

Daniel Pipes' Weblog

Muslim Taxi Drivers vs. Seeing-Eye Dogs

November 14, 2005

Muslim lore has it that dogs are impure, so pious Muslims often try to avoid the animals. In most circumstances, this does not present a problem in the West, but it can when seeing-eye dogs are involved, for they have legal rights of entry. Interestingly, the Council on American-Islamic Relations often rushes to the defense of Muslims behaving illegally.

Muslim taxi drivers refusing to allow the guide dogs into their cars is a recurring theme. In July 1997, for example, a [New Orleans](#) taxi driver, Mahmoud Awad, got so incensed at his passenger, Sandi Dewdney, trying to bring a dog into the cab that he physically yanked her out of it by the arm while yelling "No dog, No dog, Get out, get out." He harmed her broken wrist. To this, CAIR replied by pointing out that "the saliva of dogs invalidates the ritual purity needed for prayer" and left it to the scholars of Islam to decide whether a guide dog should be allowed in a cab. The judge, after researching Islamic attitudes and finding no support for the driver's claims, called his behavior "a total disgrace." Awad pled guilty to battery and was sentenced to 120 days of community service at the Lighthouse for the Blind.



Seeing-eye dogs present a problem to many Muslim taxi drivers.

Another instance arose in [Cincinnati](#) in February 1999, when Annie McEachrin, blind since birth, tried to get into Hassan Taher's cab but he refused her dog entry. When McEachrin complained to the city, Taher noted that Islam holds dogs to be impure and CAIR came again to his defense, noting that "People from the Middle East especially, we have been indoctrinated with a kind of fear of dogs. The driver has a genuine fear and he acted in good faith. He's acted in accordance with his religious beliefs."

A third taxi issue arose in [Edmonton](#), Canada in October 2000, when Khalid Habib Ahmad refused to allow Kelly Fair to take his guide dog into his cab, then claimed, without the necessary proof from an allergist to back him up, an allergy to dog hair. Ahmad also added that as a Muslim, taking a dog in his car conflicted with his religion. The case against Ahmad was dismissed because improperly filed.

[Edmonton](#) was also where, in May 2003, Doris Owen tried to enter a convenience store belonging to Mohammad Rafiq, a Pakistani who lived in Saudi Arabia for 25 years. Even after being informed by the police that Alberta's Blind Persons' Rights Act mandates guide dogs be allowed into all public places, Rafiq demurred. "This store is also my church, because I pray, I eat ... there, and my religion will not allow dogs to come in my store, or any animal." Owen testified in a January 2004 court hearing against Rafiq that he shouted at her and refused to listen to her discussing her legal rights. Addressing him, she said: "You got mad and angry and you started yelling, 'Get that dog out of here, get that dog out of here.' You didn't give me a chance ... [to explain] what a guide dog means to me, and it means a lot." Found guilty, Rafiq was sentenced to a three-month conditional discharge, "bearing in mind the concerns that Mr. Rafiq has, his cultural background."

Then there was the more recent case in [Brooksville, Florida](#), on Nov. 5, when a legally blind man, David Bearden, tried to enter a convenience store with his dog to buy a cold soda, but was thrown out by the clerk, Mike Hamed. As Hamed explains, he looked up from the counter "saw this big dog." Bearden picks up the tale: "As soon as we got inside the door, the clerk yelled at us to stop." Bearden says he tried three times to explain that state law not only requires access for seeing-eye dogs but treats denial of access as a criminal misdemeanor. Bearden quotes Hamed telling him nonetheless "Get that dog out of here; it's going to eat my food." Bearden says he plans to file a claim

against Hamed. No word yet of CAIR defending Hamed's actions.

In this connection, it is worth noting a brief letter to the editor from a Muslim woman, Zuraimah Mohammed, and published on June 14, 2005 by [Singapore's Straits Times](#):

On June 3, while I was on a bus, I noticed a taxi with a small dog in it. The dog was not in a cage and was standing on the backseat beside its owner. I am curious to know if cab companies allow uncaged pets to be transported in taxis. Dogs may drool on the seats or dirty them with their paws.

