

## The Existence of the *Conseil Français de Culte Musulman* in Bridging Interests of the Government and Muslim Community in France

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### Abstract

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly focused on the phenomenon of religious pluralism due to its perceived role in precipitating interfaith conflicts while also recognizing its potential as a unifying force if managed effectively. The establishment of religious institutions as civil society agents, such as the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil Français de Culte Musulman*, CFCM), exemplifies efforts to preserve religious diversity. This study examines the CFCM's role in bridging the interests of the French government and the Muslim community. Various perspectives, including conflict, competition, and collaboration, are employed to analyze this issue. The research underscores the importance of collaboration, emphasizing that cooperation is essential for fostering harmonious relations between the government and the Muslim community. In democratic systems, religious institutions serve as critical elements in ensuring harmony amid religious diversity. Interviews conducted with CFCM officials, international institution representatives, religious leaders, community figures, youth leaders, and activists from 2016 to 2019 reveal the CFCM's significance in addressing governmental and Muslim community concerns. However, the CFCM faces challenges such as its ambiguity regarding secularism, institutional crises stemming from internal conflicts, national identity crises, and the threats of radicalism and terrorism. These obstacles contribute to ongoing tensions, notably in cases like the hijab controversy and depictions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Effective dialog emerges as a key strategy for the CFCM to fulfill its role effectively.

**Keywords:** CFCM; religious diversity; Muslim community; existence; France; dialog

### Introduction

In recent decades, the phenomenon of religious pluralism has captured the attention of scholars worldwide. This is because it is perceived as a significant factor contributing to interfaith conflicts, as evidenced by incidents such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France,<sup>1</sup> the *hijab* case,<sup>2</sup> and the burning of mosques in Strasbourg.<sup>3</sup> However, religious pluralism can become a unifying force for nations if managed effectively. Research findings indicate that the concept of pluralism, besides being an effective means of nurturing harmony and

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<sup>1</sup> Salimatun Nikmah, "Penembakan di Kantor Majalah Charlie Hebdo," *Jurnal Al-Bayan* 23, no. 2 (2018): 196-207; Pavlos Vasilopoulos, George E. Marcus, and Martial Foucault, "Emotional Responses to the Charlie Hebdo Attacks: Addressing the Authoritarianism Puzzle," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2018): 557-575; BBC News, "Charlie Hebdo Attack: Three Days of Terror," accessed January 2024, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>; Skaiste Liepyte and Kareena McAloney-Kocaman, "Discrimination and Religiosity among Muslim Women in the UK before and after the Charlie Hebdo Attacks," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 18, no. 9 (2015): 789-794.

<sup>2</sup> Nadza Indira Rafsitahandjani and Aos Y. Firdaus, "Dinamika Pelarangan Niqab dan Burqa di Eropa Barat: Studi Kasus Perancis dan Belgia [The Dynamics of the Niqab and Burqa Bans in Western Europe: A Case Study of France and Belgium]," *Interdependence: Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* (2017): 112-120.

<sup>3</sup> Barsihannoor, "Perkembangan Pemikiran Islam di Prancis [The Development of Islamic Thought in France]," *Jurnal Adabiyah* 14, no. 1 (2014): 25-31.

fostering harmonious coexistence,<sup>4</sup> also serves as a solution to prevent interfaith conflicts.<sup>5</sup> One effort to preserve religious diversity is the formation of religious institutions as civil society agents, serving as platforms for communication between the government and citizens. The sole existing religious institution that plays a role in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community in France is the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil Français de Culte Musulman, CFCM*).

So far, the CFCM has been considered successful in realizing its goals, as demonstrated by its role as the sole religious institution authorized by the government to oversee all federations (representatives) of Islamic mass organizations in France. Additionally, the existence of the CFCM is seen to dispel negative stigmas against the Muslim community, which is often subjected to racial discrimination<sup>6</sup> However, the CFCM is perceived to lack strong grassroots support, leading to low legitimacy within the Muslim community. The Montaigne Institute reported that more than two-thirds of respondents had never heard of the CFCM. The establishment of the CFCM by the French government is considered paradoxical because, on the one hand, the government does not allocate space for religion in state affairs (secularization), yet on the other hand, it intervenes in religious life.<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity of the CFCM in fulfilling its role stems from the fact that, while its formation was intended to address issues of belief and religion, in reality, the presence of representatives of mass organizations under its umbrella remains under the influence of the home countries of these Muslim communities, such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> The CFCM is considered effective in responding to issues related to practical worship, such as mosque construction, providing halal meat and other foodstuffs, and regulating Islamic holidays. However, it is deemed ineffective in addressing social issues facing young Muslims, such as unemployment and discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

So far, research on the religious organization CFCM tends to adopt three perspectives: conflict, political competition, and collaboration. Firstly, studies employing the conflict perspective consider the existence of the Muslim community as a translocality dilemma. Furthermore, they are regarded as temporary citizens (*Gastarbeiter*), and it is believed that they will eventually return to their home countries (the myth of return). Secondly, research adopting the perspective of political competition considers the existence of the CFCM as a political vehicle utilized by politicians to gain an advantage over political rivals.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of the CFCM was a political creation initiated by the government, spearheaded by then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, to counter negative trends that regarded the French integration model as a failure.<sup>11</sup> At election times, presidential candidates approach the Muslim community, leveraging it as a mass base to garner political and

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<sup>4</sup> Arafat Noor Abdillah, "Pluralisme Agama dalam Konteks Keislaman di Indonesia," *Religi: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 15, no. 1 (2019): 51–75.

