

Driven by Faith or Customer Service? Muslim Taxi Drivers at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport (B)

On August 21, 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was drafted by the taxi advisory council. Drivers whose religious convictions prevent them from carrying alcohol could install a special “top light” on their taxis. Any passengers carrying alcohol would be referred to a cab without a top light. Slated to begin in November, the pilot project would be evaluated after six months, based on the rate of refusals and on the improvements to service. The MOU affirmed the need for ongoing customer service training and stipulated that drivers would be required to accept passengers with alcohol if no other cab was available.

Yet over the summer and early fall of 2006, media coverage of the issue intensified—as did public outcry—in the MSP taxi ranks, and customers began requesting non-Muslim drivers. Pressure was building, and in early October, the MAC received a letter from the Minneapolis Convention and Visitors Bureau, which expressed concern about the precedent being set at the airport. On October 10, the *New York Post* ran a piece by Daniel Pipes, which cited the airport’s proposed accommodation as “Sharia in America” and described a slippery slope leading to discrimination by Muslims against queer people, Jews, un-covered women, and others. The MAC was deluged by some 800 emails, expressing anger and outrage.

On October 11, the MAC announced their decision to withdraw from the MOU; a “seamless solution” had not been found. The MAC would hold a public hearing to consider stricter punishments for fare refusals. The Muslim response was varied; some were disappointed that the pilot was never implemented. Others expressed relief: they felt MAS was an extremist, Muslim Brotherhood-associated group that had manipulated the drivers. There was one point of agreement; the image of the Muslim community had suffered tremendously.

In the weeks that followed, the controversy became more complex. In late October, a passenger traveling with a guide dog was refused service by three taxi drivers at MSP, and the issue of other types of refusals became newsworthy. Elsewhere in the Twin Cities, gay couples, transgender people, and people traveling with guide dogs had been refused service by Somali Muslim drivers. Reports emerged of Muslim cashiers at Target stores refusing to scan pork products. Then, in November of 2006, a group of imams traveling out of MSP were removed from the airplane because of “suspicious activity,” including praying at the gate. A lawsuit was filed against passengers, the airline, and the airport.

At the same time, the MAC was soliciting written public input for the hearing on increased penalties. Emails and letters came in from across the US and abroad, the overwhelming majority of which opposed any form of accommodation. Indeed, many revealed high levels of fear and frustration about the Muslim presence in the US. At the public hearing on February 27, 2007, the testimony was reasoned, with competing claims of religious accommodation versus the need for seamless service. On April 16, 2007, the MAC voted unanimously to pass Ordinance 106: drivers would be suspended for 30 days for any refusal of service; a second refusal would result in a two-year suspension.

After the new ordinance passed, the airport held a job fair for drivers seeking other forms of

employment; most continued to work in the taxi ranks. Two drivers filed a lawsuit against the MAC but lost their legal representation when still in the discovery phase. In just over a year since the new ordinance passed, there were only two refusals of service at MSP: one for a short fare and one for a passenger carrying alcohol. MAC Staff now feels the issue is resolved, aside from the pending lawsuit. Yet, for others, it serves as a metaphor of the Muslim threat: the taxi drivers were featured in the July 4, 2007 FOX News story, “Are Muslims Taking Over Minnesota?”