

## France to ban pupils' religious dress

Level 3 | **Advanced**

### 1 Key Vocabulary

Fill the gaps using these key words from the text:

**secular   neutrality   conspicuous   ombudsman   commission   outlaw (vb)**  
**headscarf   absurd**

1. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is very noticeable or easy to see.
2. France is a \_\_\_\_\_ country. In other words, there is no official state religion.
3. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you prohibit it or make it illegal.
4. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a piece of cloth that a woman or girl wears on her head and ties under her chin.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ is behaviour that does not show strong feelings or opinions and, for example, does not support either side in a war or a disagreement.
6. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is completely stupid.
7. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a group of people who are officially asked to investigate something.
8. An \_\_\_\_\_ is a person whose job is to deal with complaints made by people about official organisations.

### 2 What do you know?

Which of the following words from the text do you associate with the Muslim religion, which with the Christian religion and which with the Jewish religion?

1. headscarves
2. Yom Kippur
3. crosses
4. skullcaps
5. Eid

Now read the text.

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Jon Henley in Paris

Muslim headscarves and other religious symbols are almost certain to be banned from French schools and public buildings after a special commission told the government recently that legislation was needed to defend the secular nature of the state. The 20-member group, appointed by President Jacques Chirac and headed by the national ombudsman, Bernard Stasi, recommended that all "conspicuous" signs of religious belief – including Jewish skullcaps, oversized Christian crosses and Islamic headscarves – be outlawed in state-approved schools.

The report, compiled after six months of study, also recommended that the laws should include a clause requiring "the strict neutrality of all public service employees". Some Muslim women had reportedly been insisting that their husbands accompany them at all times in hospital and would accept only female doctors. The report said the legislation must remind all health service users that "it is forbidden to reject a healthcare worker, and that the rules of hygiene must be respected".

In a gesture of respect to "all spiritual options", the report said the Jewish and Muslim holy days of Yom Kippur and Eid should be made official school holidays, and companies should consider ways of allowing their employees to take off the religious holiday of their choice.

Mr Chirac said that he favoured a law protecting France's secular republic, "I will be guided by republican principles and the demands of national unity and the solidarity of the French people," he said. The question of whether a "secularism law" is desirable or necessary – particularly to deal with the increasing number of Muslim girls wanting to wear headscarves at school – may seem abstract, or even absurd, to those used to British or US notions of multiculturalism. In France, where secularism is a constitutional guarantee and everyone, in the eyes of the republic, is supposed to be equally French regardless of ethnic or religious differences, the issue has dominated media and political debate for several months.

Mr Stasi said the proposed law aimed to preserve constitutional secularism and counter "forces trying to destabilise the republic", a clear reference to Islamic fundamentalism. But he stressed that the law was not directed at the mainly moderate Muslim community of 5 million. "Muslims must understand that secularism is a chance for Islam," Mr Stasi said. "Secularism is the separation of church and state, but it is also the respect of differences."

The main teachers' union, the SNES, said that the proposals did not go far enough to promote secularism in schools.

The Guardian Weekly 20-12-03, page 4

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### 3 Comprehension Check

Choose the best answer:

1. The Stasi commission has recommended that the wearing of headscarves in French schools be banned because ...
  - a. they are conspicuous.
  - b. they represent forces trying to destabilise the republic.
  - c. the commission wants to defend the secular nature of the French state.
2. The commission recommended a clause requiring the strict neutrality of all public service employees because ...
  - a. they wanted to remind people that it is forbidden to reject a healthcare worker.
  - b. some people only accept female doctors.
  - c. it took six months to compile the report.
3. The commission recommended the introduction of new public holidays ...
  - a. in order to allow workers to choose their holidays.
  - b. as a gesture of respect to all religions.
  - c. in order to ensure the strict neutrality of all public service employees.
4. The constitutional guarantee of secularism under French law means ...
  - a. that people cannot wear headscarves to school.
  - b. that everyone is regarded as equally French whatever their religion or ethnic background.
  - c. that the issue has dominated media and political debate for several months.
5. The main teachers' union criticised the proposals because ...
  - a. they were too radical.
  - b. they were not radical enough.
  - c. they promoted secularism in schools.

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### 4 Vocabulary: Find the word

Find the following from the text.

1. A verb which means 'to prepare by bringing together information from different sources'.
2. An adverb which is used to suggest that something may have happened. Possible synonyms are 'apparently' and 'allegedly'.
3. A verb which is the opposite of 'to accept'.
4. An adjective which means 'very large'.
5. A noun which means 'an idea or understanding of something'.
6. A noun which means 'the belief and practice of giving equal importance to each of the different cultures in a society'.
7. A verb which means 'to emphasise'.
8. A noun which means 'the belief that original religious laws should be followed very strictly'.

### 5 Discussion

What are the arguments for and against the wearing of religious symbols in public?

Do you think that girls should be free to wear headscarves to school?