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Limiting Religious Freedom? or, Don't Pray, It's Scary
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Americans are rightly proud of our nation's freedom of religion. Religious believers and practitioners have been coming to America to escape persecution since before the United States was formed. This freedom has provided this country with both a wide variety of the world's religions and with large populations of particular religions.

Since World War II, for example, more Jews have lived in the United States than in any other nation, including Israel. Indeed, they have been the country's second largest religion. Recently that position is challenged by another religion, Islam, which is growing at a pace that will soon overtake Judaism as the nation's second-largest religion. Islam in America is growing because of our country's freedom of religion.

In this light, the Thanksgiving-week incident of six Imams, Muslim religious prayer leaders, being hauled off a U.S. Airways flight by police is distressing, to say the least. After five hours of questioning, police determined they were innocent of any wrongdoing. Despite this, U.S. Airways refused to allow them on a flight and so they had to buy last-minute tickets (i.e., high-priced) on another airline to get home. Their suspicious activity? Praying in public.

Although the facts of the incident are unclear (even the airline gave out incorrect information), it seems that three Imams prayed in the gate area prior to boarding the plane. They did this quietly, in a corner, in an attempt to be unobtrusive. This alarmed at least one of the passengers who later passed a note to a stewardess claiming that the men had used the word "Allah" several times. Eventually, the airline asked the police to remove the men.

The praying Imams were following the basic guidelines of their religion. All Muslims are enjoined to pray five times a day, during specific time periods. This is not free-form communication with the divine, but a ritual prayer, with fixed wording in praise of Allah, and is accompanied by prostrations to the divine. Thus prayer involves not only intentionally directing one's heart toward God, but also sound and physical movements. That the Imams said the name "Allah" several times is not surprising. This was probably during the prayer, a prayer to Allah, after all!

The passengers' reaction to the prayers provides an extreme example of how Americans generally apply "freedom of religion" in public situations. On the one hand, it is OK to identify with one's religion by clothing, jewelry, or casual

sign (e.g., crossing oneself), and to talk about one's religion, preferably in calm tones, respectful of one's listeners. The more strident and loud this speech becomes, especially if it is proselytizing, the less such speech is appreciated by listeners, although it is tolerated as freedom of speech.

On the other hand, religious freedom is the right to worship as one would like, but in private, not in public. When private worship or prayer takes place in a public space, those not participating tend to disapprove. This is especially the case when the worshippers belong to a religion not shared by the observers; they become uncomfortable. In this case, since the practitioners were Muslims in a post-9/11 world, it made some fellow travelers fearful. Fear was the main feature of op-ed essays discussing the incident; they claimed that public Muslim prayer scared Americans and hence the Imams caused the treatment they received.

While the reaction to this incident is extreme, it is clear that Americans generally do not like prayer and worship in public in general. If instead of Imams, it had been observant Jews davening or Buddhist monks meditating, passengers would still have been uncomfortable, although perhaps not fearful. Americans believe religious worship should be private. One commentator, a Christian, observed that even though he regularly carries his Bible with him while traveling, when he prays he prays silently. In other words, he is proud to bear a symbol of his beliefs, but he worships in a hidden manner.

One explanation for this uncomfortableness with public worship is that it emphasizes the difference between practitioners and observers. The observers recognize the practitioners as a group that excludes them. There is a social boundary between them, one that emphasizes their incompatibility at a religious or even a spiritual level. The worry is that this incompatibility translates into disrespect at best, and may suggest nefarious intentions at worst. This of course reveals more about the observers' attitudes and reaction than about the practitioners' activities.

Two changes can help prevent such reactions in the future. First, worshippers should find ways to worship in private. In this case, perhaps the airport chapel might have been used. Second, Americans in general should learn about the religions practiced in their country. In this way, they will become more comfortable with their fellow citizens and better understand worship around them, even if they do not approve.