In response, two young men posted negative remarks about Muslims and Malays on the Internet and in October were [sentenced to jail](#). "Animal shelter assistant Benjamin Koh Song Huat, 27, was convicted of two charges under the Sedition Act and jailed for one month. Nicholas Lim Yew, 25, an assistant marketing manager, was convicted of one charge under the Act and given a 'nominal' jail term of one day and fined the maximum of \$5,000." (November 14, 2005)

Oct. 6, 2006 update: A report from the [United Kingdom](#) tells of two recent instances of Muslim cab drivers refusing seeing-eye dogs into their cars and being fined.

- Jane Vernon, 39, a legal officer for the Royal National Institute for the Blind, appeared on the BBC's News 24 program and the BBC-contracted car was to take her home. But minicab driver Abdul Rasheed Majekodumni said she could not get into his car with the dog because his religion considers dogs "unclean." Majekodumni's actions landed him in Marylebone court, where he was fined ? and ordered to pay another ?00 for failing to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act. Even after the verdict, Majekodumni, in the words of the *Daily Mail*, "remained defiant and insisted that he would continue refusing passengers accompanied by guide dogs."
- Bernie Reddington, 37, tried to get a ride home from a hospital appointment at Great Ormond Street but driver Basir Miah refused, calling her dog "dirty." The magistrates court at Horseferry found him guilty of breaching the terms of his license, fining him ? plus ? compensation.

Oct. 8, 2006 update: From [Melbourne, Australia](#), where about 20 percent of the city's 10,000 taxis are driven by Muslims, comes a report of more problems. According to the *Herald Sun Sunday*.

Muslim taxi drivers are refusing to carry blind passengers with their guide dogs or anyone carrying alcohol. At least 20 dog-aided blind people have lodged discrimination complaints with the Victorian Taxi Directorate. Dozens more have voiced their anger. And there have been several complaints that drivers refuse to allow passengers to carry sealed bottles of alcohol.

Victorian Taxi Association spokesman Neil Sach said the association had appealed to the mufti of Melbourne to give religious approval for Muslim cabbies to carry guide dogs. One Muslim driver, Imran, said yesterday the guide dog issue was difficult for him. "I don't refuse to take people, but it's hard for me because my religion tells me I should not go near dogs," he said.

Oct. 10, 2006 update: I take up a related taxi problem today at "[Don't Bring That Booze into My Taxi](#)" and "[More on Those Minnesota Taxi Drivers](#)."

Nov. 15, 2006 update: Bruce Gilmour, a blind man from the North Shore of [Vancouver, British Columbia](#), has filed a case with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal after a driver, Behzad Saidy, refused to let his guide dog into his North Shore taxi in January 2006. Gilmour complains that North Shore taxi discriminated against him on the basis of his physical disability. Saidy responds that his Muslim beliefs do not permit him to take dogs in his taxi. North Shore Taxi filed a document with the Human Rights Tribunal stating that about half of its drivers are "unable to take animals in their taxis due to medical or religious reasons."

Gilmour and the taxi driver disagree on what was said about the dog at the time. Saidy has told the Human Rights Tribunal he told Gilmour at the time that he was refusing because of religious beliefs. But Gilmour's lawyer Nazeer Mitha said all the driver said to Gilmour was, "No dogs, no dogs," before driving away. The first Gilmour heard about religious objections was after he filed a formal complaint,

said Mitha.

Since then, the taxi driver has filed a statement from a Muslim cleric stating that Islam has some restrictions towards certain animals, including dogs. But Mitha says Gilmour has also filed a statement from a different Muslim cleric, stating that there can be exceptions to blanket refusals to deal with dogs, especially if it means helping someone in need. Mitha said all that would be required in most circumstances would be for a Muslim person to wash their hands before eating if they have been in contact with a dog. "That's not a terrible task to go through," he said.

Mar. 30, 2007 update: Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, [scene of much disputation concerning Muslim taxi drivers](#), has also had a problem with seeing-eye dogs being refused into taxis. Airport spokesman Pat Hogan indicates three formal complaints have been made to the airport concerning guide dogs being refused rides. CAIR has figured out that there's no benefit in this particular fight and has jumped on the other side of this issue. Under its guidance, some 300 cabbies have volunteered to [provide free rides to blind people](#) and their guide dogs during a meeting of the National Federation of the Blind's Minnesota chapter on April 21, hoping thereby to improve their reputation. But Joyce Scanlan, president of the chapter, responded coolly to the offer, saying she would prefer the cabdrivers simply do their jobs. "We really are uncomfortable with that, with the offer of getting free rides. We don't think that solves anything. We believe the cabdrivers need to realize that the law says they will not turn down a blind person."

