

France to ban faith symbols in schools: Headscarves may be outlawed

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Following months of fierce debate in France, President Jacques Chirac has called for a law to ban Islamic headscarves and other “conspicuous” religious symbols from schools run by public authorities. A French Protestant leader promptly declared that such a prohibition would not only be hard to enforce but could also strengthen the cause of Islamic extremists.

“I believe the wearing of clothing or signs that conspicuously display religious affiliation must be prohibited from public schools and high schools,” said Chirac on December 17 at the Élysée presidential palace in Paris. “Discreet signs,” such as a small cross or star of David, will be allowed, the French president added. “But conspicuous signs, which are obvious, which immediately indicate religious affiliation, cannot be admitted.” Chirac said he hoped a law banning symbols could be adopted during 2004.

The question of whether avowedly secular France should make such religious definitions was sparked by discomfort over female Muslim students who wear a *hijab*, or head covering, at schools. “The Islamic veil—whatever name we give it—the kippah and a cross that are of plainly excessive dimensions: these have no place in the precincts of state schools,” Chirac said. “State schools will remain secular. For that a law is necessary.”

Jean-Arnold de Clermont, a clergyman who is president of the Protestant Federation of France, said December 18 that such a measure could be seen among France’s estimated 5 million Muslims as an “anti-Islamic” position. “Everyone knows that people no longer wear huge crosses so it’s a kind of hypocrisy to say that, of course, we are not against Jews or Muslims but against all ‘conspicuous’ signs,” de Clermont told Ecumenical News International in Geneva, where he was attending a European

church conference.

“We all know that it is not possible to define what a religious sign is,” de Clermont noted. “For example, if a Muslim comes in green clothing [a color associated with Islam], is that a religious sign?”

But de Clermont said he approved of Chirac’s statement that “all religions have their place” in France and about the need to promote equality and integration of minority groups while taking action to combat xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism.

Leaders of France’s Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches had warned of short-term risks in a statement issued before a government commission endorsed the introduction of a new law. “Any law that would be perceived as discriminatory by a certain number of French people risks short-term consequences that are more harmful than any expected benefits,” said the group. The statement was signed by Archbishop Jean-Pierre Ricard, president of the Conference of French (Catholic) Bishops, and Metropolitan Emmanuel, president of the Assembly of Orthodox bishops of France, as well as by de Clermont.

Public opinion seems to support a legal ban on headscarves, with an opinion poll by one institute finding that 57 percent support a ban. More than 80 percent of France’s 60 million people identify themselves as Catholic; 2 percent are Protestant, 1 percent Jewish and between 5 and 10 percent Muslim.

The French president’s remarks also align him with a majority of leftist and conservative lawmakers, and with a report made public a week earlier by a special presidential commission on secularity. Chirac did not back the commission’s other suggestions to make the Muslim Aid-el-Kebir and the Jewish Yom Kippur national holidays—in part, he said, because French students already have enough vacations. But, he said, non-Christians should informally be allowed their religious day off. Chirac also vowed that his government would fight discrimination facing France’s ethnic immigrant population.

Two Muslim advocacy groups in the U.S. objected to the reasoning behind the proposed French prohibitions. “A nation cannot claim to uphold principles of liberty and equality while denying the religious rights of its citizens,” said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). “I hope that Jewish and Christian leaders worldwide will join our call in opposing this upcoming legislation.”

The Muslim Public Affairs Council and the related Muslim Women's League, both based in Los Angeles, said in a joint statement that the proposed law would move France away "from the freedom-loving democracies of the world toward a state-imposed religion; i.e., secularism, that resembles the remnants of communism as seen in countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan."

In addition, they said, "In Islam, the headscarf, known as a hijab, is not a religious symbol analogous to a yarmulke or cross. Rather, for many Muslim women, it completes an overall commitment to modest dress as mandated, according to some, by the religious texts." Also: "The vast majority of Muslim women who cover their hair do so out of a strong personal conviction and not to make a political statement."