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## In Europe, 'Secular' Doesn't Quite Translate

By CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

**O**N Wednesday, President Jacques Chirac tried to summon his fellow French citizens back to "the elementary rules of getting along." He was alluding to recent cases in which Muslim men had refused, on religious grounds, to let their hospitalized wives be treated by male doctors. "Nothing," Mr. Chirac said, "can justify a patient's refusing on principle to be treated by a doctor of the other sex."

Hospital etiquette is just one corner of a society-wide debate on religion that is obsessing France. The debate's implicit focus is Islam. While law forbids ethnic and religious identification in the French census, demographers estimate that France has five million Muslims, roughly 8 percent of the population. Most are either immigrants or their offspring.

Many practice an Islam sufficiently fervent to raise worries that it cannot be accommodated within the country's century-old secular traditions, and that the elementary rules of getting along may not be as self-evident as the president assumes. The rules are certainly not self-evident to Americans. Although the French and the American systems of church-state separation have points in common, they stress different freedoms and often produce radically different results.

Increasingly frequent confrontations between school authorities and girls who wear the Islamic headscarf have come to symbolize the conflict, but other problems loom. Since the second intifada began three years ago, France has seen a steady rise in anti-Semitic intimidation and violence, much of it committed by Muslim youth, according to a European Commission report.

Last year, the sociologist Emmanuel Brenner assembled a 200-page book, "The Lost Territories of the Republic," recounting dozens of incidents in which students directed ethnic slurs at their teachers and ridiculed lectures on the Holocaust. The book reportedly made a deep impression on Mr. Chirac. A half-dozen Jewish institutions have been burned to the ground, most recently in November, when an Orthodox primary school was torched in Gagny, a Paris suburb.

Mr. Chirac insisted in his Wednesday address that France wage a "pitiless battle

against xenophobia, racism and, in particular, anti-Semitism."

He was pronouncing on a report, released Dec. 11, of a 20-member commission led by a politician and immigration expert, Bernard Stasi. After five months of studying ways of reconciling religious belief and public conduct, the Stasi commission recommended banning "conspicuous" religious symbols - not just scarves but also yarmulkes and "large crosses" from public institutions. It left room for discreet symbols, like Stars of David, small crosses and hands-of-Fatima pendants. It urged that Muslim chaplains be appointed for prisons and that a national school of Islamic studies be established. It suggested making Yom Kippur and Id al-Adha, the Muslim feast of Abraham's sacrifice, national holidays.

Confrontations between religion and secularism are arising across Europe, and evoking inconsistent responses. While most Germans register as members of a religion, the state of Bavaria banned the headscarf for teachers two weeks ago. While Britain has its established church, with the queen the "defender of the faith," it also has Muslim policewomen in veils. While Denmark has an established (Lutheran) church, it is fighting hard to keep explicit references to God out of a European constitution. While many of Italy's religious Catholics, supported by the pope, have closed ranks against Muslims who sue to remove crosses from classrooms, other Catholics have joined Muslims in opposing the Iraq war and marching in pro-Palestinian rallies.

This diversity of practice may be evidence of confusion, or it may reflect Europe's long holiday from doctrinal strife.

With that holiday over, France will be a test case for Europe. It has both the highest percentage of Muslims in Europe and an uncompromisingly secular constitution. In 1905 laws were passed to discipline the Catholic church, which controlled primary schools, influenced politics through its assets and played a role in exposing France to the disgrace of the Dreyfus affair, in which a Jewish army captain was framed on espionage charges.

Church and state were separated by means of "laïcité," which is difficult to translate. It differs from the American tradition in that it seeks less to neutralize public authorities in matters of religion than to neutralize religions in matters of public life. A paradox results: Since the Iraq war, much of the world views France as the symbol of Western reluctance to provoke a civilizational clash with Islam. The United States has been assailed for willingness to run that risk. Yet France aims to curtail the religious expression of its Muslims in ways no prominent American has ever suggested.

"A society's level of civilization is measured first and foremost by the position that women occupy in it," Mr. Chirac said last week. And the magazine *Elle* sponsored a petition against the veil as an "intolerable discrimination." But some say such rationales are disingenuous. The social scientist Farhad Khosrokhavar wrote in November: "It is common knowledge that what is aimed at is Islam,

especially the headscarf. The rest is trivia." The sociologist Jean Bauberot, a Stasi commission member, wrote that "'large crosses,' let's face it, have nothing to do with this kind of report."

By waiting a week to pronounce on the commission's work, Mr. Chirac was able to assess French sentiment. A survey done for the daily tabloid *Le Parisien* found that 69 percent favored a ban on religious signs. Most Muslims opposed such a ban, but they overwhelmingly approved of the establishment of new holidays. But these proved unpopular in the wider public, perhaps because the traditional Pentecost holiday was eliminated this year for budgetary reasons. Mr. Chirac opposes the recommendation on holidays.

The report has split the political class. Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin wants a law reflecting the commission's views to be ready for the next school year. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy opposes the ban on headscarves, reasoning that schools that allow nose-piercing are in no position to set dress codes. Jack Lang, a Socialist hopeful for president in 2007, thinks religious symbols should have been banned from schools outright. All sides worry that a change carried out with too much diffidence or zeal could help the ultra-right.

Mr. Khosrokhavar says that French alarm over Islam could be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The French Council of the Muslim Faith, set up by Mr. Sarkozy's interior ministry last April, envisions Muslim schools along the lines of those that exist for Catholics, Protestants and Jews, but no such network is yet in place. So some pious girls will seek diplomas through correspondence courses. Others, Mr. Khosrokhavar predicts, will take refuge in institutions where their headscarves will continue to be welcomed, along with other religious symbols - in the country's Catholic schools.

*Christopher Caldwell, a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, writes often on religion and politics in France.*