

Line dance: Airport decisions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

The next time I head for the airport security line, ready to be scolded for wearing too large a wristwatch, I will have to make a quick decision. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) now asks passengers to sort themselves into three different lanes on the basis of their experience and efficiency as travelers (and packers).

In my case, one of the lines rules itself out at once: this is the line in which families with children unload sufficient objects to carry them 40 years in the wilderness. I'm past that. But the next choice is not so easy: shall I get into the "Black Diamond" line for expert travelers, or am I a casual traveler, indicating perhaps inexperience or the worry that my toothpaste tube may be .0003 of an ounce too large to allow me to dash through the lane?

The whole problem here is that travelers must appraise themselves, depend on their own judgment and risk a misassessment of their own competence. Here we run into a human problem addressed by the Scottish poet Robert Burns: "Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us / To see oursel's as others see us!" As I approach the expert line, might I be afflicted with a J. Alfred Prufrockian stab: "'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'"

This is, of course, a specific Christian problem addressed by the apostle Paul, who by grace says that each believer ought "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment" (Rom. 12:3).

Soberly, my kind of traveler may rightfully judge himself adept. If one deliberates over this problem too much, such concern may breed a self-conscious and only half-authentic humility. The self-segregating traveler may settle for the casual line even when she *knows* she's an expert. Nietzsche would know what to make of that, scornful as he was of humble Jewish and Christian "slave morality." If it is I who has grudgingly chosen the casual line ahead of you, you might find me going extra slowly, pondering which edition of Nietzsche is best for this self-assessment issue and which philosophers or theologians responded to Nietzsche helpfully.

The TSA and airport staff, well-intended though they may be as they ask us to participate in the fight against terrorism by forming lines, may be throwing us back into the Dark Ages. We may be victims of what medieval confessors and their expert heirs call “scrupulosity.” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* identifies scrupulosity as “unfounded fears that there is sin where there is none.” If I rate myself too highly, I am guilty of pride and must confess, but if all along I have been expert, I would be dishonest, and thus guilty of scrupulosity, if I settled for the casual line.

The dictionary goes on: “Scrupulosity may be the result of much ascetic reading of a rigorist tendency [translate: I have read and reread all the rules the TSA hollers over the loudspeaker], but more often is the outcome of nervous disturbance.” Scrupulosity, I learn further, “may lead to the sins of obstinacy and despair, or conversely, to self-indulgence.”

Given all those problems, each of which will slow down both the casual and the executive lines, the smartest thing to do may be to have it all settled for us: rent a stroller and diaper bag and line up with the families. They don’t have to choose: their lane is chosen for them. Happy are they. The rest of us may turn out obstinate, despairing or self-indulgent.