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Chirac Backs Law to Keep Signs of Faith Out of School

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

PARIS, Dec. 17 — Ignoring opposition from Muslim leaders within France and beyond, President Jacques Chirac on Wednesday called for a new law banning the wearing of head scarves for Muslim girls, large crosses for Christians and skullcaps for Jewish boys in public schools.

In a speech at Élysée Palace broadcast live on television, Mr. Chirac recalled centuries of history that, he said, defined France as a guarantor of individual liberty, and said the secular identity of the French state was at stake.

If France succumbs to the demands of its religious communities, Mr. Chirac said, "It would sacrifice its heritage; it would compromise its future; it would lose its soul."

Calling secularism a "pillar of our Constitution," he said that he would urge Parliament to pass the law in time for the start of the next school year, in September 2004.

"In all conscience, I believe that the wearing of dress or symbols that conspicuously show religious affiliation should be banned in schools," Mr. Chirac told an audience of 400 guests, including members of the cabinet and Parliament, representatives of the major political parties and religious, human rights and union leaders.

He added: "The Islamic veil — whatever name we give it — the yarmulke and a cross that is of plainly excessive dimensions: these have no place inside public schools. State schools will remain secular. For that a law is necessary."

Mr. Chirac was responding to an official report presented to him last week on the place of religion in French society and how best to preserve the French republican ideal separating church and state.

Among other proposals from the expert commission Mr. Chirac appointed in July was a recommendation that public schools add religious holidays, like Yom Kippur for Jews and Id al-Kebir for Muslims, a proposal that Mr. Chirac rejected in his speech on Wednesday. More holidays would burden working

parents, he said, but he added that students should be able to take time off for their religious holidays, so important exams should not be given on such days.

But Mr. Chirac embraced the commission's recommendation to pass a law banning "conspicuous" religious symbols but allowing "discreet" ones. As the argumentative French news media have been pointing out, there is no indication of who will make that determination, or how.

Mr. Chirac also called for a law to prevent patients from refusing treatment by a doctor or health-care professional of the opposite sex; for the development of the teaching of basic religious facts in schools; for a "code of secularism" for civil servants to use as a guide in the workplace; and for the creation of a watchdog agency to monitor violations.

Although Mr. Chirac spoke about the general need to prevent religion from encroaching into the public sphere, it is the increasing demands of France's growing Muslim population and the wearing of the Islamic veil that has infused the issue with new urgency.

Many schools quietly allow girls to keep their heads covered. But there is a conviction, both within the government and among a large swath of society, that the veil is as much a defiant political challenge as it is a religious display.

At the same time, leaders of the country's Christian and Jewish communities have joined Muslim leaders in criticizing a ban.

The struggle to integrate France's estimated five million Muslims into French society is also a hot-button political issue, one that has been exploited by the far-right National Front, which has criticized the Chirac government for not being tough enough on crime and illegal immigration. Regional elections are scheduled for March, and with the country suffering high unemployment and a poor economy, Mr. Chirac's government has been losing popularity.

In his speech, Mr. Chirac acknowledged the alienation of France's Muslim youth.

"I share the feeling of incomprehension, of disarray and sometimes even of revolt by those young French people — immigrants by origin — whose job applications go into the garbage because of the sound of their names," he said, "and who are too often faced with discrimination when they want to find housing or even get into a place of recreation.

"All the children of France, whatever their background, whatever their origin, whatever their belief, are daughters and sons of the republic."

Mr. Chirac's announcement follows the recent unveiling of draft legislation by the German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg to ban Muslim teachers from wearing head scarves in public schools.