Apr. 2, 2007 update: Fjordman translates an article from Norway's [Aftenposten](#) that [LittleGreenFootballs.com](#) published.

Blind woman Gry Berg, accompanied by her guide dog, was denied entry into four taxis in the center of the city of Oslo, Norway, this March. Three of the drivers claimed that their unwillingness to accept her dog was due to allergy, while the fourth one simply locked the car doors and refused to give an explanation for why he wouldn't let Ms. Berg into his cab.

Andreas Strand, leader of the youth organization of The Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, reacts strongly to this treatment. "It makes it difficult for blind people to live a social life," he says. Strand claims that it has become an increasingly common problem that blind people accompanied by guide dogs are denied access to taxis, and has written a letter of complaint to the three companies whose drivers were involved in this particular incident.

Now, the police and the local transportation authorities will cooperate on punishing drivers who refuse to accept dogs into their cars. Director Odd Bratteberg of the Transportation Authority in Oslo warns that they will conduct random tests at taxi stands, and that drivers who refuse to accept passengers with dogs risk having their license revoked.

Apr. 20, 2007 update: Victor C. Harris, who is legally blind, writes me from Everett, Washington, about his experience with a seeing-eye dog. Harris has peripheral vision of 4 degrees and anyone with less than 20 degrees peripheral vision is blind; but he sees with 20/40 central acuity.

On December 1, 2004, Harris called a taxi to go home from the Everett CenterEvents. When he tried to get into a Yellow Cab, the driver refused to open the doors, only lowering his window to say he would get Harris another cab, as he did not carry dogs. Harris told him that he had a service animal and therefore could not legally be refused transportation. The driver nonetheless again would not let him in. When Harris asked for the driver's name and a card, the cabbie warned him to step away from the car and took off. Harris wrote down his For Hire number and contacted the police. After much toing-and-froing, nothing came of his complaint, except that Yellow Cab of Everett apologized and gave him two vouchers for local trips. The company specifically refused to dismiss the driver, saying that it preferred to train him rather than hire someone new.

May 24, 2007 update: In what appears to be a first in the Western world, [Australia's New South Wales government](#) has imposed a fine of up to A\$1,100 should taxi drivers refuse service to passengers with seeing-eye dogs because of "religious" reasons, fear of dogs, or supposed allergies. In addition, Transport Minister John Watkins announced that

all taxi drivers will "receive a session with a disability service advocate as part of their training."

Human Rights and Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes, himself blind and reliant on a guide dog, said he is refused service on average once a month, including twice in two days recently. "He has been told on a number of occasions that it would be against a driver's religion to allow a dog in the cab," writes Heath Aston in Australia's *Daily Telegraph*. "He has also been refused by drivers claiming to be allergic to dogs and even scared of dogs. He has also been left clutching at air on busy Market St by one belligerent driver who told him he had to take the non-existent cab in front."

Vision Australia's head of policy and advocacy Michael Simpson concurred, saying that taxi drivers refuse to take guide dogs with "too much regularity," noting that the problem is worse in the Sydney area: "It is fair to say that the [Islamic] religion has made the problem worse in the metropolitan areas than regional areas, where I've found taxi drivers are generally excellent." Simpson, who is blind, told an anecdote of his and two blind companions being refused service at the airport. "We asked the driver for his accreditation number and he gave us the wrong one. It was only because an airline staff member had accompanied us that we got the right number and could properly complain about being refused."

May 24, 2007 update: Australia's Transport Minister [John Watkins](#) has elaborated further on his decision to fine errant hacks:

If you can't actually serve the customers in greatest need those - people with some form of disability - well, you shouldn't be in the job. I'm committed to doing something about this. It is an intolerable thing. I need to make the point very clear to the taxi industry and to taxi drivers. This is illegal, with a fine of up to \$1100.

June 14, 2007 update: Sallahaddin Abdullah, 40, was fined ? and ordered to pay ?00 court costs in [Cambridge, England](#), for abandoning Paul and Kerry Monaghan, plus their guide dogs, on the pavement outside Cambridge Railway Station. Abdullah may also lose his taxi license.