<sup>5</sup> Fatonah Dzakie, "Meluruskan Pemahaman Pluralisme dan Pluralisme Agama di Indonesia," *Al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2014): 79–94.

<sup>6</sup> Johanna Konttori, "Negotiating Republican Islam: The Conseil Français du Culte Musulman and the Debates on Headscarves and Full Veils," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 8, no. 1 (2015): 31–50.

<sup>7</sup> Amin El-Yousfi, "The Paradoxes of Institutionalizing Islam in France", Policy Center For The New South (2020), 1-5.

<sup>8</sup> Nadia Kiwan, "Muslim and Secular: Performing 'Muslim Exemplarity' and Public Debates on Islam in France," *Performing Islam* 2, no. 1 (2014): 45–66.

<sup>9</sup> Demas E. Boudreaux, "The French Council for the Muslim Faith: Its Implications for Representing Muslims in France" (Master's thesis, The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2006):3-21.

<sup>10</sup> Maillard Dominique, "The Muslims in France and the French Model of Integration," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 4, no. 4 (2010): 1–24; Kielan Glinska, "The Creation of 'Republican' Islam in France: The French Council of the Moslem Faith (CFCM)," *Studia Historyczne (Historical Studies)* 49, no. 1 (193) (2006): 65–78.

<sup>11</sup> Kielan Glinska, "The Creation of 'Republican' Islam in France: The French Council of the Moslem Faith (CFCM)," *Studia Historyczne (Historical Studies)* 49, no. 1 (193) (2006): 65–78.

economic advantages.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, research that adopts a collaborative perspective, such as that involving the Comité de Coordination des Musulmans Turcs de France (CCMTF) which is a component of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) and affiliated with the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) acts as a strategic partner to the French government. This collaboration aims to promote the concept of French Islam rather than addressing the broader notion of Islam in France.<sup>13</sup> German Islam Konferenz Germany shows the importance of promoting national feelings toward fostering tolerance between religious believers.<sup>14</sup> Council of Britain (MCB) UK shows that after the London bombings in 2005, the UK government changed its approach from religious institutionalization toward overall moral and social improvement. Religious Communication Forum (FKUB) in Indonesia is considered to reduce tensions and minimize the potential for inter-religious conflicts, especially between Islam and Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Comparative studies conducted in several Western European countries, including Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, regarding the influence of state-church regimes on the institutionalization of Islamic organizations, indicate that the emergence of various religious institutions in these countries is not influenced by the structure of the state-church regime that once dominated state affairs and left a dark period in the history of state-religion relations in France.<sup>16</sup>

Previous research has indicated several perspectives utilized by researchers and academics to examine the existence of the CFCM in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community, including conflict perspective, competition perspective, and collaboration perspective. This study reinforces the position of previous research that employs the collaboration perspective, wherein cooperation is seen as an essential prerequisite for the creation of harmonious relations that can bridge the interests of the government with the Muslim community. This is because, in democratic systems, the position of religious institutions as civil society agents becomes crucial and is a strategic element that can ensure the creation of harmony amidst religious diversity.

Based on this, this study generally examines the existence of the CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. Additionally, this study specifically aims to explore the following: First, the existence of CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. Second, the factors hindering the CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. Third, the strategies adopted by the CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. This study is based on the argument that

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<sup>12</sup> Imène Ajala, "The Muslim Vote and Muslim Lobby in France: Myths and Realities," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2010): 77–91

<sup>13</sup> Zana Çitak, "Between 'Turkish Islam' and 'French Islam': The Role of the Diyanet in the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 619–634.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Benjamin, "Promoting Belonging through Religious Institutionalisation? The French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) and the German Islamkonferenz," *Political Perspectives* 4, no. June (2012): 22–38, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803707-9>; Arthur Kaufman, "Muslims in France: A Multilevel Analysis," in *15th Claremont-UC Undergraduate Conference on the European Union (Claremont, CA: Scripps College, n.d.): 1–27*.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Anang Firdaus, "Eksistensi Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama dalam Memelihara Kerukunan Umat Beragama di Indonesia [The Existence of Religious Harmony Forum in Maintenance Religious Cohesion in Indonesia]," *Kontekstualita* 29, no. 1 (2014): 58–71; Ardiansyah, "Peran FKUB dalam Menangani Konflik Pendirian Rumah Ibadah [The Role of FKUB in Dealing with Conflicts in the Establishment of Houses of Worship]," *Toleransi: Media Ilmiah Komunikasi Umat Beragama* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.24014/trs.v4i1.1029>.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Loobuyck, Jonathan Debeer, and Petra Meier, "Church-State Regimes and Their Impact on the Institutionalization of Islamic Organizations in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2013): 61–76.

the CFCM exists and plays its role in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community in France. This is evidenced by its role as the sole recognized religious institution by the government and structurally under the authority of the Ministry of Interior.

