



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on September 1, 2011

Amusement Park Safety Rules Anger Muslims

Eid-ul-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, is one of the most important Muslim religious holidays. As a celebration of that holiday, 3,000 Muslims went to Playland Amusement Park in Rye, New York. When staff at the park insisted that women who rode rides at the park could not wear the hijab — the traditional head covering that the majority of Muslim women are enjoined to use — the result was a brawl that required police from nine different agencies to converge on the park in order to restore peace. About 100 officers were required to handle the disturbance, which involved 30 to 40 people, 13 of whom were arrested by the police.



Playland Amusement Park was not attempting to offend Muslims, park officials explained. The park has had three accidents on its rides in the last seven years. Two children and a park employee were killed as a result of these accidents. As a result, [Playland Amusement Park](#) adopted some relatively stringent rules regarding passengers on its rides. These rules, on Playland's website, state that all items and clothing must be appropriately secured while on a ride. Jackets/sweaters must be worn properly and not around the waist while on the ride. The rides forbid backpacks, purses, and headgear of any kind.

Peter Tartaglia, Deputy Commissioner of the Westchester County Parks Department, explained, "It's a safety issue on the rides. Something flying off your head could land on the track. If you have a scarf on, you could choke. Part of our rules and regulations, which we painstakingly told them over and over again, is that certain rides you cannot wear any sort of headgear. It could become a projectile." Tartaglia also questioned the alleged cause of the disturbance, which was that a park employee touched a Muslim woman because of the scarf ban. "We don't have any knowledge of that at all from the police end or from the park's end."

Kathleen O'Connor, Commissioner of the Westchester Country Parks Department, said of the incident: "It got heated. They were frustrated they couldn't get on the rides." The Muslims at the park were offered a refund of the \$20 entrance fee to the park. Officials at the park also said that they had "painstakingly" explained the headgear ban was a safety issue to officials of the Muslim American Society of New York. As one official put it, "We told them several times we have what we call a headgear policy, meaning there are certain rides where you can't wear headgear of any sorts."

The headgear ban did not apply to all the rides at Playland Amusement Park, but it did to rides which were considered to require special caution, such as Catch-a-Wave, Crazy Mouse, and Dragon Coaster. Ola Salem of Coney Island asked if she could ride with her eight-year-old sister on one of those rides, and according to Salem, "They said no because of my 'headgear.' I said 'It's not my headgear; it's my religion.'" Park officials then gave Salem a list of the rides which would require removal of her scarf.

Zead Ramadan of the Council of American Islamic Relations commented on what happened: "It's



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unfortunate because everyone just wants to be home with their families today. The people feel like victims, and the police feel like they were just doing their jobs. Personally, I think things just got a little out of control on both sides. In this heightened state of Islamaphobia, a woman wearing a hijab is an easy target these days.” Sharif Aly, vice president of the Muslim American Society of New York, was equally guarded in his attitude, saying that he wanted his organization to investigate the events before reaching any position on what happened.

Is this a problem of intolerance in America? Our nation has a long history of dealing with Americans who have different religious requirements than most of their countrymen. Orthodox Jewish men, for example, wear — at least — a kippa or yarmulke or perhaps a fur cap or streimel. Long hair from the sides of the head is also common (some fundamental Christian groups do the same). Amish women dress differently from most other American women. When these Americans find that their religion demands dress and behavior that would not fit in with American society, then they set aside privately owned areas in which Hassidim can live comfortably with other Hassidim or Amish in an Amish community.

Likewise, many American Christians will not have their businesses open on Sundays, although others might complain that this inconveniences them (just as many Orthodox Jews close up shop from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday). This has historically been our nation’s response: Private behavior, as long as it does not infringe on the life, liberty, or property of others, is fine. Let each of us worship in his own way.

The wrinkle in the particular disturbance at Playland Amusement Park is that this is not a private business but rather the property of the Westchester County Parks Department. Its managers are government employees. Still, school systems have for a century dealt with students who could not eat meat on Friday, as Catholics still do during Lent, or who could only eat Kosher food, as Orthodox Jews do today. However, there is no more history of police cars being called in to surround grade school cafeterias because of riotous Catholics or Jews than of Playland Amusement Park dealing with irate Hasidic Jews who refuse to remove their streimels while riding the Dragon Coaster.



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