The married couple were stranded as they tried to make their way to Addenbrooke's Hospital for an appointment on August 15 last year. Abdullah told Cambridge Magistrates' Court: "Sorry, I sneeze; my religion" before taking another passenger from the queue and driving away. The court was told this was to imply he was allergic to dogs. The stunned couple, from North Walsham in Norfolk, are both registered blind, and Mrs Monaghan is also deaf. The next taxi driver at the rank picked up the couple and took a note of Abdullah's cab number so they could make a complaint.

Aug. 16, 2007 update: When Behzad Saily, a taxi driver in Vancouver, British Columbia, refused service to Bruce Gilmour, 49, and his seeing-eye dog (for details, see the Nov. 15, 2006 update, above), he did so on the grounds that he drove a no-pet cab. Saily later explained that being a Muslim means he must not associate with dogs, on the basis that they are "unclean." He subsequently found an [imam](#) who stated on his behalf that "Islam holds some restrictions toward certain animals, including dogs."

Gilmour, blind for 30 years, responded with a human rights complaint alleging discrimination. Three days before the provincial human rights tribunal hearing was to take place, however, Gilmour and Saily's employer, North Shore Taxi, reached a [C\\$2,500 settlement](#), which the tribunal then issued as an order.

The settlement says it balances "the rights of persons with seeing-eye dogs to obtain taxi service with the rights of



Muslims to follow their religion" by establishing a policy that forbids any driver to refuse a fare from a blind person accompanied by a certified guide dog unless drivers (1) are allergic to dogs or (2) can establish that they have an "honest religious belief (Muslim) which precludes them from transporting certified guide dogs." In such cases, drivers must to give their name to the blind person, call the dispatcher, ask for "the next available cab," and stay with the blind person until that cab arrives. Not following these regulations one time means suspension for two shifts; a second violation could lead to termination of employment.

Comments: (1) "It's a landmark in my life," a happy Gilmour responded to the change in rules, but it is hard to see what he has achieved. Yes, blind passengers will not have to inform the dispatcher of their disability and he will wait with the reluctant driver by his side, but practically speaking, anyone wanting to make an appointment or a flight on time will have to inform the dispatcher that he's got a guide dog so as to avoid standing on the sidewalk for a half hour. The Shari^ع would seem to rule in this instance.

(2) Gilmour indicated his intent to donate about a quarter of his monetary settlement to the Az-Zahraa Islamic Centre to thank its imam, Javed Jaffri, for researching the dog topic and offering to serve as his expert witness. According to Gilmour, Jaffri "spent long hours on this. He provided an unbiased interpretation of the Koran that indicated there is nothing saying that one must refuse service to another person because of the fear of contamination by a dog."

Sep. 8, 2007 update: John Matthies, my colleague at Islamist Watch, comments on the Gilmour affair and did some research on [dogs and Islamic ritual purity](#):

Cabdrivers have argued that dogs are "unclean," but there is little agreement on the subject. In our own time, clerics like the Iranian Hojatolislam Hassani have [denounced](#) the "moral depravity" of dog ownership, and demanded "the judiciary arrest of all dogs with long, medium or short legs^و together with their long-legged owners." And last September, [Saudi religious police](#) banned dogs from the holy city of Mecca and neighboring Jeddah. But these are exceptional cases.

Early chroniclers of the Prophet's life and mission [report](#) that dogs, while "unclean," are not entirely off limits. Dogs may be kept for hunting, shepherding, and protection, for example. And legal scholars disagree among themselves as to whether the dog is (1) entirely pure, (2) entirely impure, or (3) pure as to fur and impure of saliva.

Ritual purity is the rub. According to the "impure" tradition, contact with dog saliva will invalidate ritual purity and [nullify ablutions](#) ("breaks" *wudu*') required for prayer or handling the Muslim holy book. This applies to the saliva of every canine, mongrel and "certified guide dog" alike.

But what is the worst that can happen if car and driver become contaminated with dog saliva? The answer is that the soiled spot of the clothes or car must be cleansed in ritual fashion (seven times in all, and once with dirt), and the person must apply partial ablutions (*wudu*') to the face and extremities.

Matthies concludes that "No one is bound to chauffeur the public for a living, and scrupulously observant drivers should not require a settlement or ruling to perform the function for which they were hired."

Sep. 12, 2007 update: "[Cabbies see guide dogs and drive away, blind riders say](#)" comes the news from Milwaukee, reported by Ellen Gabler. Blind people sometimes wait more than an hour or have to call the cab company repeatedly after taxis arrived, then sped off on seeing the guide dog. "I've had so many bad experiences," says one blind person, Steve Heesen.