Additionally, the existence of the CFCM is supported by historical and constitutional reasons. Historically, in the 8th century H., the Muslim community had economic and cultural relations with France, particularly and Europe in general, through the Andalusian route.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, during the era of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1805 CE, the need for military recruitment led France to bring in Muslims, particularly from North African countries it had colonized.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, constitutionally, the law of *Laïcité* ensures equal rights and obligations for citizens to practice their beliefs and religion according to their own choice.<sup>19</sup>

## Literature Review

### *Muslim Community*

France is considered one of the most open and receptive countries to the Muslim diaspora from various nations. The Gallup International report notes that the Netherlands and France are among the most open European countries for engaging in dialog with individuals of all religious beliefs and convictions. Moreover, this openness positions France as a country with the highest level of pluralism, considering aspects of religion, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>20</sup> With a population reaching approximately 8.4 million Muslims in 2017, raising to 10 million in 2023, Islam holds the second-largest religious position after Catholic Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The following information is unofficial, as the French constitution prohibits census data collection based on race and religion. In addition to Islam, a variety of religions and belief systems coexist in France, including Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and atheism. Diverse ethnicities and cultures, including West African diasporas from nations such as Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal, alongside communities from Turkey, Bangladesh, Syria, and Egypt, enrich the societal structure. John L. Esposito, as referenced by Barsihannor, categorizes the Muslim community in France into four distinct groups: long-established Muslim immigrants in Paris, primarily from North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia; Algerian nationals residing in France; and new French Muslims, representing the first generation, who acquire citizenship rights either by birth or through the naturalization process. Furthermore, various French communities actively embrace Islam.<sup>22</sup>

The presence of the Muslim community in France is historically linked to the concept of citizenship initiated by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1805. The need for an adequate recruitment pool for the army at that time led Napoleon to introduce the principle of citizenship based on *jus sanguinis* (Latin for “right of blood”). This concept differs from the current Republican Party’s definition of citizenship, which is based on *jus soli* (Latin for “right of soil”).<sup>23</sup> On the

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Kreienbrink and Max Bodenstein, *Muslim Organisations and the State: European Perspectives* (2010): 198.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Laurence, “From the Élysée Salon to the Table of the Republic: State-Islam Relations and the Integration of Muslims in France”, *French Politics, Culture & Society* (2005): 23-36.

<sup>19</sup> Céline Spector, “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: La théorie rawlsienne de la justice” *Esprit* 9 (2018): 95-117.

<sup>20</sup> Marzuki, “Peran Politik Umat Islam di Prancis pada Masa Presiden Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012),” *Right: Jurnal Agama dan Hak Asasi Manusia* 1, no. 2 (2012): 417–446.

<sup>21</sup> Intan Salmah, “Islam di Prancis: Islamisasi, Perkembangan dan Eksistensi [Islam in France: Islamization, Development and Existence],” *Jurnal Al-Hikmah* 21, no. 1 (2019): 112–121. Updated data gain Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE), *Immigrants and Descendants of Immigrants: Statistics and Studies, 2023 Edition* (2024), <https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/7342918?sommaire=7344042>, accessed November 10, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Barsihannoor, “Perkembangan pemikiran Islam di Prancis,” *Jurnal Adabiyah* 4 (2014): 25-31.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Laurence, “From the Élysée Salon to the Table of the Republic: State-Islam Relations and the Integration of Muslims in France,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 23 (2005): 37–64.

other hand, the presence of the Muslim community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses domestic policy challenges in France due to its association with issues of public safety, national identity, labor markets, the development of European Union public policies, and the broader integration of European nations. In line with this, integration policies face various challenges in terms of economic aspects, social disparities, and demands for cultural recognition. These factors strengthen racial discrimination, the success of extreme right-wing populist groups, and recurring pressures for assimilation.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Laïcité***

In France, the constitution governing the relationship between the government and citizens is the law of secularism, known in Latin as *Laïcité*, which is reflected in the principles and values of the republic, namely the principles of *liberte* (freedom), *egalite* (equality of rights), and *fraternite* (brotherhood).<sup>25</sup> Historically, *Laïcité* emerged alongside the French Revolution of 1789. Its emergence was a reaction to the perceived excessive dominance of the Catholic Church at that time, which played an overwhelming role in regulating all aspects of life, not only in the religious realm but also in social and societal matters, as well as state affairs. A sense of disgust and weariness toward a system dominated by religion found the right momentum by overthrowing the power of the church and initiating revolutions, including altering the state constitution into *Laïcité*, which was deemed capable of becoming a state life system to ensure harmony amidst religious diversity.<sup>26</sup> *Laïcité*, according to Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, is based on two main principles, equality and freedom, which emerge in two models: the separation of church (religion) and State and the State's neutrality toward religion. These principles explain that a secular state should aspire to remain neutral and treat all its citizens equally and fairly. Conversely, if a state positions itself to favor one particular conception, whether it be religion or the State, then those who do not share the same view will be treated as second-class citizens.

Over time, laicite, which conceptually is expected to be able to become a way of life for all citizens so that they can live in harmony, safety, and peace, but in practice, it experiences various obstacles. These obstacles appear in the form of tension and conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as exemplified in cases such as the hijab<sup>27</sup> and the creation of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad, which led to the Charlie Hebdo incident.<sup>28</sup>

### **Research Method**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, adopting an interpretative case study design. The case study design is utilized to explore phenomena that need to be thoroughly understood. This study focuses on examining the existence of the CFCM in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community in France. The data sources in this research are divided into two: primary data and secondary data. Primary data are obtained

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Barou, "Integration of Immigrants in France: A Historical Perspective," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 21, no. 6 (2014): 642–657.

<sup>25</sup> Céline Spector, "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: La théorie rawlsienne de la justice," *Esprit*, no. 9 (2018): 95–104.

<sup>26</sup> Céline Spector, (2018): 105–167.

<sup>27</sup> Nadza Indira Rafsitahandjani and Aos Y. Firdaus, "Dinamika Pelarangan Niqab dan Burqa di Eropa Barat: Studi Kasus Perancis dan Belgia [The Dynamics of the Niqab and Burqa Bans in Western Europe: A Case Study of France and Belgium]," *Interdependence: Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* (2017):121-125.

