim students' dual identities, as members of a religious community and citizens, often face complex dilemmas in Western educational environments that tend to demand value neutrality. Therefore, the strategic solution offered through this research is the development of an Islamic educational model relevant to the context of Muslim students' lives in the West. Education should be directed not only at conveying religious teachings but also at helping students develop balanced personalities: religious, psychologically resilient, and able to interact healthily in a pluralistic society.

Overall, this study confirms that the success of Muslim students in maintaining their religious identity amidst the pressures of secularism depends heavily on a holistic educational approach, one that combines spirituality, emotional intelligence, and constructive social engagement. Thus, Islam not only survives amidst Western modernity but can also become an active moral force shaping a more just, inclusive, and humane civilization.

Suggestions for further research include more specific and in-depth studies of the psychological aspects of students. The researcher hopes that a study of secularism in the context of the Muslim identity crisis in the West will better address the social and emotional challenges facing Muslim students in the West.

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