In response, the National Federation of the Blind of Wisconsin has complained to Milwaukee County that some drivers of American United Taxi are avoiding blind passengers with guide dogs. It's particularly an issue because American United Taxi has a \$1.25 million contract with the county's Transit Plus program to provide about 500 rides each day for people with disabilities. Gabler explains the company's policy:

When calling for a cab, passengers with guide dogs must notify American United that the animal is along for the ride. This helps drivers identify blind passengers in a crowd, and also allows drivers allergic to

dogs to decline the job. Once a driver accepts an order, however, the driver must service it or wait an hour before picking up another ride.

The only drivers allowed not to pick up passengers with dogs are those with a doctor's note stating they are allergic to dogs. Of American United Taxi's 300 cab drivers, it turns out, only four have a medical excuse. As for Muslim drivers concerned about carrying dogs because their saliva is unclean, "Some of the drivers feel that if they touch a dog it is unholy," Red Christensen, general manager of American United Taxi notes.

Dec. 4, 2007 update: Remote Fort McMurray, Alberta (population: 65,000) has the same problem, Chuck Chiang reports in "[Refused: Airport cabbies wouldn't take blind woman with guide dog, despite laws on her side.](#)" Diane Bergeron, a blind woman with a seeing-eye dog, landed at the airport two days ago and despite "a whole line of ten, 15 taxis waiting outside," she said, "not one would take me because of my dog." Eventually, a bystander took her to her hotel in town.

Nor was her plight unusual: Provincial and municipal laws to the contrary, blind Albertans with guide dogs face difficulties getting cabs. "It happens frequently, everywhere," said Ellie Shuster, spokeswoman for a national non-profit agency providing services to blind Canadians. She works for blind cab riders their rights, cab drivers to learn their obligations, and police officers the laws they must enforce.

Indeed, despite laws strictly forbidding the refusal of seeing-eye dogs, local cab companies take a relaxed attitude on the topic. "We can't make the drivers do it," said Ron MacNeill, owner of Sun Taxi, who advises passengers with guide dogs to call ahead. "You have to tell our dispatch and inform us what's going on." Mustapha Hemeid, the manager at Access Taxi, agrees: "Not every driver will [permit guide dogs]. But we do have optional drivers who can, and if you call ahead, we'll do it." Fort McMurray Airport's public relations manager, Sally Beaven, responds that the taxi companies' agreement with the airport requires that "they'll not refuse any fares. This shouldn't happen."

Asked about this situation, the Muslim Association of Canada notes that many Muslims regard dog saliva as unclean, which could cause some drivers to reject dogs in their cars. In addition, "Some people just don't feel comfortable around dogs."

Dec. 23, 2007 update: On a related note, the [Al Falah mosque in Leicester, England](#), just became the first mosque in Britain to permit a seeing-eye dog enter. It is a retriever, chosen because it salivates less than other dogs. A kennel is being build for it outside the prayer hall of the mosque where it will wait for its owner, Mahomed Khatri, 17.

Feb. 6, 2008 update: The U.S. headquarters of CAIR realized a year ago (see the Mar. 30, 2007 update, above) that its anti-seeing-eye-dog efforts were doomed, so it switched sides on the issue. Today, its Canadian office came to the same conclusion. "[CAIR-CAN Urges Accommodation for Blind Taxi Passengers](#)" reads the press release. It quotes Jamal Badawi, CAIR-CAN Board Member and a "Canadian Islamic scholar," saying:

It is important to note that there is flexibility within Islamic teachings, and we should seek to implement opinions that are most consistent with our context, in conformity with Canadian law. Islam allows for dogs to be used by the visually impaired. Although dogs may be considered ritually unclean by some scholars, and so creating complications for daily worship, there are also opinions that consider dogs ritually pure. Surely, we can not impose any particular interpretation on anyone, but we should note that opinions exist that allow for flexibility and accommodation.

Feb. 7, 2008 update: [Reporting from Ottawa](#) on this issue turns up some contradictory evidence: On the one hand, just a week ago, a Muslim restaurant owner refused to serve a blind woman who entered the restaurant with her guide dog, telling her, "I'm not allowed." On the other hand, Yusef Al Mezel, for seven years president of the local taxi union, said that he has not once heard of a Muslim cab driver refusing a guide dog.

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