<sup>28</sup> Salimatun Nikmah, "Penembakan di Kantor Majalah Charlie Hebdo [The Charlie Hebdo Magazine Office Shooting]," *Jurnal Al-Bayan* 23, no. 2 (2018): 196-207. Pavlos Vasilopoulos, George E. Marcus, and Martial Foucault, "Emotional Responses to the Charlie Hebdo Attacks: Addressing the Authoritarianism Puzzle," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2018): 557–575. BBC News, "Charlie Hebdo Attack: Three Days of Terror," 2015. Accessed January 2024, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>

directly through interviews with informants, while secondary data are obtained from written documents in journals, books, and mass media, both electronic and print. The research data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted between July and November 2019 in France. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants (informants) based on their expertise rather than representativeness<sup>29</sup>. Informants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Interviews were conducted in France with Muslim figures who also serve as directors of Islamic colleges and pastors who also chair interfaith Islamic and Catholic Christian friendship groups. These Muslim figures also serve as Deputy Mayors of Bouvais, youth leaders, and Christian religious figures.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with the president of CFCM France. In-depth interviews were conducted to investigate data related to the existence of CFCM in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community in France. Moreover, they aimed to identify the obstacles faced by CFCM in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community in France and the strategies adopted by CFCM in doing so. Data analysis was conducted following these steps: (1) data reduction by selecting relevant data, (2) data categorization through grouping data based on specific themes, and (3) checking and testing the validity of data and interpretations. These steps align with the notion that the data analysis process consists of three main activities: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification.

## **Results**

### ***The Formation of CFCM***

Following the bombing of the World Trade Center in the United States on September 11, 2001, several European countries, especially France, took precautionary measures by altering their approach and perspective toward the Muslim community residing in France. The approach utilized was to “embrace” and “control” Islamic movements that were feared to threaten the foundations of the State. In 2003, the then-French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicolas Sarkozy, along with Muslim figures in France, established the *Conceil Francais de Culte Musulman* (CFCM). These Muslim figures represented various federations and religious organizations with diverse cultural backgrounds and affiliations according to their countries of origin. These include the Great Mosque of Paris (GMP), affiliated with Algeria; the *Fédération des Musulmans de France* (FNMF), affiliated with Morocco; the *Union des Organizations Islamiques de France* (UOIF), affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the *Comité de Coordination des Musulmans Turcs de France* (CCMTF), affiliated with Turkey.

The formation of the CFCM aimed to address important issues related to social and religious matters, which can be classified into two aspects: Firstly, religious belief and practice issues such as the hijab controversy, religious discrimination, acts of racism against Muslims, insults and blasphemy against Islam through the depiction of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad, and others. Secondly, it is important to consider the non-religious and non-belief-related aspects associated with the practical issues of worship within communal life. These include the construction of mosques, the organization of Islamic holidays, the provision of halal meat and food, and the education of imams and preachers within these mosques. Furthermore, the management of burials and burial practices for deceased Muslims, as well as the appointment of spiritual guides for Muslims in various settings such as prisons, hospitals, and military offices, also fall under this domain.

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<sup>29</sup> H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995): 96-108.

The establishment of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) has significantly reinforced the presence of Islam and the Muslim community within society. Through this religious institution, the Muslim community is able to articulate its aspirations and concerns pertaining to both social and religious matters, encompassing both belief-related and non-belief-related issues, to the government. Additionally, the CFCM functions as a mediator, effectively bridging the interests of the government with those of citizens, particularly the Muslim community.

### ***The Challenges of CFCM***

Several factors hinder CFCM's aim of bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. These include ambiguity in responding to secularism laws (*Laïcité*), institutional crises due to internal conflicts, national identity crises stemming from an unwillingness to integrate, and the phenomena of radicalism and terrorism.

#### *Ambiguity of CFCM in Responding to Secularism Laws (Laïcité)*

Secularism laws (*Laïcité*), also known as separatism, demand the separation of religion (church) from the State. The boundary of separation in French secularism is that the State does not recognize or subsidize any religion. This concept clearly implies the freedom or neutrality of the State toward the existence of any religion or other belief systems, including atheism. In other words, secularism means that the State grants freedom to every citizen to believe or not believe in a religion and even to change religions. A description of the State's neutrality in regulating relations between religious communities was articulated by Pastor Jean Caoutudreu: "The government does not prioritize any particular religion but acknowledges the existence of all religions. All citizens have the same rights and obligations in practicing their religion and beliefs." (Interview with Jean Caoutudreu, August 17, 2019).

The ambiguity of the *Laïcité* laws emerges in the form of debates regarding the relationship between the State and religion. In the formation of CFCM, for example, opposing groups criticize the State's policy of recognizing the existence of CFCM, arguing that if *Laïcité* does not recognize or subsidize any religion, then is not recognition of CFCM a violation of *Laïcité* itself? On the other hand, pro-groups, including Sarkozy, who initiated the CFCM, argue that recognition of the CFCM is part of the State's policy to protect religious freedom. According to Sarkozy, France cannot be considered a democratic country if there is still religious discrimination against citizens, including the Muslim community, who constitutionally have the same rights and obligations to practice their beliefs and religion according to their own choices.

