

Jews, Muslims wary of full-body scanners: Buddhists and Hindus not as concerned

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Canadian lawyer Kerry Gearin is planning to fly to Washington, D.C., this summer for a conference on Islamic family law, but the full-body scanners being deployed in some U.S. airports make her wonder if she'll be forced to leave her modesty at home.

"When I saw the pictures, I thought: it's too much information," said Gearin, a former atheist who said she "reverted" to Islam a few years ago.

Concerns about the grainy body images produced by the scanners prompted the 18-member Fiqh Council of North America to issue a fatwa, or religious edict, which said the scanners violate Islamic law. Muslims, the fatwa said, should instead request a pat-down.

"It is a violation of clear Islamic teachings that men or women be seen naked by other men and women. Islam highly emphasizes 'haya' (modesty) and considers it part of faith," the edict said.

It's not just Muslims who are concerned.

Agudath Israel, an Orthodox Jewish umbrella group, has told lawmakers that scanners should be used only on passengers who had failed testing by metal detectors. In a letter to Congress, the group called full-body imaging "offensive, de meaning, and far short of acceptable norms of modesty" within Judaism and other faiths.

Even Pope Benedict XVI has weighed in, however obliquely, telling Italian airport workers on February 20 that "the primacy of the person and attention to his needs" must always be respected, although some said Benedict could well have been calling for improved customer service.

The scanners—which have received renewed consideration after a Nigerian Muslim attempted to blow up a Delta flight on Christmas Day in Detroit—are produced for the Transportation Security Administration by New York’s L-3 Communications and Rapiscan in Torrance, California. They detect items—guns or small containers, for example—or explosives hidden under clothing. The images are grainy outlines of the human body, but they clearly show the outlines of breasts, buttocks and sexual organs.

To minimize passenger discomfort, screeners who view the images work in separate booths away from screening lines and don’t see the passengers they scrutinize. All images are immediately deleted, and the machines have no ability to store images.

TSA officials say customers who still have qualms can request a personal pat-down—an option that Gearin, the Canadian lawyer, plans to take—although a 2007 pilot program found that 98 percent of passengers preferred scanners to pat-downs, a TSA spokeswoman said.

“TSA is committed to treating all passengers with respect and dignity during the screening process,” said Sarah Horowitz, a TSA spokeswoman. There are now 40 scanning machines in 19 airports. That number is expected to grow to 450 machines across an unknown number of airports by the end of 2010.

Leading Muslim groups, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations, endorsed the fatwa against body scanners, but the issue has put Muslims in a tight spot—wanting to cooperate with security and combat terrorism, but also wanting to respect Islamic custom at a time when Muslims are already under intense scrutiny.

Ihsan Bagby, an Islamic studies professor at the University of Kentucky who sits on the Fiqh Council, said the offer of pat-downs “showed some sensitivity” on the part of TSA. “People had seen the pictures and became concerned,” Bagby said.

Rabbi Steven Weil, CEO of the Orthodox Union, said the scanners violate Jewish laws on modesty, or tzniut. While Islamic interpretations discourage exposure to either male or female eyes, it is not a violation of Jewish law for men or women to be seen exposed by the same gender, meaning that Jews can walk through scanners if men are screened by men and women screened by women.

“You have two competing values. You have the need for security and safety, and the need for human dignity and modesty,” said Weil, who flies up to four times per

week.

Buddhists and Hindus seem to have fewer problems with scanners.

“Everything in Buddhism is a matter of intent. If the screening is done to oppress and in a way that is insensitive, then it’s bad,” said Andrew Olendzki, executive director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts. “But if it’s done to protect, and done respectfully, then it’s OK.”

Modesty is also important in Hindu tradition, but it does not trump a serious security threat, said Suhag Shukla, managing director of the Hindu American Foundation. “Hindu tradition is replete with examples of sacrificing for the greater good,” she said. -Omar Sacirbey, *Religion News Service*