#### *Institutional Crisis Due to Internal Conflict*

Institutional crisis manifests in the form of internal conflicts among the leaders of the French Council of Muslim Worship (CFCM). These internal conflicts arise due to the inability of the CFCM, whose representatives consist of various federations and organizations in France, to disentangle itself from the influence of their respective countries of origin. Several representatives and federations reside in France, each bringing with them diverse backgrounds of religious and ideological understanding, cultural affiliations, and affiliations. These include the Muslim community associated with the Great Mosque of Paris (GMP), affiliated with Algeria; the Federation of Muslims of France (FNMF), affiliated with Morocco; the Union of Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF), affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; and the Coordination Committee of Turkish Muslims in France (CCMTF), affiliated with Turkey.

These internal conflicts have emerged since the early establishment of the CFCM, wherein political divisions and tensions among Islamic figures and leaders in France overshadowed the election of the CFCM chairman. Dalil Boubakeur, chairman of the GMP and considered a

historic partner of France, announced his resignation from the CFCM after ranking third in the election for CFCM chairman. However, Sarkozy managed to persuade and convince Boubakeur to rejoin, and through Sarkozy's intervention, Boubakeur was crowned as the first chairman of the CFCM.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, internal conflicts arising from tensions between religion and secularism surfaced with Dounia Bouzar's resignation from the CFCM during the 2004 election. Bouzar, in her personal life, epitomized the archetype of a secular Muslim woman, garnering support from Sarkozy as she represented the secular Muslim community that acknowledges Islam culturally but does not practice its teachings. Some of her ideas and thoughts regarding the representation of secular Muslims living in France appeared to be inadequately accommodated by the CFCM leadership, leading to her dissatisfaction and eventual resignation.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, internal conflicts arose in June 2005 due to the controversy surrounding the appointment of Moulay el Hassan el Alaoui Talibi to serve as a Muslim chaplain in prisons. Talibi, a member of the Moroccan Muslim community residing in France and politically affiliated with FNF, was appointed, triggering disagreement primarily due to ideological and cultural differences stemming from his country of origin. This appointment was not endorsed by Fouad Alaoui, who served as the Secretary-General of UOIF and concurrently as the vice president of CFCM, leading Alaoui to resign from his position. However, through the efforts of CFCM President Dalil Boubakeur, who took into account the interests of the Ministry of the Interior and the unity of the French Muslim community, a reconciliation was achieved, ultimately persuading Alaoui to return to the CFCM.<sup>32</sup> Internal conflicts also manifested in the form of the Great Mosque of Paris (GMP) deciding to boycott the 2008 election and the stance taken by both the GMP and UOIF in refusing to participate in the 2011 election.

#### *National Identity Crisis Due to Reluctance to Integrate*

The federations (representatives) of Muslim communities operating under the umbrella of the CFCM have been experiencing a national identity crisis. This is evidenced by the reluctance of some among them to integrate with other citizens. Additionally, they have yet to fully detach themselves from the influence of their country of origin's ideology and culture rather than embracing the host country's culture. However, French policy mandates full integration of all citizens to foster a sense of belonging (citizenship) that serves as a common ground for all citizens. Practical implementation of integration includes the prohibition of discrimination against citizens based on cultural, ethnic, and religious differences, as emphasized by Ahmed Jaballah: "According to integration policies, displaying religious symbols in public spaces is not permitted. Similarly, conducting population censuses based on ethnicity, culture, and religion is also prohibited." (Interview with Ahmed Jaballah, August 7, 2019)

The reluctance to integrate, as evidenced by findings from the research conducted by the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique cited by Journal du Dimanche, reveals that 56% of the French population adheres to Islam according to the values applied by the country and the nation from which they originate. Another set of data from the report by Institut Montaigne,

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<sup>30</sup> The inaugural election of the CFCM chairman in 2003 saw FNF emerge as the winner with the largest number of votes, securing 16 out of 41 votes, largely due to its significant control over mosque networks. UOIF attained the second position, primarily owing to its extensive membership base and alliances with independent mosques. GMP secured the third position with 6 votes, while CCMTF occupied the fourth position.

<sup>31</sup> Demas E Boudreaux, "The French Council for the Muslim Faith: Its Implications for Representing Muslims in France" (*Master's thesis, The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*, 2006): 3-21.

<sup>32</sup> Demas E Boudreaux, (2026): 3-21.



*The Conseil Français de Culte Musulman in Bridging Interests of the Government and Muslim Community* titled “A French Islam is Possible” in 2016, indicates that integration of Muslims in France is indeed achievable, albeit with numerous challenges.

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his desire to establish a comprehensive plan for integrating the Muslim community in France with non-Muslims without borrowing patterns of Islam from outside France<sup>33</sup>. The debate on integration has sparked a new discourse directed toward Muslim communities still adhering to old narratives. This new discourse is centered around the concept of “French Islam” rather than “Islam in France.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Radicalism and Terrorism**

Radicalism has become a crucial and alarming issue affecting various components of nations worldwide, including France. This is primarily because radicalism often leads to acts of terrorism. Terrorism breeds tension, conflict, anarchy, and violence in the name of religion rather than fostering peace, security, tranquility, mutual respect, and coexistence. As observed by Muhibuddin, radical ideologies in practice exhibit extreme, unyielding (non-moderate) characteristics and can pose a threat to the stability of established and previously secure social orders.<sup>35</sup> Radicalism threatens the values of tolerance, which in turn have the potential to undermine the pillars of national life and governance, as emphasized by Jean Caoutudreu: “We have no problem living together and coexisting with followers of other religions as long as they respect the principles of life applied by our State. Issues arise if there are groups of people or parties who seek to impose their will, way of life, thought concepts, or regulate our well-established way of life.” (Interview with Jean Caoutudreu, August 17, 2019)

Several studies examining radicalism indicate that besides differences in political power orientation, ideologies, and theology, misinterpretation of religious texts (*Quran* and *hadith*) is a significant cause of religious radicalism. Misinterpretations often manifest in partial-monolithic and textual literalist interpretation<sup>36</sup> rather than employing integrative, comprehensive, and contextual interpretation methods.<sup>37</sup> Partial interpretation fosters a narrow understanding of Islamic teachings, subsequently shaping attitudes of fanaticism, rigidity, exclusivity, and radicalism. Hence, several academics caution religious communities against getting ensnared in advocating radicalism, which typically leads to terrorist actions.<sup>38</sup>

The lived experiences of religious communities in France have demonstrated the negative impact of radicalism and terrorism, including the strengthening of Islamophobia, leading to discrimination, racism, and marginalization against Muslim communities in France. Deputy Mayor of Beauvais, Mourad Laghrari, suggests that French society is divided in its response to the existence of Islam and Muslims, unable to clearly distinguish between Arab and Islamic identities, especially after the September 11, 2001, WTC bombing. There has been a shift in societal perceptions toward acts of violence and terrorism. Before the WTC bombing

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<sup>33</sup>Jocelyne Cesari, *Islam in France: The Shaping of a Religious Minority in Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36–51.

<sup>34</sup>Karoui, Hakim El, *A French Islam Is Possible* (Paris, 2016): 32-64.

<sup>35</sup>Muhibuddin, “Nasionalisme Ulama dalam Menangkal Paham Radikal di Kalangan Santri Dayah Tradisional di Aceh [Ulama Nationalism in Countering Radical Understanding among Traditional Dayah Santri in Aceh],” in *The 16th Annual International Conference on Islamic Studies* (Lampung: Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Intan, 2016), 287–303.

<sup>36</sup>Zakiya Darajat, “Jihad Dinamis: Menelusuri Konsep dan Praktik Jihad dalam Sejarah Islam [Dynamic Jihad: Tracing the Concepts and Practices of Jihad in Islamic History],” *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam dan Kemanusiaan* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–25.

<sup>37</sup>Imam Mustofa, “Terorisme: antara Aksi dan Reaksi,” *Religia* (2017): 65-81.

<sup>38</sup>Dewi Anggraeni and Siti Suhartinah, “Toleransi Antar Umat Beragama Perspektif KH. Ali Mustafa Yaqub,” *Jurnal Online Studi Al-Qur'an* 14, no. 1 (2018): 59–77.

in 2001, the community still regarded Muslim communities residing in France as Arab. However, after the incident, this designation gradually shifted to Islam. Radicalism and terrorism perpetrated by hardline Islamic groups in France not only worsen the image of Islam but also reinforce negative stigmas directed toward Muslim communities, thereby exacerbating the disharmony in interfaith relations and between the government and Muslim communities.

### ***Dialog as a Strategy for Fostering Harmony in Religious Diversity***

The strategy employed by CFCM to bridge the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France includes strengthening dialog. The principle of living in cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity is the readiness to accept differences. Indications of accepting differences include a willingness to engage in dialog because dialog can minimize misunderstandings and overcome social, cultural, and religious barriers. Furthermore, dialog addresses rivalries, oppression, hatred, fosters harmony, and steers away from destructive attitudes. Therefore, dialog becomes a prerequisite for fostering harmony in religious diversity, as stated by Victor Hutauruk.

The prerequisite for harmony in religious diversity is that individuals or religious groups must be willing to see others as different, the majority must embrace the minority, understand that differences do not cause hostility, and promote socialization regarding tolerance among religious communities. (Interview with Victor Hutauruk, October 10, 2019).

Harmony in religious diversity typically begins with recognition, followed by mutual respect, coexistence, and living together, which then fosters a willingness to engage in dialog. Jean Caoutudreu stated: “The purpose of dialog is mutual understanding because every time you understand someone and their religion, you will be prepared to tolerate.” (Interview with Jean Caoutudreu, August 17, 2019).

Conversely, the unwillingness to engage in dialog manifests in the form of reluctance to respect the common values that serve as life principles in France. Jean Caoutudreu emphasizes four forms of dialog that religious communities should develop: First, dialog in daily life, which involves engaging in dialog with those closest, such as neighbors. Second, dialog in activities, which entails interacting with adherents of different religions in the same organizations, such as environmental enthusiasts, colleagues, parents, or political parties. Third, dialog in religious ceremonies and rituals, for example, attending circumcision ceremonies, expressing condolences for the deceased, or attending interfaith weddings (Muslim and non-Muslim). Fourth, dialog concerning sacred texts, involving a deep study of other religious scriptures such as the *Qur'an* and *Torah* to understand the beliefs and religions of others. However, not everyone can undertake this dialog, as it requires scholarly capacity and expertise.

Several forms of dialog carried out by CFCM in bridging the interests of the government with the Muslim community include: First, interfaith dialog at the national level. This dialog is held when urgent matters need to be decided by the government in general. Meetings are organized for this dialog to discuss current issues concerning the interests of religious communities in various aspects such as social, cultural, and political. Secondly, dialog between the government and religious institutions. This dialog is conducted when the government has policies to be implemented by each religious community. In this dialog, the government, through the Ministry of the Interior, appoints officials equivalent to Ministers to attend. Thirdly, dialog among religious communities through their respective associations both at the local and national levels. This dialog is initiated by various religious organizations in several cities. At the local level, dialogs are held in mosques or churches. For example,

*The Conseil Français de Culte Musulman in Bridging Interests of the Government and Muslim Community* during Ramadan, Muslims, through mosque imams, invite non-Muslim religious leaders to break the fast together while engaging in dialog on realizing shared interests among religious communities (Interview with Anouar Kbibech, August 17, 2019). Anouar Kbibech emphasizes that several forms of this dialog have proven effective in nurturing harmony amid religious diversity. Unfortunately, however, information like this does not receive extensive coverage by the mass media in France (Interview with Anouar Kbibech, August 17, 2019).

## Discussion

This article demonstrates the existence of CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France, as evidenced by its role in addressing issues related to both religious beliefs and non-religious aspects. However, several obstacles hinder CFCM's ability to achieve its goals, including the ambiguity of secularism laws (*Laïcité*), leading to paradoxes in secular discourse,<sup>39</sup> institutional crisis resulting from internal conflicts,<sup>40</sup> and national identity crisis due to unwillingness to integrate.<sup>41</sup>

This article argues that the ambiguity of secularism laws (*Laïcité*) to date has been a cause of tension and conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as exemplified in cases such as the *hijab*,<sup>42</sup> and the creation of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad which led to the Charlie Hebdo incident.<sup>43</sup> In the case of the hijab, the underlying tension is not caused by a clash between Islamic symbols and culture with the values of the French Republic. Instead, it arises from a conflict between state power and the obsession of the French nation with a monolithic national identity. In other words, the conflict stems from the politicization of Islamic symbols, such as the hijab, by politicians to discriminate against Islamic teachings and to reap short-term political gains.<sup>44</sup> Likewise with the creation of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), for example, the proponent group argues that drawing caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is permissible as a form of freedom of expression respected by secularism laws. Conversely, the opposing group contends that drawing caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) constitutes an insult to the Islamic religion and violates the freedom of religion protected by secularism laws.

Barthelemy and Michelat assert that the *Laïcité* constitution has not fully succeeded in fostering tolerance among religious communities but has instead contributed to the emergence of Islamophobia and negative stigma, resulting in discriminatory actions against Islam and the Muslim community.<sup>45</sup> Yusuf Al-Qardhawi evaluates that the French

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<sup>39</sup> Amin El-Yousfi, *The Paradoxes of Institutionalizing Islam in France*, *Policy Center For The New South* (2020): 1-5.

<sup>40</sup> Andrea Bila, "Changing Muslim Identities: Institutional Representation in Britain and France," in *First Annual British Studies Conference 2012* (2012), 43–54.

<sup>41</sup> Nadia Kiwan, "Muslim and Secular: Performing 'Muslim Exemplarity' and Public Debates on Islam in France," *Performing Islam* 2, no. 1 (2014): 45–66.

<sup>42</sup> Nadza Indira Rafsitahandjani and Aos Y. Firdaus, "Dinamika Pelarangan Niqab dan Burqa di Eropa Barat: Studi Kasus Perancis dan Belgia [The Dynamics of the Niqab and Burqa Bans in Western Europe: A Case Study of France and Belgium]," *Interdependence: Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* (2017): 126-135.

<sup>43</sup> Salimatun Nikmah, "Penembakan di Kantor Majalah Charlie Hebdo [The Charlie Hebdo Magazine Office Shooting]," *Jurnal Al-Bayan* 23, no. 2 (2018): 196-207; Pavlos Vasilopoulos, George E. Marcus, and Martial Foucault, "Emotional Responses to the Charlie Hebdo Attacks: Addressing the Authoritarianism Puzzle," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2018): 557–575; BBC News, "Charlie Hebdo Attack: Three Days of Terror," 2015; Skaiste Liepyte and Kareena McAloney-Kocaman, "Discrimination and Religiosity among Muslim Women in the UK before and after the Charlie Hebdo Attacks," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 18, no. 9 (2015): 789–794.

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer A. Selby, "Islam in France Reconfigured: Republican Islam in the 2010 Gerin Report," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2011): 383–398.

<sup>45</sup> Barthélemy Martine and Guy Michelat, "Dimensions de la Laïcité dans la France d'Aujourd'hui," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 57 (2007): 637-649.

government is not consistent in implementing *Laïcité* policies among religious communities, particularly Muslims. Regarding the ban on the hijab, Al-Qardhawi criticizes the French government, which he believes promotes freedom as a principle of life that must be respected, while on the other hand, prohibits individuals from wearing religious symbols highly regarded by human rights. In line with this, the President of CFCM, Anouar Kbibeche, likens *Laïcité* to a “double-edged sword” (Interview with Anouar Kbibeche, August 17, 2019).

Behind the ambiguity of secularism laws (*Laïcité*), some acknowledge the positive impact of implementing *Laïcité* on the Muslim community in France. One such acknowledgment is that the State provides equal treatment to all citizens without exception, as recognized by the academic and Muslim figure Ahmed Jaballah.

The implementation of *Laïcité* within the socio-cultural context of society actually ensures the effective protection of minority rights. Without it, there is a possibility that French society may adopt the Catholic legal system as the majority religion there. (Interview with Ahmed Jaballah on August 17, 2019).

Moreover, *Laïcité* minimizes or even eliminates the concept of conflicts between religious communities, as asserted by Anouar Kbibeche:

The conflicts between religious communities never occur because religious affairs are considered private matters entrusted to each individual. From this perspective, several conflicts occurring among religious communities are not purely religious conflicts but rather political conflicts engineered by right-wing politicians who enjoy stirring up controversy due to their concerns regarding the strengthening presence of Islam. (Interview with Anouar Kbibeche on August 17, 2019).

The institutional crisis arising from internal conflicts among the leaders of CFCM is primarily attributable to ideological and cultural differences among the representatives of federations and organizations, as well as the difficulty in disentangling themselves from the influence of their respective home countries, which affects their loyalty to the host country (France). However, it appears that this institutional crisis is also exacerbated by the *Laïcité* law itself, which prohibits the State from facilitating and subsidizing specific religious activities. Consequently, each federation (representative) tends to direct its loyalty toward its home country to secure support and religious financing (subsidies). At the same time, France, on the other hand, lacks stringent regulations for screening funds entering the country. Furthermore, CFCM seems to be subjected to politicization by being granted roles and authority in addressing both religious and non-religious matters. However, during electoral seasons, presidential candidates often approach the Muslim community, utilizing it as a mass base to exploit for political and economic gains.<sup>46</sup>

The solution to the internal conflict of CFCM is that each representative must be willing to sit together (in dialog) to resolve their internal conflict because how is it possible to resolve conflicts between religious communities if they are unable to resolve internal problems that occur among them? In this context, the concept of harmony among religious communities encompasses three essential elements: first, the establishment of harmony within individual religious communities; second, the promotion of harmony between distinct religious communities; and third, the fostering of harmony between religious communities and governmental institutions.

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<sup>46</sup> Imène Ajala, “The Muslim Vote and Muslim Lobby in France: Myths and Realities,” *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2010): 77–91.

Furthermore, the debate on the effectiveness of the CFCM in fulfilling its role cannot be separated from the interplay of interests between the French government and the Muslim community. The clarity of constitutional legitimacy and state policies in positioning the CFCM to carry out its role effectively is crucial. Conversely, how the CFCM positions the State as the governing institution where it pledges complete obedience and loyalty is also significant. The responses to these two puzzles greatly determine the future of religious harmony within diversity. Therefore, governmental and religious institutions must synergize to fulfill their roles in achieving desired objectives. The role of the CFCM is ineffective without policy support from the government. Conversely, the government's role will not be effective if it does not position the CFCM as a partner institution that can collaborate.

Suppose this dialectic is linked to several tensions arising among religious communities, such as the case of the hijab. In that case, the underlying conflict tension is not caused by a clash between Islamic symbols and culture with the values of the French Republic. Instead, it arises from a dissension conflict between state power and the obsession of the French nation with a monolithic national identity. In other words, the conflict stems from the politicization of Islamic symbols, such as the *hijab*, by politicians to discriminate against Islamic teachings and to reap short-term political gains.<sup>47</sup>

As a prerequisite for coexisting in religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, the French government must formulate specific interpretations of *Laïcité* (secularism). This is essential to avoid disrupting the relationship between the State and the religions and cultures that thrive in a country upholding the principles of liberalism (freedom), which is part of secularism. Maclure and Taylor acknowledge the reality that the principles and methods of secularism are not always in perfect harmony. For example, a public-school teacher wearing a hijab to work may be considered as violating the neutrality of the public space because, as an employee of a public institution, she represents the State, but as an individual, prohibiting her from wearing the hijab would be a violation of her right to practice her religion freely. So, how should the State remain neutral while still respecting religious freedom? To achieve harmony between these opposing forces, a secular state must determine its primary objective. This will inevitably result in various forms of secularism.<sup>48</sup>

Threats to the existence of Islam and the Muslim community in France will always emerge as long as there is ambiguity in interpreting secularism laws (*Laïcité*). Suppose there are no efforts to turn these threats or challenges into opportunities. In that case, they will become facts and realities subject to fluctuations depending on the level of political stability and events experienced at both local (domestic), national, and global scales. Based on research findings that reveal threats to the existence of Islam and the Muslim community in France, it is imperative to strengthen the legitimacy of CFCM to gain recognition not only from the elites but also from grassroots levels. In doing so, the existence of CFCM becomes not merely a vehicle used to achieve short-term economic and political gains but rather a means to realize long-term common interests that will determine the future of citizens' lives.

## **Conclusion**

This article reflects on the existence of CFCM in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community in France. The relationship of interests between the government and CFCM experiences fluctuations determined by the constitution of the State and developments

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<sup>47</sup>Jennifer A. Selby, "Islam in France Reconfigured: Republican Islam in the 2010 Gerin Report," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2011): 383–398.

<sup>48</sup>Rafia Khader, *Islam Française: The French State's Response to a National Identity Crisis* (Chicago, 2014): 1–19.

in geopolitics at both local, national, and global scales. Conceptually, the French government recognizes the importance of forming CFCM as a religious institution that plays a role in bridging the interests of the government and the Muslim community. This study presents certain limitations related to its specific focus and research setting, which is exclusively centered on the CFCM in France. Expanding the research to include multiple religious institutions across three major European countries—namely the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands—would yield a more comprehensive understanding of how these religious institutions function in reconciling the interests of the government with the Muslim diaspora. By broadening the geographical and contextual scope of the research, it would be possible to achieve a more thorough mapping of the roles that religious institutions play as agents of civil society in addressing the interests of the government in relation to the Muslim community. This expansion could significantly enhance the effectiveness of managing religious pluralism. Future studies in these additional countries could address the aforementioned limitations.

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